

# Numbers

## *A Suggested Outline of Numbers*

- I. The Old Generation Set Aside (1–20)
  - A. Counted (1–4)
  - B. Counseled (5–10)
  - C. Chastised (11–12)
  - D. Condemned (13–20)
- II. The New Generation Set Apart (21–36)
  - A. Their journeying (21–25, 33)
  - B. Their numbering (26–27)
  - C. Their offerings (28–30)
  - D. Their dividing of the inheritance (31–36)

## *Introductory Notes to Numbers*

### **I. Name**

The book takes its name from the two numberings of the men of war in chapters 1–4 and 26–27. The first census was made the second year after the nation had left Egypt, and the second was made thirty-eight years later when the new generation was about to enter Canaan. These numberings were not of the entire nation, but only of the men able to fight. The first census revealed that there were 603,550 available men; the second, that there were 601,730.

### **II. Theme**

Numbers is the wilderness book of the OT. It describes the failure of the nation at Kadesh-Barnea and their wanderings in the wilderness until the unbelieving older generation died. Someone has described Israel's wilderness wanderings as "the longest funeral march in history." Only Caleb and Joshua of the older generation were permitted to enter Canaan, because they had trusted God and opposed the decision of the nation to turn back at Kadesh-Barnea. Even Moses was forbidden to go into the Promised Land because of his sin when he smote the rock instead of speaking to it.

### **III. Spiritual Lesson**

Numbers has an important spiritual lesson for Christians today, as explained in Hebrews 3–4 and 1 Cor. 10:1–15. God honors faith and punishes unbelief. At the root of all of Israel's sins in the wilderness was unbelief: they did not trust God's Word. At Kadesh-Barnea they doubted God's Word and failed to enter into their inheritance. Instead of claiming Canaan by faith, they wandered in the wilderness in unbelief. Many Christians today are "in between" in their spiritual lives. They

have been delivered from Egypt by the blood of the Lamb, but they have not yet entered into their inheritance in Christ. Canaan is not a picture of heaven. Rather, it is an illustration of our spiritual inheritance in Christ (Eph. 1:3), an inheritance that must be claimed by faith. Canaan was a land of battles and blessings, as is the Christian life today. Alas, too many Christians come to the place of decision (their own Kadesh-Barnea), and they fail to enter into their inheritance by faith! Instead of being conquerors (as described in Joshua), they become wanderers, as described in Numbers. Yes, they are saved, but they fail to fulfill God's purpose for their lives. They will not trust God to overcome the giants, knock down the walls, and give them the inheritance that He has promised. They will not cross Jordan (which illustrates death to self) and step out by faith to claim what Christ has promised them.

It is interesting to note that the nation did not grow during their wilderness wanderings. In fact, the second census showed 1,820 fewer men of war. The nation wasted thirty-eight years, endured unnecessary afflictions, failed to grow, and failed to honor God all the while they were on their "death march." This is what unbelief does to Christians. It wastes time, effort, and manpower and brings no real blessing. How sad it is when churches fail to step out by faith and, as a result, start to degenerate spiritually, numerically, and materially. May God help us to trust His Word!

## Numbers 9–12

These chapters describe some of the wilderness experiences of the nation of Israel, and in them we see the experiences of Christians today.

### I. God Leading His People (9–10)

#### A. *He gives wisdom in problems (9:1–14).*

It was now the second year after Israel's wonderful deliverance from Egypt, and the nation was to observe the Passover. This feast was the constant reminder that their redemption depended on the blood of the lamb and the power of God. Every blessing they experienced came through the blood, even as with the church today (Eph. 1:3ff). However, certain men had been ceremonially defiled by a dead body, and they needed to know the mind of God about whether they could participate in the feast. Moses graciously admitted that he did not know the answer, but that he would ask the Lord. See James 1:5. The Lord permitted these men to observe the feast later, in the second month, which shows that even under the rigid Law of Moses there was freedom when circumstances demanded it (see 2 Chron. 30:13–15). Interestingly, when Nicodemus and Joseph took the body of Jesus down from the cross on Passover, they defiled themselves and could not participate in the feast (John 19:38–42). However, they had found salvation in Christ, the true Lamb of God.

#### B. *He gives direction in our daily walk (9:15–23).*

We have seen the guiding cloud before in Ex. 13:21–22. It is encouraging to know that the same God who saves and keeps us also guides us in our journey. Of course, God wanted to guide the nation into the place of His blessing, but their unbelief hindered Him. It is likely that the pillar of cloud and fire is a picture of the Word of God that is our counselor and guide in this present life. Using the Word, the Spirit leads us "always ... by day and ... by night" (v. 16). It would have been foolish, in fact, dangerous, for the camp or any part of it to move without direction from God. The Jews were a pilgrim people, living in tents, and they had to be ready to move at a moment's notice. Verse 22 makes it clear that God's leading is beyond human calculation: sometimes the cloud would

tarry a few days, sometimes a month, and sometimes as long as a year. At times God would lead them in the daytime, and at other times in the darkness (v. 21). But it made no difference so long as God was the one leading.

