

September 7, 2025

THE JOURNEY: NUMBERS 9:15-23

Introductory Activity (Adapted from ETB LG, 17)

Introduce: As adults arrive, encourage them to share about a recent trip they took. Encourage them to share where they went and why, as well as landmarks or tourist sites they visited along the way. Find out if they used a GPS on any part of the trip.

Read: Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 10 of the PSG. (**See Notes Box**) and then tell the story below.

“Three Japanese tourists visiting Australia hit the road for North Stradbroke Island, a small island off the coast of the mainland. While the GPS did give them the most *direct* path, it failed to show that it involved crossing nine miles of water to get there. 50 yards offshore, the vehicle became stuck in muddy waters, forcing the crew to abandon the vehicle and walk back to shore. Passengers on a ferry—the way *most* people get to the island—witnessed the embarrassing event from afar.”¹

Ask: Think of a time when bad directions led you somewhere unexpected. How can getting just one detail wrong disrupt our travels? (PSG, p. 10)

Transition: Today, we begin our study of the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy with a lesson in Numbers 9. In the preceding chapters, Moses reports on a census of the people, the arrangements of the tribes in relation to the Tabernacle, instructions related to Levites, and ceremonial regulations. Chapter 9 marks a change for the people. The time for preparation is complete. “It was time for the Israelites to put their feet into motion and begin the journey into the wilderness, marching toward the Promised Land.” (Preaching, 129) For the upcoming journey, they will need guidance. They do not have a GPS, and they do not have a human guide to give them directions. Instead, they will have to rely on the Lord to direct them. Let’s see what we can learn from them and consider how “God gives daily guidance to His people.” (ETB LG, 15)

1. GOD’S PRESENCE (NUMBERS 9:15-16)

Read or have someone read Numbers 9:15-16.

Explain: As we study this passage and the ones to follow, there is going to be what seems like a lot of repetition. This might reflect the possibility that this passage was an ancient song of praise related to God’s directions and the people’s faithfulness to follow. (cf. TOTC, 112-113) In light of the repetition, we should go ahead and lay out the points of our lesson as we begin. This will help us stay on track. The ETC curriculum provides three application points for the lesson.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Numbers* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Jesus in Numbers* (Exalting)
- *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Numbers* (TOTC)
- *Numbers* (Harrison)
- *New American Commentary: Numbers* (NAC)

“Many of us rely on GPS navigation when going someplace new. Not only will it tell us to turn left in 1.2 miles, but it will also tell us what time we can expect to arrive. GPS systems weren’t as reliable when they first came out. They were programmed at the factory and didn’t automatically update with the most up-to-date information. They didn’t know about new roads or routes. Thus, sometimes they gave wrong information, and people got lost.” (ETB LG, 16)

¹ <https://www.lowmanlawfirm.com/blog/driver-distraction-top-5-gps-fails-from-across-the-globe>

The Journey: Numbers 9:15-23

1. God's Presence (Num. 9:15-16): Believers can be assured that God is with them and can provide trustworthy guidance.
2. Faithful Direction (Num. 9:17-21): Following God's guidance will require believers to act on His instruction.
3. Active Obedience (Num. 9:22-23): Following God in faith means that we act on His timeframe and not our own.

Explain: So, in this first passage, we are going to focus on the trustworthy guidance of the Lord. Numbers 9:15 picks up where Exodus 40:2 left off. The people of Israel had been at Sinai for two years and had completed and dedicated the Tabernacle. The word Tabernacle means "to dwell." The name of the tent reveals one of its functions. It is the place where God would dwell. How do we know that God dwelt there? We first know this because God promised to dwell among His people. In Exodus 25:8, God tells Moses, "They are to make a sanctuary for me *so that I may dwell among them.*" (emphasis added) But how do we know that God's presence filled the Tabernacle? Verses 15 and 16 do not say that God moved in. Instead, they say that the cloud descended on the Tabernacle. Exodus 13:21 tells us that the Lord's presence was with the cloud. So, the location of the cloud above and amongst the Tabernacle does not *represent* the presence of God. It is the literal presence of God. This is what we call a theophany. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* defines a theophany as a "Manifestation of God that is tangible to the human senses."² We see these in other places. For example, in Genesis 18, God appeared to Abraham as three travelers. In Joshua 5, Jesus appears as the "Commander of the Lord's Army." The cloud is an example of God choosing to manifest His presence in a tangible way.

