

Week Nine March 2/3
People of Unbelief and Rebellion
Numbers 11-16

Summary and Goal:

Since the Fall, man has struggled to live by faith in the goodness of God and by the Word of God. Instead, we continue to live by sight, trapped in our fleshly existence, blind to spiritual truth and spiritual reality. In the book of Numbers, Israel has the promises of God regarding their existence and their land, plus the very presence of God in their midst. Yet still, they walk in rebellion and unbelief. Today's lesson focuses on four scenes from this week's reading that illustrate the depravity of the human heart.

Background Passages: Numbers 11-16

Session Outline:

What NOT to Do as God's Chosen People:

- 1. Be Discontent with God's Provision – Numbers 11**
- 2. Deny God's Authority – Numbers 12:1-16; 16:1-17**
- 3. Doubt God's Plan – Numbers 13-14**

Session in a Sentence: Though rescued from Egypt, Israel in unbelief rebelled against the Lord and His chosen servants and were judged. God's desire is for His children to walk by faith rather than by sight, trusting His Word, obeying His commands and walking in His will.

Kingdom Connection: God's plan of redemption of His people required them to choose Him as their God, believe His promises in faith, trust and obey His will. He asks the same of us today.

Missional Application: God demonstrated His goodness, grace, and mercy by choosing Abraham and His descendants as His own special people, rescuing them from Egypt and leading them to the Promised Land. Yet, human nature is to walk in unbelief and rebellion. As His faithful followers we are called to influence others away from unbelief and rebellion and speak life-giving words pointing them toward trusting in God.

TEACHERS- This lesson covers four scenes contained in Numbers 11-16 with an overriding theme of unbelief and rebellion. Feel free to narrow the scope and focus on one or two scenes if that works better for you and your class.

Introduction:

As the book of Numbers opens, the Israelites have been camped near Mount Sinai for more than a year. They have received all the laws and regulations recorded in the book of Leviticus, the tabernacle has been built and the priests assigned to their service. Transformed into a new nation of God's chosen people, they stand ready, equipped for the task ahead of them. It was time to move out and take the land. In preparation, Moses and Aaron were told to number the men who were able to serve in the army and to get the people organized by tribe into marching units to better defend themselves. This book is named for this census, or numbering of the people, which as we will see, had to be done twice. But it well could have been named the Book of Murmurings because from beginning to end it tells the story of rebellious spirits, unbelief, and grumbling!

If you can remember 5 people, you can master the book of Numbers:

1. Moses, their God-appointed leader
2. Aaron, the High Priest, and brother of Moses
3. Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, instrumental in Moses being saved from death in Exodus
4. Joshua, one of 12 spies sent into the Promised Land and one of two that believed God and lived to enter it.
5. Caleb, one of 12 spies sent into the Promised Land and one of two that believed God and lived to enter it.

As they set out from the wilderness of Sinai on their journey to the Promised Land, silver trumpets were used to coordinate their stopping and going. God's presence was always with them – a cloud of shade by day and a pillar of fire as their night light. They were literally guided one step at a time. Each time the cloud or pillar signaled a move, Moses prayed to God for guidance and victory, each time they were signaled to stop, he asked for God's presence to rest with His people. No matter how many times they started or stopped, Moses would repeat these prayers. Let's look at the end of Chapter 10 as our context for today's passages:

Numbers 10:33-36, (*Chronological Bible page 227, March 1*)

So they departed from the mountain of the LORD on a journey of three days; and the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them for the three days' journey, to search out a resting place for them. 34 And the cloud of the LORD was above them by day when they went out from the camp. 35 So it was, whenever the ark set out, that Moses said: Rise up, O LORD! Let your enemies be scattered, And let those who hate You flee before You." 36 And when it rested, he said: "Return, O LORD, TO the many thousands of Israel."

Moses feared/revered the Lord above all else and put Him first in the life of the people, oh that Israel had followed his example they may have avoided the sin that caused them so much grief!

Since the Fall, man has struggled to live by faith in the goodness of God and by the Word of God. Instead, we continue to live by sight, trapped in our fleshly existence, blind to spiritual truth and spiritual reality. In the book of Numbers, Israel has the promises of God regarding their existence and their land, plus the very presence of God in their midst. Yet still, they walk in rebellion and unbelief. Today's lesson focuses on four scenes from this week's reading that illustrate the depravity of the human heart. Let's pray and we will dig into our passages for today. (Pray)

In 1 Corinthians 10:6, 10-11 Paul says this: Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted...10 nor complain and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 Now all these things happened to them as examples and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. 12Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."

