

SESSION SEVENTEEN

REBELLION IN THE WILDERNESS

Numbers 10:11–21:35

I. INTRODUCTION

The next major unit within Numbers, namely 10:11–25:18, traces the disobedience and unbelief of the exodus generation. These notes, however, will only cover the material up to the Balaam oracles. This major unit is the heart of the book, explaining why the generation that came out of Egypt failed to enter the land of promise (excepting Joshua and Caleb). The problem was certainly not with God nor with His ability to keep His promises. Rather, rebellion and unbelief caused the people to forfeit their opportunity. The climax is at Kadesh-Barnea where the people rebel against the LORD and refuse (in unbelief) to enter the land. This one act of unbelief resulted in their judgment to die in the wilderness. However, the numerous instances of unbelief prior to this occasion nurtured a rebellious nature that certainly hindered them at the moment they needed to believe God.

Actually, the wilderness experience is not given that much attention, being relegated to chapters 15–21. More attention is given to describing the numerous incidents of rebellion and unbelief of this generation: 11:1-3; 11:4-9 and 11:31-35; 11:10-20; 12:1-16; 13:30–14:35; 20:1-13 and 21:4-9 (take note of 14:22—they put God to the test ten times!).¹

II. Sinai to Kadesh (10:11–12:16)

The departure from Sinai was a smooth one. It had now been a little over a year since they left Egypt (10:11), but they were on their way at last to the land of promise. They had not gone far, however, before "complaints of adversity" break out (11:1-3). Unger states, "In the face of all that the LORD had done for them and promised them (cf. 10:29), their discontent displayed base ingratitude."² Notice that God burned some of the "outskirts" with fire. The tabernacle would have been in the center of the camp, and the people who were rebels moved themselves to the furthest position away from God's presence. This was theocratic rebellion—rebellion against God's right to rule.

A second instance of rebellion is given in 11:4ff. This involved a certain "rabble" who were discontented with the provision of manna. Their problem was basically one of greed (11:4). The manna had several commendable features: (1) the texture was like that of coriander seed; (2) its appearance was like bdellium; (3) it had a good taste—like cakes baked with oil; (4) there were various ways of preparing it; and (5) there

¹ See Ex 14:11; 15:24; 16:2; 17:2; Num 11:1; 14:2 16:2; 16:41; 20:2; and 21:4. It is interesting to observe God's response in each of these cases. In response to the first four incidents, God graciously blessed them (e.g., He supplied manna or "healed" the water). In the latter six, however (with the exception of Num 20:2), He brought judgment on the people.

²Merrill F. Unger, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:197.

was a dependable supply. Besides the greed of the people, the problem involved two other factors: (1) this attitude quickly spread to others and (2) it was insulting to God's gracious provision for them (the people esteemed the foods from their old life more than God's provision in the new). God responded with judgment on the greedy . . . they were struck by a plague while eating.

Even Moses turns to complaining (11:10-15), being worn down by the burden of the people. In this, his faith is severely tested by the unbelief of the LORD's people. God graciously responds by investing 70 elders with authority to assist him. Their prophecy only temporarily, since the purpose was only to authenticate the new order (11:25).

Chapter 12 takes up the rebellion of Aaron and Miriam against Moses. Both had privileged positions already within the nation: Miriam was a prophetess (Ex 15:20) and Aaron, the high priest. Moses' marriage to the Cushite becomes an opportunity to vent their discontent. The real reason, however, is jealousy over Moses' position in the administration of the theocracy (12:2). God exonerated Moses by calling judgment on Miriam. The incident is a fitting commentary on many Christian workers today. An evil root of jealousy must be searched out, for it amounts to rebellion against God.

III. Unbelief at Kadesh (13:1–14:45)

Chapters 13 and 14, describing the incident at Kadesh, represent the highlight of this section, for it is the unbelief at this place that results in the judgment by God to let this generation die off in the wilderness. One should be careful about using the "wilderness experience" to make analogy to the Christian life today (as though it represented the transition between salvation and heaven). Quite the contrary, the wilderness is an experience of divine judgment as a result of disobedience and unbelief. That is certainly not to be the expected experience of believers, although it certainly has lessons for those who shrink back in unbelief from the Lord. Lessons about unbelief are highlighted by the book of Hebrews (see especially chapters 3–4).

