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Trusting God in the Wilderness - Numbers 13

“A tragic story recently unfolded in Maine. Two hikers, rescued after getting lost in a state park, got in their car and drove away. But in the foggy darkness they took a wrong turn, drove down a boat ramp, and plunged into the ocean. By the time rescuers arrived it was too late. There’s nothing worse than taking a wrong turn, and that’s a key message in the book of Numbers. Somehow on the way to the Promised Land, the Israelites took a wrong turn, and a one-month journey became a forty-year trek.” (David Jeremiah – Understanding the 66 Books of the Bible – p. 29)

Today we’ll be looking at the book of Numbers. There are so many familiar and wonderful stories in this book, and no wonder, since it tells of the 40 year journey of the Israelites through the wilderness after coming out of Egypt and before they entered the Promised Land.

Its name, Numbers, is the Greek name given to this book. When we first attempt to read this book, we can easily get bogged down in all the names and numbers of the people in the clans and tribes of Israel who came out of Egypt. The end of the book also contains a huge series of names and numbers of the Israelites who would be entering the Promised Land. These two God-appointed census are important and strategic, but the real fun takes place with the 40 year journey between these two censuses. So the name Numbers.

The Hebrew name is “In the Wilderness.” As I mentioned a few weeks ago, the Hebrew name of each of the books of the Torah or Greek Pentateuch is taken from the first words each book. Most modern translations read, ***“The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai...”*** ESV

READ: NUM. 13:1-3a - NLT - *The LORD now said to Moses, ²“Send out men to explore the land of Canaan, the land I am giving to the Israelites. Send one leader from each of the twelve ancestral tribes.”*³ So Moses did as the LORD commanded him...

Moses sent out 12 leaders, one from each tribe of Israel. These men were established as leaders among the Israelites and in their own tribes. You would think they understood the way God was moving and leading His people on this incredible journey.

God had just delivered the nation from the enemy and bondage of Egypt. They are on their way to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey – God told them. He promised to give them this land – they could count on it, and should have. At this point in the book, they had reached the border of the Promised Land, and their journey should have almost been over. But God asked that Moses send in 12 leaders to scope out the land. Moses gave them specific things to look for and report on...

Num. 13:18-20 – NLT - See what the land is like, and find out whether the people living there are strong or weak, few or many. ¹⁹ See what kind of land they live in. Is it good or bad? Do their towns have walls, or are they unprotected like open camps? ²⁰ Is the soil fertile or poor? Are there many trees? Do your best to bring back samples of the crops you see.”

They had their marching orders, so they set forth into the Promised Land and followed Moses' orders. They searched high and low and even found crops and took samples. The produce was huge and plentiful. When they completed their mission, they return to give their report.

Num. 13:27-33 – NLT - This was their report to Moses: “We entered the land you sent us to explore, and it is indeed a bountiful country—a land flowing with milk and honey. Here is the kind of fruit it produces. ²⁸ But the people living there are powerful, and their towns are large and fortified. We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak! ²⁹ The Amalekites live in the Negev, and the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country. The Canaanites live along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and along the Jordan Valley.”

³⁰ **But Caleb tried to quiet the people as they stood before Moses. “Let’s go at once to take the land,” he said. “We can certainly conquer it!”** (FAITH TALKING)

³¹ **But the other men who had explored the land with him disagreed. “We can’t go up against them! They are stronger than we are!” ³² So they spread this bad report about the land among the Israelites: “The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge. ³³ We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. Next to them we felt like grasshoppers, and that’s what they thought, too!”** (FLESH)

“Faith has to do with marrying the Invisible and the Visible. When we engage in an act of faith as Caleb did, we give up insisting that head knowledge is our primary means of understanding. Faith isn’t a conclusion we come to simply on the basis of what we see. It’s a conclusion we come to on the basis of who God is. And that fusing of the Visible with the Invisible gives us a different way of looking at the world around us. It’s often said that living by faith is a risky way to live. What isn’t so often said is that living by sight has risks, too. Even great risks. As the story of Joshua and Caleb unfolds in the next chapter, we find that the greater danger wasn’t living by faith but living by unbelief, the way the rest of the nation lived.” (Eugene Peterson, The Message – Study Bible, p. 213 notes)

So given the opportunity for the 12 spies to have faith in God or believe their eyes, they chose the latter. The consequences were tremendous. They were right there at the door of the destination, the Promised Land was right in front of them. However, their rebellion against God and His promise sent them all on a 40 year journey in circles “in the wilderness.”

Did you ever feel called by God to do something new, and then you assessed the situation, and realized it might not work out as planned? Or, did you ever think that actually acting on this thing you think God prompted you to do could blow up in your face and you would be held accountable or blamed? Were you obedient, or did you let fear and sight stop you?

The rest of the center portion of the book of Numbers focuses on this journey in the wilderness. We don't have time today to look at all the stops along the way, but the main theme is that the people mumble and complain at multiple points in the journey. This displeases the Lord. The Israelites had the struggle to trust and believe that God is in control – we all do at times. How do we react when we are in the wilderness of life – when God seems distant and we're afraid?

The people had already been complaining before they reached this area, and God was patient and gracious. Moses had even complained – yes even the leaders fall short every once in a while – and more often than you think. Thank God we have the Holy Spirit to lead us through the wilderness of the world by the guidance of the Word of God. God is leading us to a resting place in the Spirit – the Land of Promise for us. Do you believe this? Then you will be victorious.

