

Chapter 10 Numbers 1-36

Guidance in the Wilderness

“Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in the camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. At the Lord’s command they encamped, and at the Lord’s command they set out. They obeyed the Lord’s order, in accordance with his command through Moses.” Numbers 9:22-23

The book of Numbers helps us to judge how well we are doing in the story. We were meant to see ourselves in the Israelites and challenge our faithfulness in the light of their experience. It is important that we hear their story, which inspires us, as well as warns us, in order that we might learn how to live by faith in the wilderness. The community of Jesus, like the Israelites in the wilderness, have not only been *set apart* but they have *set out* on a journey of faith. Exodus is about deliverance. The theme of Leviticus is dedication, and the focus of Numbers is on direction. Yahweh gave the Israelites everything they needed to enter the Promised Land, yet they repeatedly squelched the divine initiative and frustrated the efforts of the faithful minority. The true story of Numbers describes what happens when the Promised land doesn’t look very promising, even though God does everything to provide and protect.

The story of the Israelites in the wilderness makes us think of the upward call of God in Christ. As the apostle Paul declared, “But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13-14). Spiritual growth that stresses a moment of conversion, rather than a life of transformation, is out of touch with the true story of God’s people. The dominate theme for the covenant community is setting out on a life journey of faith and trust in the risen Lord Jesus. Today’s believers often think of church growth as programmatic numerical growth. This is a byproduct of living in a western, consumer society, where the measure of success is found in bottom-line thinking. “Christianity, as Mother Teresa used to say, is anti-statistical” (quoted in “Faith vs. Statistics,” Chuck Colson, Christianity Today, Feb. 2003, 144). G. K. Chesterton agreed. “There is something a trifle vulgar,” he wrote, “about this idea of trying to rebuke spirit by size” (The Everlasting Man, 23). God’s story emphasizes a different dynamic. Numerical growth is considered a *divine* prerogative. God adds or subtracts according to his providence and blessing. Human initiative lies not in promoting success, but moving forward obediently under God’s direction. The question before the people of God is not how do we become bigger, but how do we follow the will of God more faithfully.

I’m afraid that those who rightly fear a static, no-growth church often wrongly yield to a secular model for church growth. By stressing strategies for producing numerical growth through personalities, programs and promotions, they invariably render themselves spiritually passive. The theme that God has stressed throughout salvation history and highlights in the book of Numbers, is not a method for growth, but a movement in the Spirit. As we become true sojourners, our emphasis will be on throwing “off everything that hinders and the sin that so

easily entangles.” Our calling will be to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us,” with our eyes fixed on Jesus, “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:1-2). The challenge for those whom God has *set apart* has always been to *set out* under the Lord’s direction into the wilderness. Growth that is based on accommodating to popular culture rather than resting in the providence of God misconstrues the wilderness for the Promised Land and fails to look “for the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14).

The book of Numbers is especially important for two reasons. First, it renews our appreciation for all the Lord has done to strengthen and help us in our journey. And second, it reviews all the ways sinful human nature can disrupt the people of God on their journey toward the Promised Land. This double-edged truth inspires as well as warns all “who have set their hearts on pilgrimage” (Ps 84:5).

Grace and Order

Sometimes the storyteller’s style may seem boring, but never his message. Stated in a simple, pedantic fashion, an obvious truth was meant to impress every single member of God’s covenant community. Once again the point is made by illustration, rather than explanation. Numbers begins with numbering all the able-bodied men, twenty years and older, who could serve in the army (1:3). Moses was told by the Lord how this was to be done and given a list of tribal leaders, “each the head of his family.” These men conducted a census and recorded the number of potential soldiers from each of the twelve tribes. Each tribe is listed along with the number of men. To many modern scholars, the total number of 603,550 men seems extremely high and seems to conflict with other numbers, like the number of firstborn males listed as 22,273 (3:40-43). If the total population of the Israelites was between two to three million the logistics for crossing the Red Sea and organizing such a large number of people would have been challenging to say the least. It might also appear that Israel was large enough to occupy the land without great difficulty (see Ex 23:29; Deut 7:7,17,22).

