

Sunday School Lesson for September 7, 2025  
Numbers 9:15-23

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this first Sunday in September, we're beginning a new series in the Old Testament Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, tracing the steps of the Israelites as they make their way to the Promised Land. It was, as you know, a long and difficult journey that didn't have to be that way. Because they refused to trust God and believe the report of Joshua and Caleb, an entire generation had to pass before the Lord allowed them to cross the Jordan River into the land He had promised to give to the descendants of Abraham some six hundred years before. It was a long time to wait, but you would have thought that their deliverance from slavery in Egypt that was nothing less than spectacularly miraculous would have convinced them that God had a plan and a purpose for them.

Our lesson today comes from chapter nine of the Book of Numbers. You might think that the title is a rather strange name for a book of the Bible. As with many of the books of the Old Testament, the Hebrew title comes from the first words of the book, in this case, it's "In the wilderness of." But the translators of the Septuagint--the second-century, BC Greek translation of the Old Testament--gave it the name "Numbers" because of all the lists of numbers that are found in the book, and that title has stuck.

The book of Numbers can be divided into three parts: first, the preparation for their departure from Mount Sinai in the first ten chapters, the journey from Sinai to Kadesh and the events there in chapters ten through twenty, the journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab and the events there--chapters twenty through 32, and the book closes with a detailed itinerary of the entire journey, a brief reminder

of God's instructions, a list of the leaders of the tribes of Israel, and a few other miscellaneous matters in chapters 33 through 36.

In all, the Book of Numbers covers a period of thirty-eight years and nine months, referred to as the period of wilderness wanderings. Numbers makes it clear that this extended episode in their history was punishment for the Israelites' lack of faith, so that none of the unbelieving generation would enter the Promised Land, except the two spies that brought back the report encouraging the people to trust God. As a result, Numbers is a complex story of unfaithfulness, rebellion, apostasy, and frustration, all set against the background of God's faithfulness and gracious forbearance.

By way of a reminder as to where we are in the Exodus story, the Israelites had departed from Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month of the year and reached the wilderness of Sinai on the first day of the third month. On the third day, God revealed Himself on the mountain. The Tabernacle was erected on the first day of the first month of the second year. The book of Numbers opens with this command from the Lord: "The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, 'Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel.'" The first three chapters are a record of that census.

In chapter four, the Lord directs a census be taken of the tribe of Levi, and He provides instructions for their responsibilities regarding relocating the Tabernacle as they journeyed. Chapters five and six record the Lord's instructions regarding ritual uncleanness due to infection and sin. In chapter seven, we read of the first offerings presented in the Tabernacle, and, in chapter eight, the Lord gave Moses instructions about the setting apart of the Levites for their service in the Tabernacle.

So, with everything set in place for their, brief, less-than-two-year trek to the Promised Land, they're now ready to start out. Chapter nine begins with a record of the observance of Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. Then, in verse eleven, we find that there was a second Passover celebrated for those who were ceremonially unclean or on a journey and unable to participate in the Passover on the assigned day. Reminding the people of this momentous, foundational event in their history was essential for preparing them for what lay ahead.

Our focal text begins with verse fifteen: "On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night."

As you read through the Old Testament, you'll find different names for the Tabernacle. In general, it's referred to as the Tabernacle--a Latin word that the man who first translated the Bible into Latin chose to use, but we also find it called "the tent of meeting" or simply "the tent," // the dwelling," "the dwelling of the Lord," or the "dwelling of the testimony," as well as "the sanctuary." As a portable, nomadic Temple, the tabernacle would be located either outside the encampment of the Israelites or in the center of the twelve tribes, and it would be guarded by a single attendant by the name of Joshua, the son of Nun.

You'll remember from our study from the first of the year about the instructions and building of the Tabernacle that it would be the place where God would manifest His presence among His chosen people. So that the worship that would be offered in this Tabernacle would be the kind of worship that was proper for the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth and the God Who does not dwell in tents made by humans, God Himself gave Moses the instructions for each and every item in the tabernacle, even down to the smallest detail. Not only was the

place of worship to be as God intended, the activity of worship was to be according to God's design as well.

While the Israelites were encamped beneath Mount Sinai, it took them about six months to gather and prepare all the various components for the Tabernacle. The actual construction took less than a day--on the first day of the first month of the second year after their departure from Egypt as we read in Exodus, chapter forty, verse seventeen.

Now, with the Tabernacle assembled and everything in its place, verse 33 concludes with the words, "So, Moses finished the work." All that was lacking was for the glory of the Lord to fill this magnificent place where He would dwell among His people. Finally, after some six months of meticulous cutting and casting, sawing and sewing, the moment had come for the Lord to inhabit this magnificent sanctuary where His presence would be found among His chosen people. As the last curtain was fastened in its place over the opening into the courtyard, as the priests stood in the courtyard with a great sense of expectation, the aroma of the incense began to build and float heavenward, and the people surely waited expectantly with an overwhelming sensation of anticipation to see what God was going to do.

