

Old Testament Survey - Part 19

by Dick Woodward

The Book of Numbers presents allegorical, arresting, and awesome truth that highlights the importance of faith and the limitations of God's ability to lead us due to our choices.

Duration: 27:21

Scripture: Numbers 9:15

Topics: "Faith And Obedience", "Old Testament Survey"

Description

This sermon delves into the Book of Numbers, highlighting allegorical truths that awaken believers to the importance of faith and obedience. It emphasizes the journey from deliverance to abundant Christian living, the consequences of unbelief, and the significance of God's guidance and provision. The sermon draws parallels between Old Testament events and the gospel message of salvation through Jesus Christ, emphasizing the necessity of faith and looking to Him for healing and redemption.

Transcript

We are now ready to have our second session in the Book of Numbers. As we continue to survey the Old Testament and especially the Pentateuch or the first five books of the Old Testament, we came in our last session to the Book of Numbers and we saw that the Book of Numbers presents to us truth that is allegorical, truth that is arresting, truth that is awesome, truth that will awaken us if we're apathetic, but truth that can assure our hearts if we are in the center of God's will. There's an allegory of salvation, remember, that begins in the Book of Genesis.

It continues through the first six or seven books of the Bible. When the people of God are delivered from the slavery in Egypt, that's a picture of our salvation. They're supposed to go from Egypt across the wilderness and into the promised land, and that promised land represents the abundant life that we're supposed to experience after we have been saved from our sins.

The Book of Numbers tells us that they didn't go right across that wilderness and enter the promised land, but for 40 years they went around in circles in the wilderness, and it is sad to say that very often many professing believers are pictured in this allegory of salvation, because having been delivered from the penalty and even the power of their sins, they do not cross their spiritual Jordan and enter their spiritual promised land of abundant Christian living, where the blessing of God is upon them and they experience God's perfect will for them, but rather they go around in circles of unbelief and disillusionment and confusion. Now, in the Book of Numbers we have awesome truth presented to us. We looked at it in our

last session, especially the 14th chapter, where we find the definitive chapter, perhaps, in the Book of Numbers.

The message of the Book of Numbers is very much like what we found in the 14th chapter of Numbers, where God reached a point with these people of God, where having proven himself to them ten times, having performed miracles for them ten times, having tried to demonstrate to them ten times that he could enable them to conquer the land of Canaan, God reached the point with these people where he gave them up to what they wanted, and he said to them in so many words in Numbers chapter 14, you don't want to go into the promised land, and so I'm going to give you up to what you want. You will not enter the promised land. Every one of you will die in this wilderness, and all but two of them did die in the wilderness.

Now, in addition to chapter 14 and that very awesome truth we looked at in our first session on the Book of Numbers, there are many other things in the Book of Numbers that are arresting, and some of them very awesome. I would like to point out some more of these as we survey now the Book of Numbers. First of all, in chapter 9 it's arresting to discover that when the tabernacle in the wilderness, or this tent of worship, was completed and erected, when it was raised, that's the word the scripture uses, a great event took place.

The Spirit of God came upon that little tent of worship, and the Spirit of God filled that little tent of worship, and this was manifested by the cloud that came upon the little tent of worship and filled the tent of worship. You'll remember again, if we can illustrate this one more time, that the little tent of worship was right at the center of their camp, and when they moved across the wilderness, they did not just move like a mob or an undisciplined multitude of people. They had a military formation.

Each tribe had a location, and each tribe was located around this tent of worship. The tent of worship was at the center of their camp. Now, this is a beautiful miracle of the Old Testament.

When the tent was first erected, this cloud came upon the tent of worship, and this cloud also filled the tent of worship, and this was a manifestation or a symbol of the fact that the Spirit of God had come upon this tent of worship, and the Spirit of God had filled this tent of worship. Later on, when Solomon's temple was built on the same pattern, the same thing happened when Solomon's temple was completed. The glory of God in the form of the Spirit of God so filled that temple and came upon that temple that the priest couldn't even officiate there and had to run out of the temple.