Discuss: What does it mean that God's presence settled on the Tabernacle? (How would the people feel? What is the significance for the nation?)

Explain: The presence of the almighty God among the people signifies His importance to the nation and the nation's importance to Him.

His importance to the nation is signified in the physical place God settled. The cloud settled on the Tabernacle and later rested above it. That means God is at the center of the camp. In Numbers 2, the Lord instructed the tribes to camp around the Tabernacle. Their encampment was not haphazard. Instead, the Lord instructed some tribes to settle to the east of the Tabernacle, some to the west, some to the north, and some to the south. The Levites took up residence closest to the structure. With the layout established, God was literally at the center of the camp. Moreover, God was the center of the nation. This symbolic positioning represented the intended actuality of God's place at the spiritual and governmental center of the nation.

His presence also reveals the nation's importance to God. God's presence among the people should have affected the way the people viewed themselves and other nations. "God's presence with His people Israel pointed to the uniqueness among the people[s]." (ETBC, 15) In Deuteronomy 4, Moses counsels the people to diligently follow the Lord's instructions. In verse 7 of that chapter, he says, "7 For what great nation is there

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² William C. Williams, "Theophany," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed., Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 770.

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that has a god near to it as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him?” This great truth should affect the way the people understand their relationship to the Lord and His call for them to be a light to the nations. Their unique relationship with the Lord should lead them to diligently follow the Lord. It should also cause them to understand the need of the pagan nations to follow the Lord as well. As a result, they should attempt to bring the other nations into a right relationship with the Lord God.

Believers today have a similar relationship to the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 6, the Apostle Paul challenges the church at Corinth to live righteously before the Lord and the world. In verses 19 and 20 of that chapter, he writes, “¹⁹ Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.” Similar to the Israelite camp, the Lord is literally at the center of our being.

Discuss: What does it mean that God’s presence resides with us and in us? (How might this truth affect the way a believer feels? What is the significance for the believer and his relationship with others?)

Explain: As God was the spiritual and governmental center of the nation, God is the center of the believer’s moral and relational decision-making.

Moreover, the reality of God’s presence in our lives should affect the way we see ourselves and others. His presence should cause us to view ourselves as children of the King. In a very real way, we hold a special place among mankind. We should not let others affect our view of ourselves. However, this reality should also be humbling. Like the Israelites, we did nothing to earn God’s good pleasure. Instead, it is by the blood of Christ that we enter

into a relationship with the Lord. As a result of God’s grace and mercy, we should look to those around us who need the same thing and find ways to help them enter into a relationship with Him.

Summarize Transition: As we are going to see in the following verses, the people of Israel were faithful to follow the cloud as it led them through the wilderness. Their commitment to follow the cloud as it led them was predicated on the cloud being more than a cloud. The presence of the Lord in the cloud and in their midst is the only reason they should follow the cloud. Moreover, the presence of the Lord is the reason the cloud *could* lead them. For us today, the presence of the Lord is the reason we can be sure that God “can provide trustworthy guidance.” The sovereign, all-knowing, all-powerful God of the universe is present with us and can lead us where He knows we should be.

2. FAITHFUL DIRECTION (NUMBERS 9:17-21)

Read (or have someone read) Numbers 9:17-21

TEACHER’S NOTE: WE ARE GOING TO LOOK AT THIS PASSAGE FROM TWO DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES. THE REASON FOR THIS IS, THE ETB CURRICULUM SPEAKS IN POINT TWO ABOUT ACTING ON GOD’S COMMAND, AND IN POINT THREE IT TALKS ABOUT GOD’S TIMING. IN MY ESTIMATION, THE PASSAGE OF POINT TWO (VV. 17-20) IS BETTER SUITED TO DISCUSS GOD’S TIMING.

