

## Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

### B. From Slavery to Freedom

#### 5. The Wilderness Years

We continue our examination of Israel's journey from slavery to freedom with a look at Israel's wilderness years. Do you remember what had happened to this point?

God's people had been completely delivered from the power of Egypt, with Egypt's laws having been replaced by the liberating laws of Yahweh, their deliverer. Not that God's laws were necessarily easy to follow, but they were given not to oppress the people, but to yield the greatest blessings to those who obeyed them.

Besides this, a bit of Paradise had been recaptured in the tabernacle that God had ordered to be constructed. It was situated in the middle of Israel's encampment, and overshadowed by a glory cloud as a powerful sign of Yahweh's continuing presence with his people. Whenever the glory cloud lifted, the people would follow wherever it led. And they happily anticipated their ultimate destination, the Promised Land of Canaan, to which God had ordered Father Abraham so many years before. The people were richly blessed and they knew it.

Their blessed state was summed up by the words God had given Aaron and his sons to bless the Israelites—the so-called high-priestly blessing (Num 6:24-26): *"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."*

With the presence and blessing of God, Israel was now ready to move on toward the Promised Land where they could make permanent homes and somehow, in further fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, bring blessing to the entire world.

But the next stage in Israel's journey from slavery to freedom would not be so happy; they would spend years in the wilderness. Numbers 10:11-13 describes their departure from Sinai where they had been camped for eleven months. *On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the Testimony. Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and traveled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran. They set out, this first time, at the LORD's command through Moses.*

V.33 tells us that they traveled for three days. The region of Sinai had been relatively fertile, but the Israelites soon found themselves in a real desert, and it didn't take long for them to begin to complain. It was a poor beginning for the people who were called to be God's mighty army en route to their settlement in the Promised Land. So you might well understand God's response (Num. 11:1): *And when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.*

Complaints turned to fear, and then to relief when the Lord answered Moses' prayer by stopping the fire of judgment. But it was not long before the complaining began again. God was graciously providing a daily supply of manna for the people to eat, a provision that would continue until Israel had actually entered Canaan. But, the Israelites began to complain about the lack of variety in their diet (Num 11:4-6).

Moses was getting sick to death of these complainers. He told God (Num. 11:14) *I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me.* In response, God put his Spirit on seventy of Israel's elders so they could help Moses, and he answered Israel's complaint by sending quails; they were piled up all around the camp of Israel to a depth of three feet. But here too, God gave the people a taste of his anger for their ingratitude (Num 11:33). He struck them with a severe plague.

A few more days and miles passed. Then (Num 12:1-2) even Moses' own sister and brother, Miriam and Aaron began to grumble. Their complaint was that Moses had married a woman who was not a Hebrew (She was a Cushite). But they also expressed dissatisfaction that they were subordinate to their younger brother, apparently failing to consider that God had chosen him for his office. The Lord took this as a complaint against himself and became angry with Miriam and Aaron. He struck Miriam with leprosy, which was healed only after Moses prayed for her, and after she endured seven days of uncleanness outside the camp.

Even if you didn't know the story, you might get the idea that the book of Numbers is turning out to be a record of how the people of Israel were an ungrateful people who seemed to be doing their best to mess up God's plans to install them in the Promised Land. Their time in the wilderness need not have been a spiritual wilderness as well, but it seemed to be just that.

The next test for Israel involved the return of twelve spies who had been sent to scout out the Promised Land in anticipation of their coming campaign to invade it. They were gone 40 days and came back with a report that confirmed the richness of the land, but concentrated on the difficulty of taking it for themselves (Num 13:27-28, 32-33). The majority report emphasized the large and well-fortified cities and the giant stature and power of the inhabitants of the land.

But two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, were not so negative. They spoke of the goodness of the land and emphasized the ability of the Lord to give it to them. They finished with this God-approved appeal (Num 14:9): *Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.*"

And yet, their speech of faith did not convince their fellow Israelites. In fact, the people got so angry with Caleb and Joshua that they talked about stoning them to death and returning to Egypt. It was the worst rebellion yet in the series of rebellions that had happened since Israel had left Sinai.

Can you imagine it? Egypt represented slavery and death and life without God. And here the people, who had been saved from all that, who had been cared for day after day, were now talking about leaving God and going back. It's as if all God's work and planning from the time he first called Abraham till now – as if all this work had been for nothing, because the people decided not to trust the Lord who had brought them this far.

The only other episode in Israel's journey from Egypt that approached the severity of this offense against God, was the one involving the worship of the golden calf. And even that was not the same, for the people then had meant to use the calf to help them worship God. They were wrong to do so, of course, but at least they hadn't been totally turning against God. It was worse here, because this desire to go back to Egypt was a rejection of God's law and God's leaders, and even God's very presence with them. Indeed, it was nothing less than a rejection of Yahweh as the God of Israel and a vote to replace him with another god or gods.

The people believed that the land was as good as God had promised it would be. But, they were pessimistic about God's ability to deliver it to them. They simply did not believe that the God who brought them out of Egypt was able to fulfill his covenant promises.

This pessimism did not go without response (cf. 13:30). *Caleb silenced the people...and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."* He was talking about the strength that the Lord had demonstrated so far, and about the strength that God had promised.

But Caleb was silenced with more and even louder statements from the other side. The rebellion grew.