We are to note what God's people did in the past and how their decisions affected their relationship with Him, in order to move forward with our own faith in the present. So, in looking at our passages for today, we are going to look at what NOT to do as God's chosen people.

Point 1: (do not) Be Discontent with God's Provision- Numbers 11

Read with me Numbers 11:1-2 (*Chronological Bible page 228, March 2*)

Now when the people complained, it displeased the Lord; for the LORD heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the LORD burned among them, and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. 2Then the people cried out to Moses, and when Moses prayed to the LORD, the fire was quenched.

You've heard the refrain from agitated parents "quit your belly aching or I will give you something to belly ache about." That is exactly what the Lord did. It's so interesting that what they were complaining about was apparently so insignificant that it wasn't even recorded. When the Lord judged them, they cried out to Moses and he interceded on their behalf. But it did not stop them from continuing to complain. Look at verses 4-6:

Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: Who will give us meat to eat?5We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and then garlic; 6but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!

I read that they did not "freely" have all of these things in Egypt but lusted after them then as well. Memories can be a mirage, especially when you are discontent with your current situation. They forgot the bondage of Egypt and only remembered the "flesh pleasing" things.

Though manna was miraculously provided and was healthy nourishment, they tired of this provision from the Lord and lusted for other things.

Numbers 11:10-11,13-15, page 228:

Then Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families; everyone at the door of his tent; and the anger of the LORD was greatly aroused; Moses also was displeased. 11So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you afflicted Your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you have laid the burden of these people on me? ... 13Where am I to get meat to give all these people? For they weep all over me, saying "Give us meat that we may eat." I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. 15If you treat me like this, please kill me here and now- if I have found favor in your sight- and do not let me see my wretchedness!

The people were complaining and Moses was complaining about their complaining! "Just kill me now," he tells the Lord. "This job is too hard!" Yet Moses is humble and realizes that he is no better than they are!

Commentator Warren Wiersbe explains: "So sinful is the human heart that its prone to forget God's blessings, ignore God's promises and find fault with God's providence. " (Wiersbe, Be Counted, page 266) It takes faith to accept God's providential leading and Israel's faith wasn't very strong. They were swayed by the mixed multitude among them, foreigners that had joined their journey along the way. (v4) The voices of those around God's people persuaded God's people that God was withholding something good from them and they turned their focus from the goodness of God to what they didn't have, instead of what they did.

Sound familiar? Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden tempting Adam and Eve to "take" the forbidden fruit. Like we will see in the Judges and Kingdom Eras when God's people do what is "wise in their own eyes" instead of trusting in Him. Like God's people today, easily swayed by the cravings of the heart and flesh to grumble and to desire what we don't have, instead of being grateful for what we do have. In the New Testament, Paul reminds us in Philippians 2:14-16:

14Do all things without complaining and disputing, 15that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain." (Chronological Bible page 1539, Dec 11)

Complaining is contagious. Discontentment is at the top of the slippery slope of sin. When we rebel against Him, God often gives us our own way, which can lead to our destruction. (See Romans 1:24, 26,28).

Let's continue in Numbers 11:31-33, page 229

Now a wind went out from the LORD, and it brought quail from the sea and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground. ³² And the people stayed up all that day, all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers), and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague.

The Lord gave them what they desired, and it killed them. Moses called the place "the graves of lust." It served as a monument to the danger of asking for "my will be done" over "Thy will be done." In both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the Lord warned Israel that the way they treated the daily manna would be a test of their obedience to His Word. (Exodus 16:4; Deuteronomy 8:3) By rejecting the manna, Israel really rejected the Lord and it was this rebellious attitude that invited the judgment of God.

Point 2: (do not) Deny God's Authority – 12:1-16; 16:1-17

Everyone in Israel knew that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were God's chosen servants, but that Moses was designated by God as the leader. This had been evident from before they were brought out of Egypt. God had used Miriam to save her younger brother's life, and then later to lead the women in Worship (Exodus 15:20-21). Aaron was the older brother chosen to help Moses with Pharaoh and to serve as the first High Priest. But Moses was the one whom God spoke to and spoke through as the leader of Israel. Even among spiritual leaders, the sin of envy is ever present and unless it's guarded against creeps into leadership circles. "Envy" is that whimpering whisper that cries, "that's not fair! Why not me?" and it can affect anyone at any time, especially where siblings are involved. Read with along with me

Numbers 12: 1-10 (*Chronological Bible page 229, March 2*).

