

OT Survey 5 Leviticus & Numbers: Holiness, Worship, Wilderness Testing

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Introduction

When reading through the Bible in a year, these books tend to be where many believers “drop out”. This information can seem tedious and exhausting. In a 3 chapter stretch there are laws about lepers, how to cleanse lepers, and laws concerning bodily discharges. These are not the passages of scriptures that most believers look to for comfort and guidance. God was teaching His people ritual cleansings and sacrifices that would be a daily part of their lives for many generations to come. He was teaching His people how to deal with sin, and how to approach God. The key foundational principles of Substitutionary Atonement and Access to God were being drilled into their heads by repetitive living for hundreds of years to come.

The Book of Numbers gives accounts of a testing ground for the people. How would they respond when it came time for them to possess the land, and how would they deal with the failure at Kadesh and the resulting consequences?

Laws for Sacrifices and Cleansing

Leviticus is a name derived from the Latin leviticus and Greek Leuitikon ("connected to the tribe of Levi"), it acts as a manual for priests to manage the Tabernacle and the nation's spiritual purity. The opening chapters give instructions on how the people worked through the priests to offer worship with the different types of offerings. A study of these offerings in detail and a comparison to Christ give background into the curriculum that Jehovah was seeking to educate the people. One of the few actual occurrences recorded in this book was the death of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, who offered "strange fire" to God. This was a fire for sacrifice from an unauthorized source. It was possible that the sons of Aaron were drunk when they were performing service and had a serious lapse of judgement. We are not told exactly what happened, but it seems clear from God's warnings in chapter 10.

Day of Atonement - Lev 16

Aaron continued in service to God even after the execution of his sons. God even had warned Aaron and the family not to show traditional types of mourning, but to focus on service. God was continuing the tone set back in Ex 19 with making Himself unapproachable except in the most exacting of circumstances. This was to emphasize the holiness of God and teach them that they were not capable of pleasing God themselves. Christ was the fulfillment of the law, keeping it perfectly. Again, it was a lesson on righteousness that the people were being taught. And they were not very good students.

Blood was to be spilt first for Aaron and his family, and then for the people. This was mentioned in Hebrews to show the distinction between Christ's sacrifice and the way the priesthood operated (7:27). Aaron was to sprinkle blood from these sacrifices onto the mercy seat between the cherubim in the holiest of holies. The image of substitutionary atonement is strong here.

“Approach to God” chart: Court → Holy Place → Most Holy

The diagram of the Tabernacle and its increasing restrictive access show one of the lessons that God was seeking to teach the people. God’s presence requires cleansing. Sin creates a problem that God and God alone can deal with. Man is not capable of approaching God by himself, and judgement is dispensed when any attempt apart from God’s direct and clear command is undertaken. God is preparing the nation for His Son’s arrival.

Unbelief at Kadesh - Num 13-14

The first 10 chapters of the book of Numbers are filled with more instructions on how to set up the camp and how to worship God. From the duties of the Kohathites (carrying the holy objects, including the ark of the covenant) to specific articles of worship, the way to approach God was to be limited and the process exacting. God had provided everything that Israel needed to be successful. He demonstrated His power to them at every turn. Joshua and Caleb, two of the twelve spies that went in to view the land, had the confidence in God that they could do what God had asked them to do. Their confidence was in Jehovah. The people did not share this confidence. They fixated on the obstacles instead of the God who was walking with them. This unbelief resulted in judgement. This generation would not see the promised land, everyone over 20 would die in the wilderness and Joshua and Caleb would lead the next generation into the land, to possess it.

Rebellion and Rules!!!

Several accounts from chapters 10-36 in Numbers have to do with rebellion of parts of the people. Miriam showed a flare of rebellion and was judged immediately. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram also were judged in a powerful way when they opposed God’s chain of command. The account of Balaam offers insight into how the people ultimately fell into apostasy. Told from the perspective of the false prophet Balaam, we see the fruitlessness of rushing God’s judgement upon anyone. God will handle the dispensing of justice. Were God’s people in need of chastening? Yes, but God would handle the timing and the tool to be used. Balaam’s story is a cautionary tale of what happens when we take sides against God’s people. According to Numbers 31:8 and Joshua 13:22, the prophet Balaam was killed with the sword by the Israelites during a war against the Midianites. He was executed for his role in advising the Midianites to corrupt the Israelites with idolatry and immorality at Peor, acting out of greed after failing to curse them directly. Interspersed between these accounts are various sets of guidelines for how to handle situations that may arise under the Mosaic Law. These issues of rebellion show the wickedness and stubbornness of the human heart, even among God’s chosen people.

Dispensational tie-in

Jehovah is holy and His people Israel were to be holy (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:6). The Law was to be their righteousness (Deuteronomy 6:25) for it was a righteous law (Deuteronomy 4:8). Israel was to pursue righteousness in their dealings with one another. God

had revealed in the Law this kind of righteousness. There was to be no partiality either for rich or poor (Deuteronomy 16:19). If the nation would pursue this righteousness, they would go on living and inherit the land, which Jehovah was giving to them (Deuteronomy 11:8-9, 20-25). This was their test. Would Israel live their daily lives under the Law so that they as a nation would be set apart to God? Would Israel submit to the Law? As we will see in the next lesson, and following, Israel will ultimately fail, resulting in bondage before they failed the ultimate test in failing to recognize the Righteous One as he offered them His Kingdom.

Conclusion and Set up for next lesson

The wilderness wandering is a time of testing for Israel. It is a time for them to learn as they experience God's provision, even in judgement. Deuteronomy and Joshua come next, where God will renew His covenant blessings and cursings with those who will follow Moses.