Upon arriving at Kadesh, spies are sent out to search the land.³ This was not intended to raise the question if it were possible to take the land, because in Exodus God had told them that He was going to bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey. Rather, the spies would confirm that the land was worth fighting for (a warfare of faith). Unfortunately, the spies (excepting Joshua and Caleb) focused attention on what the obstacles were like, not the land. Even though God instructed Moses to send out the spies (13:2), this seems to have been a permissive act by God at the request of the people. Deut 1:19-23 explains that the whole congregation made the request for spies, offering as a reason their need to know which way would be best to go up. Apparently, there is some hesitation by the people to go up even before they receive the report.

The report resulted in two responses. Caleb and Joshua reported back with hearts of faith. For them, new information does not affect belief: where God has spoken, the issue is settled. The majority of the spies, in contrast, reported back in unbelief, emphasizing the difficulties. Furthermore, they measured the difficulties by their own selves: "*We are not able*" (13:31).

³Merrill identifies Kadesh as modern Tell el-Qudeirat which is located in the Desert of Zin nearly fifty miles south-southwest of Beersheba (Num 20:1).

The congregation seized upon the bad report and blamed the whole situation on the LORD (14:2-3). From God's perspective, they had spurned Him (14:11). Further insight is provided in Deut. 1:26-27.

"Yet you were not willing to go up, but rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; and you grumbled in your tents and said, 'Because the LORD hates us, He had brought us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites to destroy us.'"

This represented a willful act of unbelief and rebellion by the nation. The people had seen God's faithfulness in leading them and providing for them up to this point. They had every reason to trust God to establish them in the land.

Furthermore they declared, *"Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt"* (14:4). This was repudiation of the theocratic authority that Moses had exercised since they left Egypt. Joshua and Caleb quickly interpreted the plan to elect a new leader as open rebellion against the LORD (14:9).

YHWH responded by suggesting He smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, using Moses to start a new nation (14:12). Indeed, God could have wiped them out without violating the Abrahamic covenant, because Moses was a descendant of Abraham (and presumably Caleb from the tribe of Judah [Num 13:6] would have been spared to preserve the kingly promise to the tribe of Judah [Gen 40:10]). Moses' intercession on behalf of the nation was two-fold: (1) his concern for God's honor among the heathen and (2) God's character, especially His forgiveness and lovingkindness (*hesed* = loving-loyalty).

God responded with forgiveness, but it came in terms of the preservation of the nation, not in remission of well-merited punishment. The judgment would be that this generation would not go in to the land of promise (14:23). There is a strong irony regarding His permissive will to allow the nation to rebel. In 14:2, the people had mentioned how much better it would be to die in the wilderness than to attempt to take the land. So, the very thing they wanted, they received (14:22-30). Although they had worried for their children (14:3), the little ones would be the very ones that God would bring in. Finally, the spies who brought back the bad report were killed by a plague (14:37), never being touched by the ones they feared, i.e., the Canaanites. Nevertheless, it is not the nation that is being denied the blessing of the land, only that particular generation. God is still faithful and considers the Abrahamic covenant as still valid.

IV. Priestly Concerns (15:1–19:22)

This section covers several topics dealing with sacrifices, the priesthood, Aaron, the Levites and defilement. Thus the common element is "priestly concerns." This material is placed after the unbelief at Kadesh, and therefore falls within the period in which the nation wandered in the wilderness. Despite the fact that the "wandering" took place for nearly 40 years, very little is recorded about those experiences. One of the highlights, however, was the rebellion led by Korah (Num 16:1-40), a Kohathite Levite (one of the most honored of the Levites).

This amounted to an organized rebellion in which 250 of the leaders of the congregation participated, making this the most serious of all the revolts against Moses and Aaron. The question by Moses, *"are you seeking for the priesthood also?"* (vs 10) implies that Aaron's authority was also being challenged. The rebels even flouted God's authority, vested in Moses, by refusing to appear when summoned (16:12).