12:1 Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. ² So they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. ³ (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.)

⁴ Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!" So the three came out. ⁵ Then the LORD came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward. ⁶ Then He said,

"Hear now My words:

*If there is a prophet among you,
I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision;
I speak to him in a dream.*

*⁷ Not so with My servant Moses;
He is faithful in all My house.*

*⁸ I speak with him face to face,
Even plainly, and not in dark sayings;
And he sees the form of the LORD.
Why then were you not afraid
To speak against My servant Moses?"*

⁹ So the anger of the LORD was aroused against them, and He departed. ¹⁰ And when the cloud departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam, and there she was, a leper.

Aaron begged Moses to intercede for Miriam, and so Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "Please heal her, O God, I pray!" Then the LORD said to Moses, "Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterward she may be received again." So, Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days, and the people did not journey on until Miriam was brought back in.

Miriam attempts to assume leadership equality with Moses and influences Aaron to join her in this rebellion. Verse 9 says the Lord was so angered that He departed from them. He then deals swiftly and decisively with her. Aaron begs Moses to intercede, which he does. Miriam's life is spared but the entire camp is delayed seven days because of her rebellion.

Just a few chapters later we see another example of rebellion against God's chosen authority. This one much later, while they were wandering in the desert after they refused to go into the Promised Land which we will look at in a few minutes. Again, the Lord's judgment is swift and decisive. Skip over to chapter 16, Korah's rebellion. You may remember it as you read this account this past week on March 4th, page 235:

Numbers 16:1-7:

16:1 Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men; ² and they rose up before Moses with some of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, representatives of the congregation, men of renown. ³ They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"

So when Moses heard it, he fell on his face; ⁵ and he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His and who is holy,^[b] and will cause him to come near to Him. That one whom He chooses He will cause to come near to Him. ⁶ Do this: Take censers, Korah and all your company; ⁷ put fire in them and put incense in them before the LORD tomorrow, and it shall be that the man whom the LORD chooses is the holy one. You take too much upon yourselves, you sons of Levi!"

Korah and Moses were cousins. Accompanied by 250 of the most prominent men of the congregation, Korah, Dothan, and Abiram challenged Moses and Aaron in their positions, basically telling them they have been in charge too long and not the only ones who are "holy"

and can lead. Like with Miriam, the real issue is envy. Korah wanted all the Levites to have the same privileges as Aaron and his sons.

Moses' response is to fall on his face before the Lord in humility, then speak to Korah. This is the example of a servant leader, bowing before the Lord before confronting those he leads. He suggests that they take it to the Lord, saying "Tomorrow we will bring our censers before the Lord and see who He chooses."

The next morning, they all show up at the tabernacle with their censers, and the Lord takes action.

Numbers 16:20-35, page 235

²⁰ And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ²¹ "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment."

²² Then they fell on their faces, and said, "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and You be angry with all the congregation?"

²³ So the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁴ "Speak to the congregation, saying, 'Get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.' "

²⁵ Then Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ And he spoke to the congregation, saying, "Depart now from the tents of these wicked men! Touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins." ²⁷ So they got away from around the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents, with their wives, their sons, and their little children.

And Moses said: "By this you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will. ²⁹ If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the LORD creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the LORD."

³¹ Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, ³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. ³³ So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly. ³⁴ Then all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up also!" ³⁵ And a fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense.

God made it very clear that He was in control, that they were to accept the leaders whom He had appointed over them and were to respect those leaders' authority. It is a dangerous thing to doubt God's authority and challenge His appointed leaders. Rebelling against His appointed leaders is the same as rebelling against the Lord.

When you review the history of the redemption of Israel and their journey from Egypt to Canaan, you see that every time they resisted the leadership of Moses and Aaron, it caused them great trouble. As the Lord sought to bring them through difficult situations and build their faith, they rebelled against His authority, blamed those He put in charge and made plans to return to Egypt. No society can function without authority and subordination. God's plan wasn't just to free them from slavery but to establish them as a nation.

Point 3: (do not) Doubt God's Plan – Numbers 13-14

Israel had journeyed to Kadesh Barnea from Mount Sinai, on their way to Canaan. Just south of the Promised Land, they sent out spies to look over that which they were to possess.

Turn back to Chapter 13 (page 230, March 2), and read with me verses 1-3:

13 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel; from each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a leader among them. "³ So Moses sent them from the Wilderness of Paran according to the command of the LORD, all of them men who were heads of the children of Israel.