And then, it happened--Exodus, chapter forty, verse 34: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle."

Back in chapter thirteen of the Book of Exodus, God had made His presence known by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night in order to protect the Israelites and give them the assurance that He was with them. That same cloud had led them every step of their journey through the Red Sea all the way to Mount

Sinai, and now that very same pillar of cloud covered the newly-erected Tabernacle, while an intensely brilliant light identified as “the glory of God” filled the interior of the Tabernacle.

Although the glory of God can’t be adequately defined in human terms, it’s often spoken of as the sum of the invisible qualities, character, and attributes of God displayed in a visible way. The Latin word from which we get our word, glory, means fame or renown, but the Hebrew word refers to a sense of weightiness or importance, reflecting the profound greatness, consequence and significance of God's presence. Here, it’s pictured as a glowing fire that gleamed through the cloud. The cloud hid at least some of the full brilliance of the majesty and splendor that no human eye could behold. It seems that, when Moses tried to enter the Tabernacle to see for himself this magnificent spectacle, the presence of God was so intense that Moses was not able to enter--it was just too foreboding. He had been there just a little while ago when he oversaw the assembly of the Tabernacle’s interior; but now, he was so struck with awe and reverence by the overwhelming presence of the Lord, that he knew he had no business being where only Aaron, the high priest, was allowed to go.

One commentator writes, “With the completion of this building and its divine consecration, Israel had now received a real pledge of the permanence of the covenant of grace, which Jehovah had concluded with it; a sanctuary which perfectly corresponded to the existing circumstances of its religious development, and kept constantly before it / the end of its calling from God. For although God dwelt in the tabernacle in the midst of His people, and the Israelites might appear before Him, to pray for and receive the covenant blessings that were promised them, they were still forbidden to go directly to God’s throne of grace. The barrier, which sin had erected between the holy God and the **un**holy nation, was not yet taken away. To this end the law was given, which could only increase their

consciousness of sin and unworthiness before God. But as this barrier had already been broken-through by the promise of the Lord ..., the entrance of the chosen people into the dwelling of God was [made possible] by the service of the sanctified priests in the holy place, .... And even the curtain, which still hid the glory of God from the chosen priests and sanctified mediators of the nation, was to be lifted at least once a year by the anointed priest, who had been called by God to be the representative of the whole congregation [and who would] make expiation for the children of Israel because of all their sin, and to prefigure the perfect atonement through the blood of the eternal Mediator [--even Jesus], through [Whom] the way to the throne of grace is [now] opened to all believers, that they may go into the house of God and abide there for ever, and for ever see God.”

Back to Numbers, chapter nine, verse sixteen: “So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night.” The glorious, mysterious, yet ever-abiding presence of the Lord was visibly displayed 24-7 for all to see and know that God was with them. It had first appeared when they left Egypt and camped at a place called Etham on the edge of the desert--Exodus, chapter thirteen, verses 20 and 21.

As God “hardened the heart of Pharaoh”--Exodus, chapter fourteen, verse eight, he decided to assemble his army and go after the Israelites. When they saw the Egyptian army pursuing them, the Israelites complained that Moses had just brought them out of Egypt to die in the desert. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t be the last time Moses would have to hear that complaint.

So, what did God do? Verse nineteen of Exodus, chapter fourteen: “Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all

night.” Thus defended and directed, the Lord made a path through the sea, the people crossed on dry land, and, when Pharaoh’s army pursued, the waters returned and the army was destroyed. Verse thirty: “Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.”

One more thing about the cloud that covered the tabernacle by day and the appearance of fire at night--were they two different clouds or manifestations of the presence of God? Exodus, chapter fourteen, verses 19 through 24 make it clear that they were the same, appearing as fire at night and as a cloud during the day as a blazing fire enveloped in a cloud--verse 24: “And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic.” It seems that the cloud surrounded the fire in such a way that, by day, it appeared as a dark cloud in contrast with the light of the sun, but, in the darkness of night, the fire was the prevailing characteristic.

However it appeared, it met the ever-changing needs of the children of Israel. We know, for example, that this fire-cloud could change shape--when it went before the army of Israel, it took the form of a column in order to show the people what direction to take. But when it separated the Israelites from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, we could imagine it spreading out like a fog bank, forming a defensive wall.