Explain: In the previous verses, we saw that “Believers can be assured that God is with them and can provide trustworthy guidance.” In this passage, we see that “Following God’s guidance will require believers to act on

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His instruction." (ETB PSG, 19) We are going to look at these verses broadly at first and come back to them when we get to the last point in our lesson because they provide us with examples for submitting to God's timing.

Ask: Looking at verse 17, call out where the Israelites camped.

Explain: We can see in this passage that the Israelites camped where the cloud stopped.

There is a difference in taking a road trip with your family and taking a bus tour with a large group. When a family travels the country, they get to decide what they see, the route they will use to get there, and the places they stay along the way. When participating in a bus tour, the riders do not dictate the route or location for each night's lodging. They are under the direction of the tour company and the contract they signed. These two types of trips appeal to different types of people for different reasons. One significant difference is the required knowledge of those who participate. The bus tour participants do not have to plan ahead and know the best route. They do not have to book lodging along the way or at the destination. They don't even have to keep up with the time during the day because they know the bus will stop for breaks and lunch along the way. Similarly, the people of Israel, who had spent their lives as slaves in Egypt, did not have to know anything about desert travel. Nor did they have to know the best route to their destination. Even more, they did not even have to worry about finding or hunting food along the way. The Lord was their leader. All they had to do was follow the cloud.

In verse 17, we see that the cloud told them where to go. It rose, and the people could just follow it and know that when it stopped, they had reached the destination for the day. In verse 18, we see the cloud told them where to safely rest for the night. In verse 19 and following, we see that the cloud told them when to begin again.

Discover: Ask the group to look again at verses 17-21 and discover a pair of words repeated several times. (The phrase is the "Lord's command.")

Explain: "The Hebrew term for *command* literally means 'mouth' and by extension refers to speech or commands...The text clearly indicates that God was the one leading and guiding." (ETBC, 18) Next week, we are going to explore some important aspects of Moses' leadership of the people, but we see an essential element to the reality of the nation and its relationship to leadership. "The nation of Israel was not traveling and camping at the discretion of Moses or Aaron or one of the tribal leaders. Instead, they were following direct guidance from God Himself." (ETBC, 16)

The people had no real idea where they were going or how to get there. They must rely on the Lord. Likewise, in our lives, we sometimes do not know where to go or what to do. In those cases, we must rely on the Lord. However, we have a different means by which to determine the Lord's will. The Israelites had the cloud to follow. We do not generally have the Lord leading us around in such an obvious and miraculous manner. Instead, we have another miracle to lean on when deciding the Lord's best for our lives. We have both the physical manifestation of God's Word given to us in Scripture and the indwelling manifestation of God in the Holy Spirit. We should search Scripture and seek the Spirit when making decisions.

Summarize and Transition: God is a trustworthy guide for the people, and He is a trustworthy guide for us today. However, a guide can only point the way. Exodus 40:38 tells us that the cloud was visible to “the entire house of Israel.” Paired with the details of Numbers 9, this “indicates that every household was responsible for obedience to the direction of God through the cloud.” (ETBC, 15) The cloud could move camp could break, but it was incumbent on each individual and each household to follow the Cloud. The same is true today. The Word of God and the guiding of the Spirit reveal what we should do, but it is up to each and every one of us to decide to follow. This passage reminds us that “following God’s guidance will require believers to act on His instruction.” (ETB PSG, 18)

3. ACTIVE OBEDIENCE (NUMBERS 9:22-23)

Read or have someone read Numbers 9:22-23

Explain: We have seen that “believers can be assured that God is with them and can provide trustworthy guidance,” and “following God’s guidance will require believers to act on His instruction.” As we conclude our lesson, we will see that “following God in faith means that we act on His timeframe and not our own” (ETB PSG, 18).

Verses 22 and 23 recount the faithfulness of the people to follow God. When we couple that with the preceding verses, we can learn something about the timing of God’s direction and our response to His timing.

In verses 19-22, Moses mentions several different time frames that can help us know how to follow God. In these verses, we get the When’s of God’s Direction.