The Bible reiterates this high number (Ex 12:37; Num 1:46; 2:32; 11:21; 26:51) and records how their sheer number terrified the surrounding cultures. “This horde,” complained the Moabites, “is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field” (22:4). What is important for our purpose is not the debate about how ancient calculations were made and represented, but the significance of God’s power in developing a nation. Yahweh had already fulfilled his promise to Abraham, when he said, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you” (Gen 12:2).

Joseph’s descendants were divided into two camps, Ephraim and Manasseh. The Levites “were not counted along with the others,” because they were appointed “to be in charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony” (1:50). The census listing was followed by another list which arranged the location of each of the twelve tribal groups, beginning with Judah, around the Tent of Meeting. Aaron and his sons were set apart as priests and responsible for the supervision of the Levites. The Levites were then counted, subdivided into clans and assigned specific duties. Once again, the camp’s ceremonial purity was stressed and specific procedures for dealing with injustices and suspicions are listed. The goal of full restitution and the removal of suspicion were

important for healthy relationships and the strength of community (5:1-31). If a person desired to express their spiritual enthusiasm and zeal, they were directed to take a vow of separation to the Lord as a Nazirite (6:1-21). This meant that they abstained from all grape products, from wine to raisins, as a sign of their break from everyday life. The second distinguishing mark of the Nazirite was his refusal to go near a dead body. “Even if his own father or mother or brother or sister dies, he must not make himself ceremonially unclean on account of them, because the symbol of his separation to God is on his head” (6:7). A visible sign of this vow of separation could be seen in the Nazirite’s refusal to cut his hair. After the period of separation was over, he “shaved off the hair of his dedication” and “put it in the fire that is under the sacrifice of the fellowship offering” (6:18).

The most noteworthy representative of the Nazirite vow was to come fifteen centuries later in John the Baptist. What is striking about this vow, and often overlooked, is that it prescribed limits around spiritual zeal. The ascetic discipline was not carried to extremes, but limited in order to call attention to Yahweh rather than the individual self. Nor did this spiritual zeal place a demand on the community, as is so often the case in modern Christianity where the zealous believer becomes dependent on the support and encouragement of the church.

God’s prescription for a healthy, holy community extended even to the wording of the priestly blessing. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

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.’” (6:22-26)

Aaron's benediction is followed by a detailed listing of offerings presented by each tribe at the dedication of the tabernacle. For twelve days, each tribe, beginning with Judah, presented an offering to the Lord. The reader is struck by twelve lists of identical offerings for a total of twelve silver plates, twelve silver sprinkling bowls, twelve gold ladles, twelve bulls, twelve rams, twelve male lambs a year old, twelve grain offerings, and twelve male goats (7:1-87). This could be dismissed as a tedious accounting of each tribe's offerings if it were not for the fact that the repetition was for a purpose. For the record the narrative shows that each tribe participated equally in the dedication of the tabernacle. All of Israel had an equal share in the sacrificial system. No tribe was more dedicated or generous than another tribe. All were equally committed.

As we've already seen in Exodus, God's directions for worship in the Tabernacle were comprehensive and detailed. In Numbers these instructions entailed arranging the lampstands properly, so their light would be cast forward. Specific directions were given for setting apart the Levites and making provision for those who were unable to participate in the annual Passover celebration because they were ceremonially unclean, so that they could still celebrate the Passover a month later (8:1-9:14).

It may be understandable if Christians today skim over the first ten chapters of Numbers, but we then miss the important message that they hold. God called for an accounting of the people which revealed not only their size, but their strength. Then God arranged and organized them

around the tabernacle, assigning a place to each tribe. The ministry of the tabernacle commenced with the Lord's acceptance of offerings indicative of each tribe's equal partnership in worship. The whole account, which is repetitive on purpose, was meant to impress upon them, and us, the totality of God's sovereign care over his people. God ordered the covenant community through various means, by numbering and organizing the people, ordaining leaders and assigning responsibilities. Yahweh's leadership through Moses was designed to buildup their confidence and control the competitive urges that inevitably surface in any human community. God's administration opposed anarchy as well as bureaucracy.