That's when God responded (Num 14:10-12): *Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites. The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they."*

It was the second time God had threatened to disinherit the people and start over with Moses. But again, Moses prayed for them, concluding with these words (Num. 14:19): *In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now."*

Num 14:20-23: *The LORD replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times-- not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it."*

That included all of the adults of Israel 20 years old and up - all except Caleb and Joshua. What's more, the ten unfaithful spies were struck down and died of a plague.

The rest of Israel was suitably impressed and understandably sorry. They mourned bitterly, and told Moses (14:40): *We have sinned. We will go up to the place the Lord promised.* But it was too late, as Moses told them. And when some of them persisted in going anyway—without God's leading—they were attacked and defeated by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

So Israel came under God's judgment for the next forty years, one year for each day that the spies had explored the land. Yet, God did not abandon his people, but stayed with them for all that time. Numbers goes on to describe the continuing discipline of God during that forty-year period. Even though the adults would never see Canaan, God cared for Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. And he continued his lessons too, for the sake of their children, so that they would not be disobedient as their parents had been.

Numbers 16 and 17 describe further challenges by certain Israelites to the leaders that God had appointed over Israel. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were ringleaders of a group of 250 prominent men of Israel. Num 16:3 *They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?"*

Korah was a Levite with high duties in the service of God but he wanted to be a priest. And Dathan and Abiram were Reubenites who had their own issues with Moses. When Moses in turn summoned them to appear before him (16:12-13) *they said, "We will not come!" Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert? And now you also want to lord it over us?*

Did you notice that in their insolent response, they referred to Egypt by the very description God had given to the Promised Land: "a land flowing with milk and honey."

How soon they had forgotten both the slavery of Egypt and the rebellion that had condemned them to wander in the desert for forty years. Moses was deeply dismayed by this charge, for he knew that God wouldn't stand for it. He proposed a trial by fire to see which men the Lord would accept as his leaders. So all of Korah's followers put fire in their censers and stood at the entrance to the tabernacle. Immediately *the Lord said to Moses and Aaron (16:20-21) "Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once."*

By "this assembly" God meant all of Israel. But Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before God and pled that he not destroy all of his people for the sake of the Korah, Dathan and Abiram and those allied with them. So God told the people to move away from the rebels.

Num 16:28-30 *Then Moses said, "This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: If these men die a natural death... then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt."*

And that's just what happened. Korah, Dathan and Abiram and their households died in the earthquake that followed. And their 250 followers died right after by fire that came out from the Lord. And when the people complained that Moses had killed the Lord's people, God sent a plague that killed thousands before it was stopped by Aaron standing with his censer between the living and the dead.

Is it any wonder that this generation of Israelites was referred to often in subsequent history as a hardhearted and rebellious generation? Not that they were so much worse than their descendants, or any of us, for that matter. Because it's too often the case that people are very forgetful about all the blessings of God and very prone to complain against him when something doesn't go their way.

But both ingratitude and outright rebellion are fully deserving of the judgment of God. We can be thankful, therefore, that, for the sake of Jesus, God postpones his judgment and continues to be merciful to sinners.

There are other incidents described in Numbers as well: e.g. the rebellion described in ch 21 which brought a judgment of venomous snakes until Moses made a snake of bronze at God's command, and put it up on a pole for the people to look at and be healed. Jesus later referred to this incident, saying (John (3:14-15) *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*

Moses himself also came under God's judgment when, angry with the people, he disobeyed the command of God and struck the rock to provide the Israelites with water. That was the incident that disqualified Moses from entering the Promised Land. The closest he ever got was a mountaintop view from across the Jordan River.

Besides the various rebellions by which the Israelites brought themselves under the judgment of God, the pagan nations that Israel encountered also contributed their share of problems. I'll conclude with the problems caused by just one of these nations, a nation that would long be a thorn in the side of God's people - Moab.

That nation was terrified by the numbers and proximity of the Israelites. So the king of Moab hired a mercenary, Balaam—an internationally known prophet—who shared the pagan belief that the God of Israel was like any other idol god who might be manipulated by acts of magic or sorcery. But from early on, when Balaam first encountered the one true God in visions, and in the story of his journey on a donkey who talked—told in Num 22—from early on Balaam began to learn that dealing with the one true God was fundamentally different from anything he had ever known.

When Balaam attempted to curse Israel—something he'd been hired to do by the king of Moab, he found his mouth unable to express the curse he wanted to pronounce. Instead, from his lips came blessings on Israel and curses on her enemies—the very people who had hired him. In his fourth attempt to curse God's people, these are among the words that came out of his mouth (Num 24:17): *"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.*

This prophecy of a star out of Jacob and scepter out of Israel was perhaps fulfilled initially in King David, but ultimately it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. For Moab was another representative – just as Egypt had been – of evil and Satan. And this conflict was another chapter in the ongoing enmity between Satan and humanity that had been prophesied in Genesis 3:15.

This also helps explain the severe reaction (Num 25) of Phinehas, a priest and grandson of Aaron, when he found an Israelite man and Midianite woman engaged in immorality. Phinehas ran a spear through them both. He saw their action with God's eyes, not merely as the personal business of two hot-blooded young people, but as an example of the spiritual seduction of God's people by a representative of Satan.

So these are some of the stories of Israel in the wilderness, stories that show both the unfaithfulness of God's people and the faithfulness of God. Though the immediate enjoyment of God's great blessing for his people always depends on their faithfulness, the ultimate realization of God's blessing is sure – because God won't go back on his Word. So Numbers reaffirms the ongoing purposes of God. Despite his judgments against rebellion, God was still determined to bring Israel into their own homeland, just as he had promised the Patriarchs.