*C. He gives warning when we need it (10:1–10).*

These two trumpets were made of silver (a metal that speaks of redemption) and were used to call the assemblies for the journeying of the camp. The priests and Levites lived right next to the tabernacle, and they would be the first ones to see the cloud moving. It would be their responsibility to warn the camp. As we read these verses, we see that the trumpets were used for several other purposes: to assemble the camp at the door of the tabernacle (vv. 3, 7); to call the heads of the tribes together (v. 4); to sound an alarm, either for war or for the journeying of the camp (vv. 6, 9); and to announce the special days, the new moons, etc., (v. 10). It is interesting that trumpets are associated with both Israel and the church. The rapture of the church, when God calls His heavenly people together, will be with the sound of the trumpet (1 Cor. 15:51–53; 1 Thes. 4:16–17; see also Rev. 4:1). He will also use the trumpet to gather scattered Israel (Matt. 24:31, and see the Feast of Trumpets in Lev. 23:23–25).

*D. He leads His people in an orderly way (10:11–28).*

Each tribe was camped at a specific place around the tabernacle, and each section moved as the trumpets commanded.

*E. He does not need the world's wisdom (10:29–36).*

Hobab was Moses' brother-in-law; Raguel (or Reuel) was Moses' father-in-law, also named Jethro (see Ex. 2:18–21 and 3:1). God had promised to guide His people, yet Moses wanted to lean on the arm of flesh.

## **II. God Chastening His People (11–12)**

After the remarkable evidences of God's love in chapters 9–10, it is amazing that we read of the people complaining. Yet such is human nature—we fail to appreciate what God has done for us.

*A. The people complained and God sent fire to chasten them (11:1–3).*

The same people who complained, begged Moses for help, and he was gracious enough to pray for them. Taberah means “burning.” It is a serious thing to complain against God.

*B. The people lusted and God provided flesh for them (11:4–35).*

The “mixed multitude” were traveling with Israel, but, like worldly church members today, their hearts were still in Egypt. Instead of remembering God's goodness, they remembered the carnal things of Egypt! And they complained about the heavenly manna that God gave them daily. Verse 8 indicates that the people did their best to improve on the manna, for they ground it, beat it, and baked it. They would do anything to make God's bread taste like the food of Egypt, but the problem was their appetite and not God's bread. Exodus 16:31 says that the manna tasted like honey, but v. 8 states that when the Jews tried to “improve” upon the manna, they made it taste like oil!

One of the sad results of carnality among God's people is discouragement on the part of the leaders (v. 10ff). Now Moses himself complained to God! Notice how often he said “I” and “my” and “me” in his prayer, for his concern was himself and not God's glory. Moses should have known that

the same God who delivered them, led them, and provided for them, would give them flesh in the wilderness; but, as often happens, self-centered praying killed his faith. Finally, Moses was about to give up: "I am not able!" (v. 14). See what his father-in-law said back in Ex. 18:18. Of course, in himself, Moses was not able to lead Israel, but with God leading him, he could do the impossible. Yet Moses was so discouraged that he even asked to be killed!

God met both needs: He gave Moses seventy elders to assist him in his work, and He gave the lusting Jews the meat that they craved. Note, however, that in both cases, the answers God gave were costly. God took of the same Spirit that empowered Moses and gave Him to the seventy elders to assist him, but could not the Spirit have given Moses all the power he needed for his work? And the people who ate the flesh died of a great plague even as they ate (Ps. 78:25–32; 106:13–15). God sometimes answers our prayers, and we find that the answer is not a blessing at all! Note in vv. 26–30 that Moses manifested no envy toward the two men empowered by the Spirit to prophesy. This is the sign of a great man. Moses certainly had his days of discouragement, as we all do, but he was a man of God in spite of his failings.

In v. 31 we see that the quails were blown in from the sea and flew about two cubits over the face of the earth, near enough for the Jews to catch them. The people spent two days and one night gathering their meat, yet how many of them were faithful to gather the heavenly manna? The name "Kibroth-hattaavah" means "graves of lust." "To be carnally minded is death" (Rom. 8:6).

### *C. The leaders criticized and God chastened them (chap. 12).*

Aaron, the high priest, and Miriam, a prophetess (Ex. 15:20–21), both were leaders in Israel with their brother Moses. The apparent cause of their argument was Moses' wife, who was a Cushite (Ethiopian, and therefore a Gentile). But the real cause was their jealousy over Moses' leadership (v. 2). Moses proved his meekness (humility) by refusing to fight them; he left his cause in the hands of God. God has promised to defend His servants (Isa. 54:17). Apparently Miriam was the ringleader, for she was made leprous, and her sin held up the march of the camp for seven days. Aaron confessed his guilt, and Moses prayed for his sister Miriam, an evidence of true love and humility. It is a serious thing when spiritual leaders become envious of one another, because their sin affects the whole congregation.

Whether this was a new wife, or Zipporah, Moses' wife of years before, we do not know. It could have been a second marriage for Moses, but there is no hint anywhere that Zipporah had died. Note that the word "apparently" in v. 8 means "plainly"; God spoke to Moses face to face.