The climax in the story of God's provision was the description of the cloud above the tabernacle. "Whenever the cloud lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites set out; whenever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. At the Lord's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped" (9:17-18). This divine protocol for when to set out and when to encamp is repeated seven times for emphasis. "The Lord said to Moses: 'Make two trumpets of hammered silver, and use them for calling the community together and for having the camps set out'" (10:1-2). God's guidance was confirmed by both sight and sound, so that it was absolutely unmistakable.

I believe there is an analogy between the tangible and visual administration of Israel in the wilderness and God's provision and guidance for the church today. At times we might wish for a list from God numbering our true membership, naming our leaders, assigning our responsibilities, and telling us when to move forward in mission and ministry. It may even be difficult for us to appreciate the fact that God's leadership over the church today is a greater blessing than his gracious provision for Israel in the wilderness. The difference between then and now is the difference between an external organization imposed upon people by God for their own good, and a people internally transformed by the Holy Spirit for God's glory. God gave the people of Israel rituals of redemption and rules of conduct, but all of these pointed forward to the day when he would write his law on our hearts (Jer 31:33). In Christ, the outward administration described in Numbers is replaced by the Holy Spirit's administration within each and every believer. The New Testament focuses much more on the church as an organism, rather than an organization. Luke's description in Acts underscored a simple, relational dynamic. The early believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

What has happened over the course of salvation history is similar to what happens in a healthy family. Infants are helpless and require constant parental care. Virtually everything must be done for them. Out of necessity a baby's world is organized and structured by parents who lovingly provide for the baby's needs. But as a child matures, parental responsibility and provision recedes and the child assumes responsibility for his or her own life. The believer's dependence on the Spirit of Christ, in place of an external code, does not lessen the believer's responsibility to trust and obey, it only deepens it.

In the transition from external administration to internal transformation we were meant to identify the church as a body of believers rather than a building. Church facilities count for little

against the importance of the Church's Faith and faithfulness. The Church is a people of God's own choosing, indwelt by the Spirit, rather than an institution maintained by a budget. That is not to say that organizational matters are unimportant. The analogy of a human body is quite appropriate, because there is nothing in all of creation better organized than the human organism. If "in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others," then one should expect a well-run church (Rom 12:5). Instead of arranging the tribes and assigning responsibilities, as God did for Israel, God has empowered the church by his grace with gifts of service (Rom 12:6). Now, in place of rituals, restrictions and regulations, the indwelling Holy Spirit sets apart the people of God. Instead of conforming to a list of external expectations, the Spirit empowers a complete transformation of the person, enabling those in Christ "to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2).

When the Israelites set out in the wilderness, they were taking "baby steps" with God acting like a concerned parent, hovering over them and propping them up every step of the way. And even though God did everything to support them and to assure their success, these blessings did not change their hearts. The sheer size of Israel might have bolstered confidence, but instead it only meant more people lived in fear. God's constant provision in the middle of nowhere was met with constant grumbling and complaining. Instead of feeling secure in their assigned roles and free from the strain of competition, certain groups wanted more power and chafed under Moses' leadership. God's systematic organization and preparation for his people as they set out for the Promised Land are in marked contrast to the nerve-racking narrative of the hardhearted wilful rebellion, that follows. Sadly, the flip side to God's detailed direction and provision, was a dark and painful description of the sinful human condition.

Israel's experience in the wilderness is a lesson to those who feel that the ineffectiveness of the church lies in its administration. They insist that what is needed is smarter management, wiser stewardship, and better communication. If these organizational matters would get straightened out, then the problems would go away. However, the story of Israel reminds us that our frustrations lie deeper, not in inferior human organization and communication, but in the human heart. There is a difference between asking ourselves what we can do to increase our numbers and what we can do as a body of believers to move forward in obedience and faithfulness to the will of God. The first question always seems to call for more programs and the second question invariably calls for earnest prayer.

Sin and Rebellion

After a year in the vicinity of Mount Sinai the Israelites set out for the wilderness of Paran. We read, "They set out, this first time, at the Lord's command through Moses" (10:13), and marvel at how much God did to prepare his people for their wilderness trek. We sense Moses' confidence in the God of Israel's future, when he said to Hobab, his Midianite brother-in-law, "We are setting out for the place about which the Lord said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will treat you well, for the Lord has promised good things to Israel" (10:29). Hobab declined his offer, but Moses wouldn't take "no" for an answer. "Please do not leave us," Moses entreated. "You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes. If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us" (10:31).