So twelve men travel to Canaan to survey the land. This is where we first meet Caleb. We met Joshua, his counterpart as a General in the army back in Exodus 17, and when he went up Mount Sinai with Moses in Exodus 24. Together, these two are the only Israelites over the age of 20 that ultimately enter the Promised Land. The rest died while wandering in the wilderness for 40 years because of their rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. Let's review what happened.

Numbers 13:21-33 (*Chronological Bible page 230, March 2*)

²¹ So they went up and spied out the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, near the entrance of Hamath. ²² And they went up through the South and came to Hebron; Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmaj, the descendants of Anak, were there. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) ²³ Then they came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there cut down a branch with one cluster of grapes; they carried it between two of them on a pole. They also brought some of the pomegranates and figs. ²⁴ The place was called the Valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster which the men of Israel cut down there. ²⁵ And they returned from spying out the land after forty days.

²⁶ Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan."

³⁰ Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it." ³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." ³² And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. ³³ There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."

Twelve spies went into the Promised Land. Ten saw obstacles, and two saw opportunities. It's a matter of perspective, and it's the difference between fear and faith. Ten spies looked up and saw giants, Joshua and Caleb looked up and saw God. And what did the people do?

They freaked out.

In chapter 14 it says they wept all night, then complained against Moses and Aaron. They cried out, "We are going to die! It would have been better if we had died in Egypt, or in the wilderness." Their faithlessness was surpassed only by the foolishness of their plan. "Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" ⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt." And that's when their leaders stepped in and stepped up. Read with me beginning in verse 5:

14:5 Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel.

⁶ But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; ⁷ and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, 'a land which flows with milk and honey.' ⁹ Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them."

And what was the people's response? Verse 10:

¹⁰ And all the congregation said to stone them with stones.

After hearing the criticism, the doubts, the fears, Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the Lord and prayed for them. The intercessory prayers of Moses are legendary and one of the secrets of his greatness.

Joshua and Caleb try to encourage the multitude and inspire their faith. "The Lord will do it," they proclaim. "The Lord is with us!" Yet, to no avail. The fear and rebellion ran deep.

Then the Lord spoke, verse 11

... “How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them? ¹² I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

Once again Moses intercedes on their behalf and explains to the Lord that if He does not bring them into the Land of Promise, the Egyptians and other nations will accuse the Lord of being unable to do what He said He would do. And then Moses prays,

¹⁷ And now, I pray, let the power of my Lord be great, just as You have spoken, saying, ¹⁸ ‘The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.’ ¹⁹ Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.”

Moses appeals to the Lord based on the Lord’s attributes, reputation, and character. Moses won this battle from his knees!

And so, the Lord determined that they would wander in the wilderness until all this faithless generation perished, those 20 years and older, except Caleb and Joshua. Only these two would be able to enter the Promised Land. Why? Because Joshua and Caleb followed the Lord with complete faith and trust.

This story tells the story of many of our lives. It was God’s plan that the children of Israel should go straight into the land He had promised them, the land of Canaan, but the people would not. We can put difficulties between ourselves and God like the people of Israel or put God in between ourselves and our difficulties like Joshua and Caleb. The Lord wanted them to enter the Promised Land, but their fear and unbelief kept them out. Their faith failed. They doubted God’s plan.

Is your fear keeping you from all that God has for you? Fear can paralyze even the bravest of hearts. Joshua and Caleb reviewed what they saw but then recounted the promises of God in the face of what they saw. Sometimes we need to listen to ourselves less and preach to ourselves more. As faithful followers of the Lord, we need to read His Word, recount His promises and review our blessings with gratitude. With God as our guide, we can face our giants without doubting God’s plan.

Conclusion:

God demonstrated His goodness, grace, and mercy by choosing Abraham and His descendants as His own special people, rescuing them from Egypt and leading them to the Promise Land. Yet, Israel’s response to the outstretched hand of God reflected the proud, stubborn, and rebellious heart of all humanity. This is still evident today. Our default system is to question whether God is indeed good and whether He will do what He says He will do for His people.

God speaks, God acts and God reveals. What have we learned from these passages? Little issues of complaining and grumbling and discontent with God's provisions and His guidance are a slippery slope to sin. The cost of rebellion is paid not only by the rebels but by future generations. Our words can either be a "bad report" about God that will influence others to unbelief or life-giving words of faith that can inspire them to trust in Him.

Resources:

Be Counted, Warren Wiersbe

What the Bible is All About, Dr. Henrietta Mears

The Charles Stanley Life Principles Bible

Jon Courson's Application Commentary