The fire in the pillar of cloud was most likely the same that Moses saw when the Lord revealed Himself in Exodus, chapter three and from which the Lord descended upon Sinai amidst thunder and lightning in a thick cloud in chapter nineteen. It was a symbol of the zeal of the Lord for His chosen people as we find in such places as Isaiah, chapter four, verses five and six; Psalms 27, 91, and 121; and it also brought sudden destruction to those who, like Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, chose to disobey the Lord’s instructions--Leviticus, chapter ten.

As a result, one commentator notes that “We must by no means regard it as a mere appearance or a poetical figure, and just ... storm-clouds or natural fire. Just as little, too, must we suppose the visible and material part of it to have been an element of the divine nature, which is purely spiritual. We must rather regard it as a dynamic conformation, or a higher corporeal form, composed of the earthly sphere and atmosphere, through the determining influence of the personal and specific ... presence of God upon the earthly element, which ... form God [physically] assumed and pervaded, that He might manifest His own real presence [within it].”

Verse seventeen: “And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped. At the command of the Lord, the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the Lord they camped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp.”

The Lord’s intentions for His people were made clear through the movement of the cloud. When the cloud lifted from its place above the Tabernacle, the Israelites knew it was time to break camp, disassemble the Tabernacle, load up the wagons and beasts of burden, and get ready to move to the next location where the cloud would once again come to rest. The priests would sound the trumpets--Numbers, chapter ten, verse two--and the entire assembly of people, livestock, food, cooking utensils, and all their other possessions would make their way to the next destination indicated by the movement of the pillar of cloud.

When the cloud came to rest, they would unpack, set up their tents, assemble the Tabernacle, put their animals out to pasture, prepare their next meal, and wait on the Lord for their next move. This must have been an amazing logistical feat, especially when you consider there were six hundred thousand “footmen” according to what Moses said in Numbers, chapter eleven, verse 21, plus all the



other family members, so, perhaps as many as two million people altogether, making their way to the Promised Land. In comparison, Houston, the fourth largest city in the US today, has a population of just over 2.3 million.

So they moved at the command of the Lord. That command could have come from the Lord through Moses, but it was certainly communicated through the movement of the cloud. Verse nineteen: “Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not set out.” The repetition of these instructions and the reiteration of the description of the events surrounding the account of the movement of the cloud and the Tabernacle are certainly intended to bring out the grave importance of the significance of these actions and to awaken the consciousness not only of the absolute dependence of the children of Israel upon the guidance of Lord, but also of the gracious care the Lord was giving to them and their movements that was displayed to them throughout all their journeyings.

This one factor would determine the movements of the entire nation of Israel for the next forty years--verse nineteen: “Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not set out.” They stayed put, waiting on a word from the Lord; but they didn’t just sit and wait. They didn’t put their worship on hold just because they hadn’t heard a new word from the Lord. They continued to do what the Lord had told them to do. The daily, annual, and feast offerings in the Tabernacle continued right on schedule as the Lord had commanded.

Verse twenty: “Sometimes the cloud was a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of the Lord they remained in camp; then according to the command of the Lord they set out. And sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning. And when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted, they set out. Whether it

was two days, or a month, or a longer time that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not set out, but when it lifted they set out.” That “longer time” could have referred to several months, or even several years, and the word we have translated as “days” actually meant an undetermined amount of time. A second-century AD chronicle of the history of Israel states that the Israelites stayed in Kadesh Barnea for nineteen years. Whether or not they did, it doesn’t really matter. In every way, the Israelites were obedient to the instructions they received from the Lord as He gave them in the manner and the time of His choosing.

And, when it was time to go, they packed up and followed the pillar of cloud and fire--verse 23: “At the command of the Lord they camped, and at the command of the Lord they set out. They kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by Moses.”

There’s much that we can apply to our own lives from the experience of the Israelites as they followed the Lord and responded to God in faithful obedience. Perhaps the most important lesson from this story is the almost continuing state of uncertainty they were kept in throughout their journey. They didn’t know where they were going next, they didn’t know when they’d be leaving to get there, and they didn’t know how long they’d stay once they got there. Sometimes the cloud stayed in its position above the Tabernacle for several days, weeks, or even months; sometimes it stayed just for a single night: “As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp.” “Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, **after that** the people of Israel set out.” They knew nothing about what the next day would bring, yet they followed the Lord, moving when He moved, pausing when He paused.

So it should be with us. For those of you who remember that great study by Henry Blackaby entitled, “Experiencing God,” you recall that, as God pursues a

love relationship with us, He takes the initiative to invite us to join Him in accomplishing His purposes in us and in the world. To do that, He reveals Himself and His will as He speaks to us through His Word, through prayer, through circumstances, and through other believers as the Holy Spirit applies each of these to our hearts. Our response to that invitation requires obedience on our part. At least in the movement of the nation of Israel, they were obedient to the Lord as they moved only when they were instructed to do so.

