



Lesson 11 / June 4, 2017

WILDERNESS WANDERING

Numbers 13-14

Key Verse

“Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.”

Numbers 14:19

Question 21: How does Israel rebel in the wilderness?

Short Answer: *Israel rebels when they stop trusting God in faith.*

Full Answer: *Israel rebels when they stop trusting God and prove themselves faithless by complaining against God, doubting his goodness, and refusing to follow him into the Promised Land.*

Discussion Questions

1. In Numbers 13-14, what is the relationship between belief in God and obedience to God?
2. How does God demonstrate both justice and mercy in Numbers 14?
3. Does God’s mercy triumph over judgment in Numbers?
4. What influence does Moses have as an intercessor (see Numbers 14:13-19)?
5. What do we learn about how we should pray today?
6. Read Psalm 95:6-11 (cf. Heb 3:7-19). How do we harden our hearts when we hear God’s voice today?
7. Read 1 Corinthians 10:6-13. What should we learn from the example of Israel wandering in the wilderness?
8. How does your belief in God influence how you live?

Question 22: How does God display his mercy in the wilderness?

Short Answer: *God displays his mercy by remaining faithful to his covenant.*

Full Answer: *God displays his mercy by remaining faithful to his covenant, forgiving Israel’s rebellion, and continuing to bless them even as they wander in the wilderness for 40 years.*

Summary

The shortest distance between two points may be a straight line, but rarely do we travel so efficiently. Sometimes we choose the scenic route and other times the scenic route chooses us! The book of Numbers tells the story of Israel wandering in the wilderness, but remember that not all who wander are lost. Indeed, Israel's geographical wandering is really a spiritual journey as God leads them from unbelieving rebellion to the destination of faithful obedience.

Numbers begins with a spirit of optimism and even triumphalism as God prepares Israel for taking possession of the land he promised to Abraham back in Genesis 12:7. God instructs Israel to take a census and to *number* their men over twenty years old who are capable of going to war (Num 1-2). They rearrange themselves into a sort of military formation as they finally prepare to depart from Mt. Sinai after a year-long encampment and to march to the Promised Land, following the presence of the LORD as a cloud over the ark of the covenant (Num 10). The excitement is palpable; this great nation will finally have a land to call its own.

The excitement, however, quickly gives way to complaining and strife and finally to full-blown rebellion. When Israel reaches the brink of the Promised Land, they send in spies to gather intelligence for 40 days, and the spies return with a mixed report (Num 13). On the one hand, the land flows with milk and honey, as evidenced by a single cluster of grapes so plentiful it required two men to carry it back to Israel's camp! But on the other hand, the land's inhabitants are strong people – even giants! – who are prepared to defend their land.

The odds are stacked up against Israel. How can a clan of former slaves hope to overthrow giant warriors entrenched deeply within their fortified cities? Unbelief and fear sweep through Israel and they shrink back from entering the Promised Land. How quickly they have forgotten their LORD who delivered them from slavery in Egypt and defeated Pharaoh at the Red Sea! Faith is a fickle thing – just the moment you think you have it, it slips away and gives way to fear.

Their failure of faith leads to a crisis of covenant that unfolds in Numbers 14. What will happen to God's covenant with Abraham, who was a man *full* of faith, when Abraham's descendants prove faithless? Will God exhibit his justice and reject them, or will he exhibit his mercy and forgive them? Or is there a

middle way for God to exhibit both justice and mercy? Initially, God stands prepared to exercise his justice and to disinherit his people, but Moses appeals to God's steadfast love and God forgives their iniquity. The only thing more stubborn than the rebellion of Israel is the mercy of the LORD their God.

Mercy may have triumphed over judgment but God will still exercise his justice upon Israel. He sentences them to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (one year for each day the spies were in the Promised Land) until the current generation dies and takes their rebellion with them to the grave. But take note: God does not abandon his people during the time of wandering. His presence remains with them and he provides them with manna for food, water from rocks, and clothing that does not wear out.

And as they wander, God must continually show mercy to them because their rebellion continues! The stories of their ongoing rebellion in the wilderness are interspersed with reminders of the very laws of God they are violating (Num 16-21). Even Moses himself rebels when he tunes out God's voice and strikes the rock so that he too must die alongside this rebellious generation. Rebellion is a pesky thing: just the moment we think we have it conquered, it rises up again in our hearts. Thank God for his abundant mercy!

And thank God for his prevailing blessing. Early in Numbers, God commands the priests to regularly speak a blessing over the people of Israel as a reminder of his covenant blessings (Num 6:22-27). His blessing remains despite Israel's rebellion. And when Israel's enemies seek to curse Israel through Balaam (Num 22-24), God constrains Balaam (even using a talking donkey!) so that Balaam can only bless Israel. When God puts his name upon his people, he truly *will* bless them (Num 6:27). Nothing can separate God's blessing from God's people.

Numbers ends with a new generation of Israelites standing again at the edge of the Promised Land. They have had 40 years of wandering to learn the lesson from their ancestors. Now, will they have faith in God and enter, or will they too disbelieve and rebel? Have they learned their lesson? Indeed, have *we* learned their lesson? Later Scriptures (see Ps 95:7-8; cf. 1 Cor 10:6-13; Heb 3:7-19) implore us to remember the wilderness wandering as an example for us as well. When we hear God's word, will we harden our hearts in rebellion, or will we trust him in faith and follow him in obedience?