Moses' invitation to a foreigner to join Israel and receive the Lord's blessing is a moving reminder of where the gospel story is headed. Moses was in tune with the Lord's will. Aaron was told what to say when he gave the Lord's blessing (6:22-26), but Moses offered his own simple prayer whenever the ark set out, "Rise up, O Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you." And when it came to rest, he prayed, "Return, O Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel" (10:35-36).

Moses' gracious invitation to Hobab and his eager expectation of the Lord's blessing presents a striking contrast to the people's grumbling against Yahweh. No sooner had Israel set out than they began to complain "about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord" (11:1). What follows in the story is a litany of dissatisfaction and rebellion against God stirred up by selfish felt needs, jealousy against Moses as God's appointed leader, and great fear at the prospect of entering the Promised Land.

Moses set out encouraged, but the petty, irrational complaints were enough to disillusion any leader. One can only imagine the impact on morale as Moses walked through the camp hearing people from "every family wailing," and saying, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost--also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (11:4-5).

Those who have been in leadership may identify with Moses and his troubled emotions. Moses was so intent on lashing out at the Lord because of the "rabble" that he failed to appreciate how angry the Lord was with the people. Instead of empathizing with the Lord, he accused the Lord of setting him up, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant?" He did what spiritual leaders have often done. He translated his disillusionment with the people into disappointment with God. He exaggerated his responsibility. "What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers?" Moses had reason to be angry, but not with the Lord. His frustration stemmed not only from the people, but his own feelings of failure. He was laboring under an impossible, imaginary burden that the Lord had never assigned to him. "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now--if I have found favor in your eyes--and do not let me face my own ruin" (11:11-15). The one positive thing that can be said about his outburst was that it was directed to the Lord and not to the people. His ego-distorted views of his personal responsibility were better expressed to the Lord than to the people.

It was not only the "rabble" who had ignored all that the Lord had done, but Moses seemed to have forgotten as well. God disregarded Moses' anger, his rhetoric, and his false perspectives, and intervened to help him get a grip. He called Moses to convene the leaders and consecrate the people. God responded to the first outbreak of grumbling with a fire on the outskirts of camp (11:1-3). He answered the second by giving them what they wanted--meat! "You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, or ten or twenty days, but for a whole month--until it comes

out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the Lord, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’ (11:19-20). Moses had trouble believing this: “Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!’ Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them?” (11:21-22). The Lord answered Moses, “Is the Lord’s arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you” (11:23).

God’s response to Moses was accompanied by an outpouring of his Spirit on the elders, even upon two elders, Eldad and Medad, who had not presented themselves at the Tabernacle. Joshua, “Moses’ aide since youth” wanted Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying, but Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” (11:29). This is the first indication we receive in this episode that Moses is getting the message that the Lord is in charge and that the Lord will do whatever he pleases.

The divine prerogative to send the Spirit of God on the elders however may have been misconstrued by Miriam and Aaron and emboldened them to challenge Moses’ leadership. It appears that they used God’s blessing, the outpouring of the Spirit, to undermine Moses’ authority. “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?” they asked. “Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” However, the Lord immediately defended Moses’ unique position and his character is praised. “Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (12:3). Miriam and Aaron, along with Moses, were called to the entrance of the tent and the Lord said, “When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” Once again we are reminded that Moses embodied the hope of God’s people for a deeper, more personal relationship with the Lord. He represented the future of the new covenant that God would bring through the Incarnate One, Jesus Christ. Presumably Miriam provoked this incident, which accounts for why she was struck with a skin disease rather than Aaron. Moses entreated the Lord on her behalf and she was healed, but she suffered the further indignity of being confined outside the camp for seven days.