## **Numbers 13–14**

Hebrews 3–4 is the NT commentary on these chapters. The key thought is that unbelief robs us of blessing. Notice the evidences of unbelief in the nation and its leaders.

### **I. Sending in the Spies (13:1–27)**

Here read Deut. 1:20–23, where Moses makes it clear that the sending of the spies was the desire of the people, not the commandment of the Lord. He permitted this plan to be used so that He might reveal to the people what their hearts were really like. God had already told them many times what Canaan was like, what nations were there, and how He would defeat their enemies and give them their promised inheritance; so what need was there for men to go in and spy out the land? Sad to say, human nature prefers to walk by sight, not by faith.

The spies searched the land and even brought back some of the wonderful fruit, but they also brought back an evil report and discouraged the hearts of the people. Except for Moses, Caleb, and Joshua, nobody in the nation believed that God would keep His promises! The ten unbelieving spies illustrate many Christians today: they have “spied out” their inheritance in Christ and have even tasted some of the fruits of His blessing; but their unbelief keeps them from entering in by faith.

It is interesting to note the “promotion” of Joshua. In Num. 11:28 he is called “Moses’ servant”; ultimately, he becomes Moses’ successor (Josh. 1). We see him as a soldier in Ex. 17:8–16; Ex. 24:13 shows him with Moses on Sinai; Ex. 33:11 has him in charge of the tent of meeting; and Num. 13 shows him as one of the spies. Because he was faithful in whatever task God gave him, Joshua was advanced from one responsibility to another.

## **II. Refusing to Go into the Land (13:28–33)**

The ten spies described the glories of the land, and then added, “Nevertheless ...” This word is usually a sign of unbelief. The people were strong; the cities were walled up; and giants were in the land. They saw the giants and saw themselves as grasshoppers—but they did not see God. Their eyes were on the obstacles, not on the God who had led them there. Caleb showed true faith when he said, “We are well able!” The people showed unbelief when they said, “We are not able!” Instead of reporting the blessings of the land, the ten spies emphasized the difficulties, giving an “evil report” of God’s holy land. Unbelief always sees the obstacles; faith always sees the opportunities.

This refusal to enter the land is a type of the believer’s refusal to claim his or her inheritance in Christ (Heb. 3–4). Instead of entering into full rest in Christ, and trusting Him for every need, doubting Christians see the problems and obstacles, and wander around restlessly, blind to their blessings.

## **III. Rebelling against Their Leaders (14:1–39)**

In Ex. 15, we see Israel singing in great victory, but here they are weeping in defeat! Had they forgotten their song? See Ex. 15:14–18. Had they forgotten all that God had done for them in the past two years? They had seen His power and glory, yet now were tempting Him by their attitude of rebellion and unbelief (vv. 22–23).

God waited until the people expressed a desire to replace Moses and return to Egypt; then He began to act. Caleb and Joshua realized that the nation’s response was nothing but rebellion (v. 9). God’s glory suddenly appeared, and God spoke to Moses.

### *A. God’s offer (vv. 11–12).*

God was willing to destroy the entire nation and make a new nation through Moses’ family, but Moses rejected this offer. What humility and love! You can be sure Moses realized that his descendants would not be any different from the nation he was now leading, for “all flesh is as grass.” See Ex. 32:10 for a similar offer from God.

### *B. Moses’ intercession (vv. 13–19).*

A short time before, Moses was complaining because the people were such a burden, and now he was pleading on their behalf. He had the heart of a true shepherd—he loved his people and prayed for them. Note that Moses reminded God of His promises and performances: it was the glory of God that was at stake! Moses also reminded the Lord of His mercy and forgiveness (see Ex. 33:18–23 and 34:5–9). In this scene, Moses is a picture of Christ who was willing to give up His own life that He might save us.

### *C. God's judgment (vv. 20–39).*

In His grace, God pardoned their sin; but in His government, He had to allow that sin to produce its bitter fruit (see 2 Sam. 12:13–15). First, God gave the people their request, announcing that they would die in the wilderness (vv. 2, 28–30). Only Caleb and Joshua were excluded from this judgment because of their faith and faithfulness. The people had fretted about their little ones, yet the children would be the very ones to live and enter into the land. Since the men had spied out the land forty days, God gave the Jews forty years to wander in the wilderness while they died one by one. What a contrast to the church today: when the last unbelieving Jew died, the nation could enter Canaan; but when the last unbelieving sinner enters the body of Christ, the church will leave this world and enter her inheritance! Finally, the ten spies who brought the evil report were killed immediately by a plague (v. 37).

It cannot be emphasized too much that God honors faith and judges unbelief. Faith leads to obedience and glorifies God; unbelief leads to rebellion and death. We have the Word of God filled with His promises and assurances. There is no reason why any of us should wander in unbelief when we can be walking in victory and enjoying the spiritual riches we have in Christ.

### **IV. Attempting to Battle without God (14:40–45)**

How fickle is human nature! One day the nation was mourning because of their plight, and the next day they were recklessly trying to accomplish God's work apart from God's will and God's blessing. They thought that because they had confessed their sin, God would change His mind and give them victory. Moses warned them, but they ignored his warning, proving that they were not walking by faith in the power of the Spirit. The flesh is always self-confident and self-sufficient, as illustrated by Peter (Luke 22:31–54).