In verse 19, we see that sometimes **God’s When Requires Patience.**

Moses writes, “Even when the cloud stayed over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites carried out the Lord’s requirement and did not set out.” When we think about the travels to the Promised Land, we immediately think about the 40 years of wandering. At this point in the story, the Israelites had not yet disobeyed God’s command to enter the land (Numbers 14:1-38). The people following the cloud in Numbers 9 were expecting to reach the land in short order. Therefore, when the Lord’s cloud rested for many days, the people might have wondered if they would have to wait long before entering the land. There might have been some who were impatient to get moving. Likewise, we should be patient when the Lord has us wait. The Israelites did not know what was before. The Lord could have been protecting them from enemies or other dangers when He had them wait. The same can be true for us. Also, these times of waiting provided the benefit of rest. Packing up and walking for long periods of time would have been tiring for such a large intergenerational group. When the Lord has us wait, He might have several reasons. He might be protecting us, or he might be getting us ready for something challenging.

In verse 20, we see that **God’s When Requires Perception (or awareness).** Moses writes, “Sometimes the cloud remained over the tabernacle for only a few days. They would camp at the Lord’s command and set out at the Lord’s command.” Packing up camp would have been a laborious process. Moreover, getting the children and the senior adults ready to move would have taken time. If the Israelites were going to respond to the Lord and “make as much time” as possible in their daily walk, they would need to be aware when the cloud began to lift and move. One commentator pointed out that the Levites would have kept an eye on the

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cloud for any movement. Similarly, in our lives, we need to be aware when God is stirring in our lives or when God is on the move. If we think back to the lessons taught in Henry Blackaby's study *Experiencing God*, we will remember that God is always at work around us and He invites us to join Him in that work. For us to join Him, we must first perceive the work. We should be challenged to stay alert and perceptive to His movements.

Verse 21 teaches us that **God's When Requires Preparedness**. Moses writes, "Sometimes the cloud remained only from evening until morning; when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. Or if it remained a day and a night, they moved out when the cloud lifted." If you have ever gone on a multi-day hiking trip, you know the challenges of setting up camp and breaking camp the following morning. Sometimes, those who are hiking and camping for multiple days on a trail such as the Appalachian Trail or Pacific Crest Trail will forego a tent when possible and set up cowboy camp (sleeping under the stars with no tent) or hang a hammock for the night. This allows them to set and break camp easily. Now, imagine you are a group of 2 million people who, after walking for an entire day and then setting up camp at night, see the cloud lift again the next morning, signaling you to break camp. If they never knew when the cloud was going to guide them to strike out, they had to be ready to leave any morning. They, therefore, needed to be prepared to respond to God's movement. Similarly, we should always be ready to respond to the opportunities God provides us. We should be ready to share the gospel, offer a kind word, or lend a helping hand.

Summarize and Transition: After summarizing the guidance of the cloud, Moses provides us with a remarkably positive summation of the people's actions. In verse 23b, he writes, "They carried out the Lord's requirement according to his command through Moses." The people obeyed the Lord. We know that this was not the manner in which they always responded. But regarding the clouds leading, they obeyed the Lord as a group and as individuals. Whether they stayed one day or many, the people obeyed. Likewise, believers can know that "Following God in faith means that we act on His timeframe and not our own." (ETB PSG, 18)

CONCLUDE

As we conclude our look at this passage, we might find ourselves among the Israelites.

- Are you in need of God's guidance? "We can be assured that God... can provide trustworthy guidance." (ETB PSG, 18)
 - Ask Him for guidance and seek His will in Scripture.
- Are you struggling with God's instructions or guidance? We can be sure that "Following God's guidance will require [us] to act on His instruction." (ETB PSG, 18)
 - Ask Him for the courage to follow Him wherever He is leading.
- Are you struggling with God's timing? Maybe He is moving quickly or maybe He is moving slowly. "Following God in faith means that we act on His timeframe." (ETB PSG, 18)
 - Ask for the patience you need. Practice alert perception to spot God's work in your life. Be prepared to act when you see Him at work or feel His leading.