However, the most serious breach of trust in this litany of rebellion against the will of God was the infamous majority report issued by those who had explored the Promised Land. Ten of the twelve confirmed that the land “does flow with milk and honey,” but they insisted the people were too formidable for conquest. They publicized “a bad report,” saying, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size...We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (13:32-33). Once again this touched off a popular uprising against Moses and Aaron. The mumbling, murmuring mantra, “If only we had died in Egypt!” became a rallying cry which nearly resulted in the stoning of Caleb and Joshua, the two spies that challenged the people. In front of the entire assembly they tore their clothes and said, “If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into the land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. 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” (14:8-9). The courage of Joshua and Caleb to confront the fear of their own people, reminds us of Jesus confronting the Pharisees. They too contemplated stoning God’s messenger.

Yahweh’s response to this rebellion ought to be an encouragement to all who have to endure the fear-induced disobedience of God’s people. If the Lord felt the way he did about the people, saying to Moses, “I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they” (14:11-12), then we know he understands whatever grief and frustration we might also have with some of God’s people. Many of us would not have been as gracious as Moses, nor as sensitive to Yahweh’s testimony among the nations. He pled for God’s mercy, “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: ‘The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.’ 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” (14:17-19).

The Lord heard Moses’ prayer and forgave the people, but the consequence for their rebellion was great. Not one of the adults who had witnessed “the miraculous signs [the Lord] performed in Egypt and in the desert” and “tested [the Lord] ten times,” would ever see the promised land. Only Caleb and Joshua were spared this verdict, but as for the rest of the people, the Lord declared, “I will do to you the very things I heard you say: In this desert your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me” (14:28-29). Having heard the Lord’s judgment against them, “they mourned bitterly.” They admitted, “We have sinned” and expressed their determination to occupy the promised land. But it was too late. Their presumptuous attempt to take the high hill country from the Amalekites and Canaanites met in defeat.

One of the reasons the narrative separates incidents of rebellion from information about offerings and other procedures is to give us a sense of time and space. These rebellions happened over time, but with a frequency that showed a constant and fundamental resistance to the will of God. There is a dialectical tension between the lists that shape and structure Israel as a covenant community, and the litany of complaints and contempt that threatened to break the community apart. The rebellion sponsored by Korah, a Levite, and Dathan, Abiram, and On, who were Reubenites, was particularly serious, because these men conspired together to undermine the authority of Moses and Aaron. They argued on spiritual and democratic grounds that Moses and Aaron were power hungry. “You have gone too far!” they said. “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?” (16:3). This of course was a lie, but by couching their quest for power in spiritual terms, they made it seem that they had the interests of the people in mind.

The seriousness of this rebellion can be measured by Moses’ response and God’s judgment. Moses immediately fell face down and called on the Lord to show who belonged to him and who was holy. And Moses insisted, “*You Levites* have gone too far!” He summoned Dathan and Abiram, but they refused to 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?” they argued. “And now you also want to lord it over us? Moreover, you haven’t brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you gouge out the eyes of these men? No, we will not come!” (16:13-14).

Moses had done nothing to deserve this, but he suddenly found himself accused of being the reason for Israel’s failure, even though it was rebellion such as this that had consigned the people to wander in the wilderness. Once again the Lord was ready to wipe out the Israelites and start all over. The Lord made known his presence at the entrance of the Tent of meeting and said, “Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once” (16:21). However, Moses and Aaron intervened. They fell face down and cried out, “O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?” This response is especially important because it illustrates Moses’ deep awareness that the Lord’s use of Israel was for the benefit of all nations. Moses was convinced that the issue was larger than the Israelites. The salvation of all mankind was at stake.

God’s devastating judgment first fell on the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and then it fell on all those who sympathized with them. God chose a positive sign following the earthquake and plague to reaffirm Aaron’s priestly line. Each tribe presented a staff, but only Aaron’s evidenced the touch of God. The miracle of Aaron’s blossoming, almond-bearing staff was “a sign to the rebellious,” declared the Lord. “This will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die.” And it certainly should have, for God had made his will clearly known. But it didn’t end the grumbling. The Israelites responded to Moses, “We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die. Are we all going to die?” (17:10-13).