The men advanced to the top of the hill, and the enemy defeated them. The whole venture was "presumption" on their part; they were living by chance, not by faith. The Lord was not with them in spite of their seeming repentance and their zeal. We can never do anything by faith that contradicts the Word of God. How many Christians today realize their failings and then try to make up for them in fleshly activities that only lead to discouragement and defeat. All the Israelites could do was to accept God's judgment and surrender to His will. Far better to wander in the wilderness in the will of God than to fight a losing battle out of the will of God.

These two chapters emphasize again the importance of faith. Faith is not blind; it has all of the promises and assurances of God's Word for its foundation. "Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts" (see Heb. 3:7–8).

## **Numbers 16–17**

The "gainsaying (saying against) of Korah" is mentioned in Jude 11 as one of the marks of false teachers in the last days; and certainly today we see a united rebellion against the authority of Moses and the priesthood of Aaron (God's way of salvation by blood). Korah was evidently a cousin of Moses (Ex. 6:21), which makes the rebellion even more serious.

### **I. Korah Defies Moses and Aaron (16:1–18)**

Korah was a Levite who was not content to assist in the tabernacle; he wanted to serve as a priest as well (v. 10). Of course, this attitude was a direct rebellion against the Word of God as given by Moses, since it was God who made the tabernacle appointments. Not content to rebel alone, Korah gathered 250 princes of Israel, well-known men (most of them probably Levites), as well as three

men from the tribe of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son. In name, number, unity, and attitude, those rebels seemed to have a strong case against Aaron and Moses. It appears that Korah and his followers defied Aaron, while Dathan, Abiram, and On (being descendants of Reuben, the firstborn) questioned the authority of Moses. However, they were united in their plot.

Rebels rarely give the real reason for their attacks; in v. 3 the men argued that all of the nation was "a kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6), and therefore Moses and Aaron had no right to take the places of leadership. Of course, this rebellion was based on self-seeking and envy. These men wanted to "lift themselves up" before the congregation. Certainly the whole nation was holy to God, but He had placed some people in positions of leadership as He willed. The same is true of the church today: all saints are beloved of God, but some have been given spiritual gifts and spiritual offices for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:15–16; 1 Cor. 12:14–18). We are encouraged to "desire spiritual gifts" (1 Cor. 14:1) but not to covet another person's spiritual office. If a believer wants a place of spiritual leadership, let him prove himself worthy of it by his character and conduct (1 Tim. 3:1ff). The church must heed Paul's warning in Acts 20:28–31.

Moses and Aaron did not defend themselves; they let God do the defending. Moses instructed Korah and his followers to bring censers (pots for burning incense) to the tabernacle where God would demonstrate who was right in the dispute. He called for Dathan and Abiram to come, but they defied Moses' authority and refused to obey. In v. 25, Moses went to them, but his visit meant condemnation, not blessing. Note how the men blamed Moses for their failure to enter the Promised Land (vv. 13–14), when it was their own unbelief that brought this defeat. To rebel against Moses meant rejecting the Word of God, for he was God's prophet; and to rebel against Aaron meant rejecting the work of God on the altar, salvation by the blood.

## II. God Defends Moses' Authority (16:19–35)

The next day God stepped in and judged the rebels. Fire from the Lord killed the followers (v. 35), and the earth opened up and swallowed the leaders, Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their possessions. In **26:11** we learn that Korah's family was not destroyed. This explains why we have psalms titled "For the sons of Korah" in our Bible (Pss. 84, 85, 87, 88). Apparently Korah's descendants were content to be humble ministers and not priests, for they wrote in Ps. 84:10 (nkjv), "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." For "tents of wickedness" see Num. 16:26. It is tragic when a few people sin and cause the deaths of many others. Before this rebellion was over, nearly 15,000 people had died (see v. 49). Read 2 Peter 2:10–22 for God's estimate of those who "despise authority" and rebel against God's truth.

## III. God Defends Aaron's Authority (16:36–17:13)

### A. *By giving Aaron the censers of the rebels (16:36–40).*

Moses told Aaron's son, Eleazar, to gather the censers and have them made into brass plates for a covering for the brazen altar. When worshipers came to the altar, they would see these plates and be reminded that the sin of rebellion is severely judged by God. Why were these censers "hallowed" (sanctified)? Because God had used them in a special way to teach Israel a lesson. To allow the censers to be treated as "junk" or as ordinary implements would have lessened the impact of the judgment.

### B. *By having Aaron intercede (16:41–50).*

You would think that the deaths of all these people would strike terror and awe into the hearts of the nation, but it did not. The very next day the entire congregation rebelled again! Only the grace of God can change the human heart; no amount of law or judgment will ever make the heart new. The

congregation gathered against Moses and Aaron and accused them of being murderers, but God stepped in and defended his servants. Had Moses been of a bitter spirit, he would have allowed the plague to destroy the people. Instead, he commanded his brother Aaron to go into the midst of the plague with his censer to stop the judgment. How little the people realized Moses' love and sacrifice for them. Aaron literally became their savior—he stood between the living and the dead and stayed the plague. His one censer accomplished more than the 250 censers of the rebels! In a sense, Aaron illustrates the work of our Savior, for Christ left the place of safety to stand between the living and the dead and rescue sinners from death.