The people of Israel did not learn easily – and most of the time, either do we. We can fall into the same sin – offenses to God as they did in the wilderness...

“All the Israelites could think about was the meat, melons, cucumbers, leeks, onions, and garlic in Egypt. Talk about a selective memory! Didn't they remember the backbreaking toil, the slave master's lash, and the chains of slavery? And what about the land to which God was calling them? They had no thought of Canaan because they had no knowledge of it. They had heard about Canaan, but they had no experience of it.”¹

The judgment of God against the Israelites in the wilderness “came in three forms... fire, plagues, and poisonous serpents. This is a picture of the inevitable result of whining, complaining, and murmuring as a Christian.”¹ We complain about similar things today...

- Where God has put us.
- The kind of people He has surrounded us with.
- The kind of food we have to eat.
- The leaders He has put over us.
- Various circumstances we face.

“Soon we discover:

- The fire of gossip, scandal, and slander.
- The plague of anxiety and nervous tension.
- The poison of envy and jealousy.”¹

God was blessing His people on their wilderness journey and taking care of all their needs, even though they caused this delay in entering the Promised Land by their unbelief and lack of trust. God even blessed them so their sandals didn't wear out with 40 years of hiking. How many pair of shoes have you gone through in the past 40 years? ☺ How ungrateful! God had every right to destroy them all, but He had another plan.

God decreed that because of their rebellion against Him marked by the 10 spies who convinced the people that they could not go in and conquer the inhabitants of the Land, the entire older generation would not enter the Promised Land. So He caused them to wander in the wilderness until that entire generation died there. “During those 40 years, 1.2 million people died. That’s 82 deaths per day!”¹

God had promised them this land, but...

- They thought numbers of people were greater than God.
- They thought the strength of the people was greater than God.
- They thought fortified cities were greater than God.
- They thought location was greater than God.
- They thought giants were greater than God.

What do you face that is greater than God in your mind and eyes? Unless the answer is “NOTHING,” you are in the same place as they were. This is not God’s will for you. He expects trust in Him always and in all circumstances. There’s no other way! (Like the hymn states).

They were willing to settle for the old life of slavery and bondage rather than pursue God’s plan to receive His promises by moving forward into the unknown. So many Christians today would rather languish in a miserable wilderness spiritual life, rather than obey God’s call and pursue holiness – yeah it may cost us something; it may be a difficult battle to attain it; it may take courage and even rejection. What are you willing to accept in order to pursue holiness in your life?

They failed God, and He gave them another chance, over and over again. His judgment seems harsh, but it’s what caused them to repent time and time again. One entire group was destroyed by fire, and they tried again and failed. Two clans were swallowed up as the earth opened up beneath their camps; they tried again and failed. They just couldn’t trust God.

A king once lay ill in his bedchamber. He had called for the royal physician to bring him medicine for his ailing stomach. But before the physician could arrive, a messenger arrived with a secret letter, accusing the physician of being involved in a plot to murder the king. “Receive no medicine from the doctor’s hand,” read the letter. “It will be poison.”

The king hid the letter under his pillow just moments before the royal physician arrived with a goblet filled with a medicinal potion. “Trust me, Sire,” said the doctor. “This medicine will cure your stomach.”

“I do trust you,” said the king. Reaching beneath his pillow, he took the accusing letter and handed it to the doctor at the same time he took the goblet of medicine.

“What is this?” asked the doctor, taking the letter from the king’s hand.

“Read it,” said the king. Then he lifted the goblet to his lips and drank the potion.

The doctor read the letter, then looked up at the king with eyes full of shock and pain. “Your Highness, you must believe me, this letter is nothing but lies! I would never do anything to harm you!”

“I do believe you,” said the king, “and I trust you completely—see?” The king held out the goblet. He had drunk every drop. By the next morning, he was completely recovered. The king had demonstrated, in the most dramatic way imaginable, his complete trust in his physician.

Trust is the theme of the book of Numbers. In this book, God dramatically sets forth what is perhaps the hardest lesson any of us has to learn: our need to trust God rather than our own reason.^[1]

The people needed a savior! When the 12 spies were selected, Joshua was not called by that name. His name was Hoshea (salvation), but Moses prophetically changed his name to Joshua (the Lord saves). This is the Hebrew form of the name Jesus (the Lord saves).

Finally, when the people complained about the food God provided, God sent poisonous snakes to bite and kill the complainers. However, in God’s mercy and grace, He also instructed Moses to form a snake out of metal and put it on a pole (snake on a stick), and hold it up for all to see. It was available to everyone. Anyone who looked upon this snake and believed would live, but those who stubbornly refused would die. This has real significance to us even today. Jesus even used this scene as an example of what He came to accomplish for us all.

Jn. 3:14-15 – “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is what we must believe in and apply to our own lives to live eternally with Him in the Promised Land – Heaven. Faith in Him is available to everyone, but only those who believe will be saved.

“Numbers is the record of the failure of the people in their perpetual stubbornness and foolishness, yet it is also the story of the unwearied patience and faithfulness of God... Victory is still ours if we hold fast to our trust in God...”¹ We will face our own wilderness experiences. When we do, will we be faithful to trust that God has everything in control, and He has a plan even if we can’t see it or realize it at the time? We will fail occasionally, but God has given us grace and mercy to repent and be reconciled back to Him again and again.

2 Tim. 2:13 – “If we are faithless, He will remain faithful, for He cannot disown Himself.”

AMEN

^[1]Ray C. Stedman with James D. Denney. 1997; 2003. *Adventuring through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*. Discovery House