For us on this side of the cross, we also are led by the One Who is coming with the clouds--Revelation, chapter one, verse seven--and Whose eyes are like a flaming fire--Revelation, chapter one, verse fourteen, for it was He Who said--John, chapter eight, verse twelve: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Alexander MacLaren explains that "the conception of 'following' the light seems to make it plain that our Lord's image is not that of the sun in the heavens, or any [other] such [celestial] light, but that of some light which comes near enough to a man to move before him, and behind which he can march. So, I think, that Christ Himself laid His hand upon this ancient symbol [of the fire and the cloud], and in these great words said in effect, 'I am that which it only shadowed and foretold.' ... [Those] whom Christ guides / want [no one else] for leader, pattern, counsellor, companion, [or] reward. This Christ is our Christ 'for ever and ever, He will be our guide even unto death' and beyond it. The pillar that we follow, which will glow with the ruddy flame of love in the darkest hours of life--blessed be His name!--will glide in front of us through the 'valley of the shadow of death,' brightest then when the murky midnight is blackest. Nor will the pillar which guides us cease to blaze, as did the guide of the desert march, when Jordan has been crossed. It will still move before us on paths of continuous and ever-increasing approach to infinite perfection. They who here follow Christ afar off

and with faltering steps shall there ‘follow the Lamb [wherever] He [goes]’”--a reference to The Revelation, chapter fourteen, verse four.

Like the Israelites, so it should be with us. Our hearts should be so in tune with the heart of God that, wherever He leads, we would follow. In those times when it seems that God is silent, trust that He is working behind the scenes in ways to prepare us, to prepare others, to prepare events for our part in His perfect plan--not running ahead of God, and certainly not giving up on God.

Then, like the Israelites who responded immediately when the cloud of fire began to move, our obedience should be prompt, because, like them, we’ve been waiting expectantly for the Lord to move. They hadn’t arrived in the Promised Land. They were on their way, and they knew their intended destination. They didn’t know what they would encounter along the way, but they trusted God to lead them when and where He knew was best for them and His plan for them.

MacLaren puts it this way: “In the night, after they had had their tents pitched for a long period, when only the watchers’ eyes were open, the pillar lifts, and in an instant the alarm is given, and all the camp is in a bustle. That is what we have to set before us as the type of our lives. We are to be as ready for every indication of God’s will as they were. The peace and blessedness of our lives largely depend on our being eager to obey, and therefore quick to perceive the slightest sign of motion in the resting, or of rest in the moving, [the] pillar [that] regulates our march and our encamping.”

As a result, he says, “We need perpetual watchfulness lest the pillar should lift unnoticed. ... [and ] Do not let us be in a hurry to run before God. When the Israelites were crossing the Jordan, they were told to leave a great space between themselves and the guiding ark, that they might know how to go, because they had ‘not passed that way [before].’ Impatient hurrying at God’s heels is apt to lead us

astray. Let Him get well in front, that you may be quite sure which way He desires you to go, before you go. And if you are not sure which way He desires you to go, be sure that He does not, at that moment, desire you to go anywhere.”

“We need to hold the present”--and by this he means “houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands” as the Lord spoke of in Matthew, chapter nineteen, verse 29, or any other “stuff” you may own or that owns you-- “We need to hold the present,” he says, “with a slack hand, so as to be ready to fold our tents and take to the road, if God will. We must not reckon on continuance, nor strike our roots so deep that it needs a hurricane to remove us. To those who set their gaze on Christ, no present, from which He wishes them to remove, can be so good for them as the new conditions into which He would have them pass. It is hard to leave the spot, though it be in the desert, where we have so long encamped that it has come to feel like home. We may look with regret on the circle of black ashes on the sand where our little fire glinted cheerily, and our feet may ache, and our hearts ache more, as we begin our tramp once again, but we must set ourselves to meet the God-appointed change cheerfully, in the confidence that nothing will be left behind which it is not good to lose, nor anything met which does not bring a blessing, however its first aspect may be harsh or sad.”

At the commandment of the Lord, they moved. In the absence of a commandment, they stayed. Either way, they were obedient to God’s plan for their lives. In closing, perhaps a look back to the psalms that we studied in the previous quarter is in order. In Psalm 27, verse fourteen, David writes, “Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” May we learn from and live by the example of the Israelites as they trusted God and followed Him wherever He would lead.

Thank you for being part of our brief look at the journey of faith the Israelites followed as they made their way to the homeland God promised to them through

Abraham. Next week, we turn to the Book of Numbers, chapter eleven, verses four through seventeen where we learn of one of the many complaints from the people that Moses dealt with and how God responded to their grumbling.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

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