*C. By causing Aaron's rod to bud (17:1–13).*

God was now going to declare once and for all the authority of the Aaronic priesthood. The people had not learned their lesson, so Moses instructed each tribe to bring a rod—a dead stick—to be placed before the ark in the tabernacle. God announced that the rod that blossomed would indicate the one He had chosen for the priesthood. Verse 8 tells us that Aaron's rod not only budded, but it blossomed and bore fruit! The other rods were still dead, and each of the princes took back his dead rod, leaving Aaron's rod to be placed in the tabernacle as a testimony to the nation's rebellion and God's appointment of Aaron as the high priest.

The budding of the rod is a beautiful picture of the Resurrection of Christ. By means of the Resurrection, God has declared that Christ is His Son and the only Priest that God accepts. All other priesthoods are rejected by God. It matters not how many people are involved, how great their names, or how sincere their work—all other priesthoods are rejected. There is One High Priest, one sacrifice, and only one open way to heaven; read Hebrews 10. We have many today like Korah who presume to take over the priesthood, but they have no heavenly authority.

Note in vv. 12–13 that the people were fearful after they had seen this demonstration of God's power. What the death of nearly 15,000 people could not do, the silent blossoming of a dead stick did accomplish! "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit ..." (Zech. 4:6).

## Numbers 20–21

In these two chapters, we have two wonderful types of Christ.

### I. Christ the Smitten Rock (20:1–13)

We have already been introduced to this type in Ex. 17:1–7. In many places in Scripture, God is pictured as a Rock; and 1 Cor. 10:4 makes it clear that the Rock in Exodus and Numbers is a picture of Christ. The people could not live without water, nor can we live today without the water of life (John 4:13–14; 7:37–39). In the Bible, water for drinking is a type of the Holy Spirit, who comes within and satisfies our spiritual thirst. Water for washing is a type of the Word of God, which has cleansing power (John 15:3; Eph. 5:26).

The events here contrast with those in Ex. 17. In the Exodus passage, God told Moses to smite the rock, picturing our Lord's death on the cross. But here He told him to speak to the rock, for Jesus Christ died but once. All we need do now is ask, and He will give of His Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39). When Moses smote the rock, he used Aaron's rod, not his own. This is the priestly rod of life (Ex. 17:1ff). Here is the explanation of why Moses was to speak to the rock and not smite it: Christ our rock has risen from the dead; He is our living High Priest; and He gives us the spiritual blessings we need as we ask for them. A person does not have to be saved over and over again,



nor does the gift of the Holy Spirit have to be repeated. We receive the Spirit once when we trust Christ; we receive fillings of the Spirit many times as we come to Christ and ask.

The main reason, though, that God judged Moses and kept him out of the Promised Land was this: he exalted himself and failed to glorify God. In calling the people “rebels” and in saying, “Must we [Aaron and I] fetch you water out of this rock?” (v. 10) Moses was not giving God the glory due His Name. It was an evidence of pride and unbelief (v. 12). Moses’ strongest point was his meekness (12:3), yet this was where he failed. No doubt Peter was a brave man, yet he failed in that very thing when he denied the Lord. Unless we glorify God in all that we do, God will deal with us and we will miss the blessing He has planned for us.

## **II. Christ the Uplifted Brazen Serpent (21:1–9)**

John 3:14 is our authority for making this a type of Christ. Note how it pictures for us the salvation we have in Christ.

### *A. The need.*

The people had sinned in two ways: they had spoken against God, and they had spoken against Moses. Because of this, they were dying. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Here we have the two aspects of the Law of God: behavior toward God and behavior toward one another. Because of sin, death is in the world and all are condemned (John 3:16–18). Every person born into this world has been bitten by the fiery serpent of sin and is destined to die.

### *B. God's grace.*

God could have ignored his people's plight, for they deserved to die, but in His love and grace He provided a remedy. The intercession of Moses in v. 7 reminds us of the prayer of Christ, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

### *C. Another serpent.*

How strange that Moses should make another serpent when it was serpents that caused all the trouble to begin with! Were there not enough of them in the camp already? But the serpent of brass pictures Christ, who became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Brass is the metal that speaks of judgment, and on the cross, Christ bore our judgment for us. Note that the serpent was not effective in Moses' hand, or on a shelf. It had to be “lifted up”—Christ had to be crucified. See John 3:14, 8:28, and 12:30–33.

### *D. By faith.*

The people had prayed, “Take away the serpents!” But God's method was to overcome the sting of death by faith. “Look and live!” was the answer. It was not by ignoring the bites, beating the serpents, applying medicine, or trying to flee that the afflicted people were saved. Salvation came through looking by faith to the uplifted serpent in the center of the camp (cf. Isa. 45:22). Note that the serpent was not connected with the tabernacle in any way. No amount of sacrifices could have saved the people from death.