It seems anticlimactic for Numbers to go from the disturbing emotions and high drama of rebellion to recapping the significance of sacrificial offerings. This is what gives the impression to some scholars that Numbers is a cut and paste compilation from various sources, but I believe it is wiser to see the description of sacrificial offerings, the duties of priests and Levites, and the stress on ceremonial purity, as a reminder of God’s administration over Israel (see 15:1-40; 18:1-19:22). The message communicated in Numbers is that God graciously ordered and supervised this great company in the wilderness. In spite of rebellion, the people of God were accounted for and assigned their place in the community (26:1-65). Their inheritance issues were settled (27:1-11; 36:1-12) and their future leadership was assured. Eleazar assumed Aaron’s high priestly responsibility (20:22-29) and Joshua was commissioned to take Moses’ place (27:12-23). The rhythm of daily, monthly, and yearly worship was maintained (28:1-30:16). God’s purposes were to be honored in everything from why they wore tassels on garments (15:37-41) to how they kept their vows and pledges (30:1-16). We see an earnest attempt on the part of Moses to live under God’s administration. This is especially evident when Moses was confronted with complicated ethical issues, such as what to do with a Sabbath-breaker (15:32-36), or challenging strategic issues, such as whether to allow the Reubenites and Gadites to settle on the wilderness side of the Jordan river (32:1-42).

When we consider the humility and mercy of Moses, his heartfelt concern for the fulfillment of God's great purposes, and his efforts to communicate and implement the divine administration of God's people, we cannot help but be deeply saddened by his actions at Kadesh. The fact that his disobedience was provoked did not excuse it. Failing to find water, "the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron," and in a scenario that had become altogether routine for the Israelites, they quarreled with Moses. They repeated their mantra, "If only we had died..." but this time, instead of wishing they had died in Egypt, they said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord!" (20:3). It was truly a terrible thing to say. They were blaming Moses and baiting the Lord. The sheer repetitive nature of the rebellion wore Moses to the breaking point. But no matter how much evil we face, it cannot become an excuse for disregarding God's will. The Lord told Moses, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to the rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water" (20:8). Moses took the staff and gathered the assembly, but his anger got the better of him. He raged against the people, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" He might have felt he had cause, but he had no right to say what he said. Then he raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. The water gushed out, but so did the judgment of the Lord. "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites," declared the Lord, "you will not bring this community into the land I give them" (20:10-12). Moses still embodied the hope for a deeper, personal relationship to the Lord. He didn't lose this, but his disobedience cost him dearly and cut short his leadership. The Lord used this judgment to show himself holy among the people (20:13).

Balaam's Blessing

Israel posed a threat to the surrounding nations. Edom denied Israel passage through their land forcing Moses to lead the people around Edom's "large and powerful army" (20:20). When the Canaanite king of Arad attacked the Israelites, Israel made good on their vow to the Lord to "totally destroy their cities" (21:1-3). God's help in battle however, did not quell Israel's constant complaining against God. Once again they repeated the refrain, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread." (21:5). The Lord responded by sending venomous snakes that led to the deaths of many in Israel. In answer to Moses' plea, the Lord told him to make a snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who was bitten could look at the bronze snake and live (21:8). Centuries later in conversation with Nicodemus Jesus drew on this episode to illustrate the need of a rebellious people and the gracious provision of God for salvation. Jesus made the snake on a pole as a type of himself on the cross. "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" (Jn 3:14).

Although the Israelites were victorious in battle, they kept destroying themselves by their internal opposition to the will of God. In spite of their resistance and rebellion, God protected them from the physical and spiritual forces arrayed against them. The Lord blessed them in ways they didn't even realize. The story is told of Balaam, who was called upon by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the people of Israel. Balak was terrified by Israel. Their sheer numbers struck terror in his heart. "This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field" (22:4). Balaam was an internationally known spiritist, living near the

Euphrates in Mesopotamia. Balak was willing to pay well for Balaam's services and he sent a delegation to Balaam with his "fee for divination." The Bible devotes a long account to this incident. At first God refused to allow Balaam to go to Balak and even after he gave permission we are told that God was very angry that Balaam went.

As Balaam traveled to Moab on the back of his donkey, his way was blocked by the angel of the Lord. Balaam, the reputed expert in the spirit world, was unable to see what his dumb donkey could see. This price-is-right prophet, this diviner-for-hire who made his living reading the entrails of animal intestines, was not as smart as his stubborn donkey. His donkey got the message, but he didn't. Three times he beat his donkey. And then we are told, "the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?'" In the New Testament, the apostle Peter described the situation this way, "...Balaam, who loved the wages of wickedness...was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey--a beast without speech--who spoke with a man's voice and restrained the prophet's madness" (2 Peter 2:16).