The challenge given in 16:3 seems to imply that they did not see the need to be under authority since they were all part of the redeemed. The point is that they felt that they did not need an administrator. Underlying this is a denial of God's right to rule, saying that the redeemed do not need to submit to authority. This was

a false attitude (similar to Christians who claim to be free from all law since we are "under grace"; while we are free from the Mosaic Law, we are under the law of Christ). Unger states, "They want to overturn what the LORD had established to usurp a place for themselves that He had not given them."⁴

The whole congregation was called to gather, since this had been a public rebellion (note 16:19). God desired to consume them (16:21), and would have, had it not been for the intercession of Moses and Aaron. Nevertheless, the judgment was severe. The households of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were swallowed up by the earth (16:33), and the 250 leaders were consumed by a fire from the LORD. The judgment was severe, because God saw this as a repudiation of His theocratic administration. The judgment underscored the fact that the people cannot get away with individual rebellion and they cannot get away with group rebellion.

Thus the congregation as a whole was spared and should have learned not to challenge the authority that God had established. Nevertheless, they did not learn their lesson well, for the very next day they came grumbling that Moses and Aaron were to blame for the whole matter (16:41). This confirms how unsubmitive their hearts were to God. How rebellious the heart of God's children can become! God appropriately responded with a plague that took the lives of 14,700 (16:49). Those who were spared would learn an even deeper lesson:

They knew they were not spared because of faithful hearts or repentant ones. They should have been convinced, by the timing of the cessation of the sudden death plague with the atonement offering, that what saved them was the quick action of Moses and the faithful intercession of the high priest of God through an offering of the sanctuary. The very ones whom they called murderers, had proved to be their "saviors."⁵

V. From Zin to Moab (20:1–21:35)

One other episode that deserves comment is the striking of the rock by Moses (Num 20:1-13). The scene is a familiar one: lack of water turned the people to "contending" with Moses. One is amazed to observe a people who seem to never learn by previous experiences of God's gracious provision. In Exodus 17:1-7, the people had lacked water, and God provided water following the striking of the rock by Moses. In 1 Cor 10:4, we are instructed that the rock was Christ. On this occasion in Num 20, however, Moses is told to speak to the rock.

Although God graciously supplied water once again, the actions of Moses reflect his unsubmitiveness. We note that he is irritated and quickly loses his temper, for he addresses the people "*Listen now, you rebels*" (20:10). Furthermore, he does something that robbed God of His glory, for in vs 20 he asks, "*shall we bring water for you of this rock?*" This was a glorification of self by emphasizing the "we" and not saying a word about YHWH. Finally, he outrightly disobeyed God by striking the rock twice instead of speaking to it. The theocratic administrator himself was being unsubmitive to divine authority. In doing so, he distorted the object lesson intended for Israel. The previous incident of striking the rock typologically pointed to the suffering of Christ upon the cross, but this was not to be repeated—Christ's suffering was once and for all. Henceforth, the "rock" only needed to be spoken to in order to receive blessing. The rock

⁴Unger, 206.

⁵Jensen, *Numbers: Journey to God's Rest-land* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 75.

was intended to teach the Israelites that God who had redeemed them would provide for their needs, as He channeled His blessing through the administrator.

Consequently, Moses was judged (20:12) by not being allowed to lead the people into the land. This judgement displayed that God would rule even over His theocratic administrator! Moses, who had been such a faithful leader, is allowed to be seen in failure. In one sense, this is good, for we see that even the best of men cannot achieve God's will to its completion. Our hearts yearn for one who can, and indeed One will come some 1400 years after Moses.

VI. A Lesson for Our Life

Think further about Num 16:8-10. Korah had a very privileged opportunity to serve the LORD as a Levite, and yet he was not content in that assignment. He wanted more, and of a kind that would elevate him more above others. This kind of attitude is dangerous, especially to those of us who are in leadership responsibilities. Pray that God will give you contentment in your service to Him, and let it be God who elevates you rather than any fleshly attempt on your part.