*E. Available.*

The serpent was not lifted up in some hidden corner. It was lifted up in the center of the camp where all could see it and live. Christ is available today; He is not far away. See Rom. 10:6–13 for fuller application. The remedy was available to all; “whosoever will, let him take” (Rev. 22:17).

*F. Free.*

It cost dying sinners with Moses nothing to look and live. They may not have understood the how and why of it all (and who does understand salvation?) but they could believe and live!

*G. Sufficient.*

The one uplifted serpent sufficed for the whole camp. Christ alone is sufficient for our salvation; we need nothing more. The dying were not saved by looking at the serpent and then keeping the law, or looking and bringing a sacrifice, or looking and making promises to do better. They were saved by faith alone. Christ is sufficient to take care of all our needs for time and eternity.

*H. Immediate healing.*

Salvation is not a process; it is an immediate miracle that takes place when the sinner looks to Christ by faith. Christ in His death and resurrection does not save us “a little bit at a time.” He saves instantly, immediately, and completely.

*I. One remedy for all.*

Thoughtless people say, “As there are many roads leading to Rome, so there are many roads to heaven, many ways to be saved!” There was only one way to be saved in the camp of Israel, and there is only one way today. Read John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. Unless a sinner looks to Christ by faith, he or she is lost forever.

*J. Double assurance.*

How did the dying people know the remedy would work? First, they had the assurance of the Word of God. God had promised that if anyone would look, he or she would live. Second, they could see what had happened in the lives of others. God would give no special revelation, no special feeling; sinners had to depend on what God had promised.

All of this seems so foolish to the people of the world (1 Cor. 1:18–31). Imagine, looking at an uplifted serpent to be saved from death! People today scoff at the cross, while they try to kill the snakes and manufacture new anti-snake remedies. Yet every remedy man has manufactured has failed! Reformation, education, better laws, religion—all have had their day. And still people are dying in sin. The only answer is the cross of Jesus Christ, the uplifted Savior.

Read 2 Kings 18:4 and you will discover that the Jews had preserved this brazen serpent and made an idol out of it. This is human nature, to look at the material thing and ignore the God who deserves our trust. It was not the serpent that healed the people; it was the God who commanded the serpent to be made. This is idolatry, to “worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). Hezekiah broke the serpent idol in pieces and named it, “Nehushtan”—“a piece of brass.” We wonder what God thinks of the millions of idols scattered across this world, pieces of wood or metal that are robbing God of the trust and glory that He deserves.

## Numbers 22–25

Few men in the Bible raise as many problems as Balaam. He was apparently of a heathen nation, yet he knew the true God. He was a soothsayer, yet was able to predict the future of Israel. He listened to God's Word and faithfully proclaimed it, yet turned right around and led Israel into sin and judgment. What an enigma he is!

### I. Balaam's Visits from Balak (22)

#### A. *The first visit (vv. 1–14).*

Balak was the king of Moab and apparently was allied with the Midianites in some way. He had seen the conquests of Israel (Num. 20–21) and was afraid his people would be overcome too. He realized that physical force would never defeat the Jews, so he resorted to spiritual deception by hiring Balaam to curse Israel. He offered Balaam a good price for doing the job, but the prophet (having consulted the Lord) refused to agree. Balak's messengers went home and reported failure.

#### B. *The second visit (vv. 15–41).*

Balak was not one to give up easily; he sent princes more noble than the first, promised Balaam greater wealth and honor, and suggested that the prophet reconsider the matter. This is what Satan often does once we have made a definite decision to obey God's Word. Deep in his heart, Balaam wanted to go with the messengers because he was greedy of gain. This is "the way of Balaam" (2 Peter 2:15–16), using religion as a means of getting wealth. God permitted Balaam to go with the princes, but He did so only to test him (vv. 20–22). It is here that the well-known episode with the angel and the ass takes place. The angel stood in Balaam's way, but the prophet did not see him! The ass did see, and acted so strangely that Balaam struck her. This should have been a warning to Balaam, but he was intent on his selfish mission and was not sensitive to God's will. When his eyes were opened, Balaam saw the angel and realized his mistakes. God said plainly, "Your way is perverse" (v. 32, nkjv), so there was no reason for Balaam to say, "If it displeases You, I will turn back" (v. 34). Balaam was playing with God's will, seeing how far he could go. God permitted Balaam to meet Balak, who gave him a great feast ("offered" in v. 40 means "slew, as for a feast") and took him out to view Israel.

The main lesson here is to find the will of God and obey it, regardless of personal desires or subsequent circumstances.

### II. Balaam's Visions of Israel (23–24)

Balak wanted Balaam to curse Israel and in this way protect Midian and Moab, but every time Balaam opened his mouth, he blessed Israel instead!

#### A. *First vision—Israel's calling (23:1–12).*

Balaam makes it clear that he cannot curse Israel because God has blessed Israel. He sees the nation as a special people, called by God and separate from the other nations (Deut. 26:18–19; 32:8–9; Lev. 20:26). He sees the increase of Israel (as the dust) and expresses his desire to die as a righteous Jew would die, in the blessing and favor of God. This vision, of course, displeased Balak, who took Balaam to "another place" for a "different viewpoint."