Balaam answered the donkey: "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." He was so angry that it didn't register with him that he was talking to a donkey. Then the donkey reasoned with unreasonable Balaam: "Am I not your donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," answered Balaam. It was as easy to open the mouth of a donkey as it was to open the eyes of Balaam. The Lord opened Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. "The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared her."

Balaam repented and offered to return to his home, but God ordered him to proceed, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." I am sure that the Israelites would have found a great deal of humor and encouragement in Balaam's experience. Although they didn't deserve it, God was working behind the scenes to protect Israel from the world's curses and frustrate her enemies.

When Balaam finally arrived he was met by the king of Moab on the verge of panic. "Did I not send you an urgent summons? Why didn't you come to me? Am I really not able to reward you?" There is certainly an ironic twist to Balaam's response: "Well, I'm here now? But can I say just anything? I must speak only what God puts in my mouth."

Balaam called for an elaborate ritual and Balak complied, gathering together a solemn assembly to witness the curse of Israel, their enemies. The air was filled with the smoke from the altars, as Balaam pronounced, not a curse, but a blessing: "From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them. I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number even a fourth of Israel?" Balak could not believe his ears: "What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have

done nothing but bless them!"

The entire procedure is repeated from another vantage point and once again Balaam blesses Israel: "God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'See what God has done!'" You can hear the exasperation in Balak's response: "Neither curse them at all nor bless them at all!" But Balak still hadn't learned his lesson and the procedure was repeated a third time and then a fourth, with each of Balaam's blessings becoming greater. Balak's anger finally reached its breaking point and he told Balaam to leave, and he refused to pay him. Balaam responded with a warning, prophesying doom for Moab but, unknown to him, a blessing for the world. "The oracle of Balaam, the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly, the oracle of one who hears the words of God...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" (24:15-16).

The story of the talking donkey and a pagan spiritist underscores the power of God to protect and to bless. God's purposes prevail in spite of armies and demons. The priestly blessing holds: "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" (6:24-26). Israel in the wilderness is like the church in the world. We are to remember the promises of God whenever we are inclined to fear the world or tempted to feel like a victim: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). It is true, "In this world [we] will have trouble. But take heart!" Jesus said, "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Although Israel enjoyed God's remarkable protection from external forces and the evil intent of those who wanted to cause them harm, their stubborn hearts persisted in insulting God. What Moab could not achieve through a curse, they gained through seduction. Surely Balaam was dumb, dumber than a donkey. But what can be said of the people of God who had every advantage, every blessing, but were willing to throw it all away for sensual pleasure and idolatry? Sadly the story recounts Israel's spiritual and sexual indulgence with the people of Moab. "While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them" (25:1-3).

How could this be? Their story challenges the people of God today. We should not worry about the world! God will protect us from the world. The Lord of the Universe can handle the devil and the principalities and powers and rulers of this evil world. What should concern us, humbly and prayerfully, is our daily faithfulness to the Lord.

Throughout Numbers there is a constant emphasis on the organizing and structuring of the covenant community. The rabble insisted on chaos and confusion, but God persisted in organizing and ordering the community. Rebellious people challenged God's will at every turn, but God ordained the worship, leadership, guidance and commands that the people were called to

follow for their welfare. They wandered in the wilderness because of their disobedience, but Israel survived the wilderness because of God's faithfulness. Moreover, God prepared Israel for the future by determining their tribal boundaries in Canaan (34:1-29) and establishing cities of refuge (35:1-34). Yahweh made his will known, so that the people were without excuse. "When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places. Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess" (33:51-53).

God's story in Numbers reminds us of the Gospel truth, "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). Nothing can get in the way of God's will, not pagan cultures nor spiritual warfare, not even his own rebellious people. And in the most unlikely places and through the most unusual sources, God revealed the destiny of his sovereign plan and our salvation history. The prophecy of Balaam shone through the darkness like a penetrating laser beam. "The oracle of Balaam, the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly, the oracle of one who hears the words of God....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" (24:15-16).