*B. Second vision—Israel's acceptance (23:13–30)*

This time Balaam makes it clear that God speaks and keeps His Word. He is not like men who change their minds or who fail to keep their promises. He announces the amazing fact that God sees no iniquity in Israel. Certainly the Jews had sinned often, but as far as their standing before God was concerned, they were accepted. They had been delivered from Egypt by the blood of the Lamb, and they were God's own purchased possession (Ex. 19:1–6). Humanly speaking, they were failures, but from the divine view-point, they were the people of God forever. By now, of course, Balak was furious, but he took Balaam for another look at Israel from a new place.

*C. Third vision—Israel and Canaan (24:1–9).*

This time Balaam did not use any of his enchantments; instead, the Spirit of God came upon him and opened his eyes. This vision describes Israel enjoying her blessings in the Promised Land, with the other nations defeated. Note the emphasis on water in this vision, a precious item in the wilderness. This vision was more than Balak could bear. He threatened Balaam, hinting that "the Lord" had kept him from receiving wealth and honor (vv. 10–11). Then the prophet had a fourth vision.

*D. Fourth vision—Israel's future glory (24:10–25).*

There are probably two ways to look at this symbolic message. Certainly King David fits the description, since he did defeat the Moabites, Edomites, and other peoples (see 2 Sam. 8:2, 14). But the greater fulfillment is in Christ, the Messiah, the "Star of Jacob and Scepter of Israel." Israel will have complete dominion when Christ returns and establishes the millennial kingdom. Israel's many enemies will be defeated. See Luke 1:68–79.

Balaam gives a wonderful history of Israel in these four visions, all the way from their election as a nation to their exaltation in the kingdom. We may apply these truths, of course, to the NT believer, who has been chosen of God, justified (so that we are accepted in the beloved), given a rich inheritance in Christ, and promised future glory.

### **III. Balaam's Victory over Israel (25)**

Had Balaam stopped with his visions from God, he would have been safe, but he wanted the money and the honor that Balak promised. So he told the king how to defeat Israel. His plan was simple: invite the Jews to share in the heathen sacrificial feasts and corrupt them with idolatry and lust. The ceremonies involved in Baal worship were very wicked, and Balaam knew that the Jewish men would be tempted to join with the Moabite women. This is exactly what happened. In fact, one Israelite was bold enough to bring a heathen woman home right in the sight of Moses (v. 6). What the armies of the other nations could not do, the women of Moab and Midian were doing. If Satan cannot overcome God's people as a lion (1 Peter 5:8), then he comes as a serpent. Beware of the friendliness of God's enemies! Their smiles are snares.

Aaron's grandson Phinehas took a definite stand for the Lord and opposed this compromise of God's people with the heathen (2 Cor. 6:14–18). A plague from the Lord had already begun. When Phinehas slew the guilty man and woman, the plague stopped, but not before 24,000 people had died. See Num. 31:16. In this age when people are telling Christians to become friendly with their spiritual enemies, we need more courageous men like Phinehas who will take a stand for separation and holiness.

Of course, Balaam thought that Israel's sins would destroy the nation. This is "the error of Balaam" mentioned in Jude 11. People look at the church today and condemn her for her "spots and wrinkles and blemishes," but God sees His church from a different viewpoint. True, He punishes our

sins and chastens us when we disobey, but He will never leave us or forsake us. It is this blessed fact of grace that Balaam did not understand. Revelation 2:14 mentions the doctrine of Balaam. This was his counsel to Balak that he invite the Jews to mix with the Gentiles, marry Moabite women, and share in their evil feasts. Such a “doctrine” is nothing but compromise. It is interesting that the NT warning comes in the letter to the church at Pergamos, because “Pergamos” means “married.” This is the great danger today: Christians individually and churches (and denominations) collectively are forgetting their calling to be separate and are joining themselves to the world. This can only mean judgment.

For other references to Balaam, see Deut. 23:4–5, Josh. 24:9–10, Neh. 13:2, Micah 6:5, 2 Peter 2:15–16, Jude 11, and Rev. 2:14.

## Numbers 33–36

These chapters deal with the assigning of the tribes' inheritance, looking ahead to the time when the nation would possess Canaan. The tribes are assigned their portions, the Levites their special cities, and, most important of all, the cities of refuge are defined. We will consider these six cities from three viewpoints. (Read Deut. 19 and Josh. 20 for additional facts.)

### I. The Practical Meaning

The nation had no police force, and the elders in each city constituted a “court” to consider capital crimes. If a person accidentally killed another person, he or she needed some kind of protection; for it was legal for a member of the slain person's family to try to avenge the blood of the slain relative. Genesis 9:6 established the principle of capital punishment, which was affirmed by Moses in Ex. 21:12–14. (Note in v. 13 the suggestion of the cities of refuge, however.) In other words, the person who killed another was in danger of his own life, because the “avenger of blood” (the kinsman) could kill him before the slayer had a chance to prove himself innocent.

Numbers 35:16–23 makes it clear that God considers murder (by deliberate intent) and manslaughter (by accident) two different things. We follow this distinction in modern law. The murderer has deliberate intent to kill; he has a history of hating the victim. But the person who slays another by accident has no murderous intent. He deserves the right to state his case and save his life. This was the purpose of the cities of refuge. The slayer had to flee to the nearest such city, where the elders would meet him, hear his case, and hold a trial. If they decided he was guilty of murder, he would be turned over to the proper authorities and then slain (Deut. 19:11–13). If it was clear that the slaying was accidental, then the person would be allowed to live in the city under their protection, and the avenger of blood could not touch him. If, however, the person left the city, he could be slain. When the high priest died, the person would be free to return to his own city safely.

Note that the aim of this law was to keep the land from being polluted (Num. 35:29–34). Murder would defile the land, and uncondemned murders would lead the land into greater sin. This law provided for the protection of the innocent and the condemnation of the guilty. It was a just law. It is unfortunate that our laws today often are misapplied so that it is easy for the guilty to go free. No wonder our nation is defiled with blood and there is little respect for law and order.

### II. The Typical Meaning

These six cities of refuge are beautiful types of Christ, to whom we “have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us” (Heb. 6:18).

*A. They were appointed by God.*

This was an act of grace, for all men are sinners and deserve to die. Moses did not choose the cities, for the Law cannot save anyone. Though these were priestly cities, it was not an earthly priest who appointed them. Their appointment and the sending of the Messiah both came from the loving heart of God. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16).

*B. They were announced in the Word.*

The six cities are named in Joshua 20:7–8, and they could never be changed. On the authority of the Word of God, a slayer could enter a city and no one could forbid him! So with our salvation: it is promised to us in the Word, and this can never change. There were cities in Israel that were larger and more prominent, but none of them could shelter the sinner. There are many "religions" today, but there is only one way of salvation as announced in God's Word—faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

*C. They were accessible to all.*

If you will consult a map of the Holy Land, you will find that the six cities were arranged so that no tribe was too far from the place of safety. On the west side of Jordan were Kedesh in the north, Shechem in the central area, and Hebron in the south. Right across the river on the east side (where Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh chose to settle) were Golan in the north, Ramoth in the central section, and Bezer in the south. These cities were accessible. Some of them were located on mounts so as to be even more prominent. Tradition tells us that the priests made sure the roads were in good repair leading to these six cities, and that regular landmarks were put up to guide the fleeing person. We are also told by the rabbis that the gates of these cities were never shut. What a picture of Christ! Certainly the "way to the city" is clear! No one need ever wonder who the Savior is or how to come to Him, for we come to Him by faith. He will never turn any sinner away (John 6:37). There is one point of contrast between the cities and Christ: when the slayer came to the city, he was admitted but he was also tried. With us, there is no trial, for we are already condemned! See also John 3:18. The elders of the city admitted someone who was innocent of murder, but Christ receives guilty sinners. What grace!

*D. They were adequate to meet the need.*

So long as the slayer remained in the city, he was safe, and he would be freed when the high priest died. This does not suggest that we may "leave Christ" and lose our salvation, for we do not build doctrines on types; rather we interpret types on the basis of doctrines. The true Christian can never perish, but by failing to "abide in Christ" he or she opens the door to spiritual and physical dangers. Our High Priest will never die, and because He lives, we live also.

To see the adequacy of Jesus Christ to meet our every need, consider the names of the cities. Kedesh means "righteousness," and this is our first need. When we come to Christ, He gives us His righteousness and forgives all our sins (2 Cor 5:21, Col. 2:13). Shechem means "shoulder," and suggests that we find in Christ a resting place, a friend on whom we can lay our burdens. "Can I hold out?" is always the question a new believer asks. The answer is, "He will hold you!" Hebron means "fellowship," suggesting our fellowship with God in Christ, and also our fellowship with other believers. Bezer means "fortress," suggesting the protection and victory we have in Christ. The safest place in the world is in the will of God. Ramoth means "heights" and reminds us that believers are seated "together in heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 2:4–10). Sin always leads a person down, but Christ lifts us up; and one day we shall be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air! Finally, Golan means "circle" or "complete" and suggests that in Christ we are complete (Col.

2:9–10). Some say it means “happiness,” and certainly the Christian is a happy person, in spite of the trials and problems of life.

Note that the slayer is told to flee to the city. Such a person could not afford to delay! Nor can lost sinners today afford to delay in fleeing to the only refuge, Jesus Christ.

### **III. The Dispensational Meaning**

There are some students who see in these cities a picture of Israel and her rejection of Christ. Israel killed Jesus Christ in ignorance and blindness (Acts 3:14–17; 1 Cor. 2:8). Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This means Israel is treated like a manslayer and not a murderer, and that there is forgiveness and safety for Israel. However, Israel is now “in exile” as was the manslayer in the city of refuge. In other words, God is protecting Israel and one day will bring her forth in forgiveness and blessing, when she sees her Messiah (Zech. 12:10–13:1).

These same ideas would apply to Paul, who was guilty of slaying others (see 1 Tim. 1:12–16). He is a “pattern” for Jews who will be saved in the future, for they will see Christ in glory just as Paul did (Acts 9).