The same thing happened when this tent of worship was erected according to God's directions. You have these beautiful words in the book of Numbers. On the day the tabernacle was raised, the cloud covered it, and that evening the cloud changed to the appearance of fire and stayed that way through the night.

It was always so, the daytime cloud changing to the appearance of fire at night. When the cloud lifted, the people of Israel moved on to wherever it stopped and camped there. In this way they journeyed at the command of the Lord and stopped where He told them to, then remained there as long as the cloud stayed.

If it stayed a long time, they stayed a long time. If it stayed only a few days, they remained only a few days. When it moved, the people broke camp and followed.

If the cloud stayed above the tabernacle two days, a month, or a year, that is how long the people of Israel stayed. But as soon as it moved, they moved. So it was that they camped or traveled at the commandment of the Lord.

Now this is a very beautiful story, of course, of a very beautiful miracle that symbolizes for us the anointing of the Spirit upon us and the filling of the Spirit, because remember that tent of worship later on in the New Testament becomes a picture of our bodies. The Holy Spirit anoints us, the Holy Spirit indwells us and fills us, just like He did that little tent of worship. But there's an arresting truth as we find the application to this miracle in the book of Numbers.

You might ask the question, if this cloud guided them, if when the cloud moved they moved, and if they were led by this cloud, why didn't that cloud lead them right across the wilderness, across the River Jordan, and into the Promised Land? How is it that they're following the guidance of God and they're going around in circles? Well, I think there's a very important truth here. If we can think of God as having limitations, God does have limitations because of our weakness, not His. God created us creatures of choice.

This is a very sacred thing to God. He will not violate this. When God created man, He created man a creature of choice.

He hasn't done that anywhere else in His universe, according to many scholars. The unique thing about man and what God has done on earth is that on earth God created a creature who could do His will by choice. That's a very important thing to God.

And so God is limited in His ability to lead us. He's limited to our faith. If we have the faith to enter our spiritual Promised Land and claim all the blessings God has for us and His good and acceptable and perfect will of God for our life, then He can lead us into our spiritual Promised Land, and He can place these blessings upon us and lead us into the very center and heart of His will for our lives.

But if we do not believe, then God is limited. God is not limited in the sense that He lacks power. He's limited in the sense that He made us creatures of choice, and He won't ever make us do anything.

There's a sense in which that's true. He may lean on us like an elephant. He may make us a lot of offers that ultimately we can't refuse, and eventually the easiest thing will be, you know, to surrender to Him and do His will.

But there's a sense in which God will never ever make us do anything, because He made us creatures of choice. And that's an arresting truth, I think, that we see in this first miracle in the book of Numbers that we want to cite in this session. The fact that the presence of God in the form of that great cloud and that pillar of fire by night came upon the tent of worship and filled the tent of worship and then became the center around which they found their divine guidance.

I believe this is, by application, a story of your life and mine so much of the time. I believe there is such a thing as the directive will of God and the permissive will of God. If God is God and He's all-powerful, there isn't anything really that happens that He doesn't permit.

But there is also God's directive will. You might think of it in terms of two concentric circles. The innermost circle representing God's directive will and the outer circle representing His permissive will.

I believe it's realistic to say that most professing believers spend most of their Christian life in God's permissive will and very little of their Christian life in God's directive will. I think that's what's being illustrated by that cloud and that fire that couldn't lead the people right across the wilderness into the promised land. We're told in the New Testament because of their unbelief.

Now another truth that is, I think, arresting in the book of Numbers is in chapter 11 where we're told about the meat and the manna. God supernaturally fed them with this manna. And this manna, remember the word in Hebrew for manna was simply what is it.

They never could decide what it was and so they called it what is it. That's the way you say what is it in Hebrew. You just say manna.

God fed them with what is it for 40 years and it's interesting when they entered the promised land He stopped doing that. But He supernaturally provided for their needs. Now we're told that these people plagued Moses.

They just pressed him to death with complaints and part of their complaining is expressed this way in Numbers chapter 11. It says, then the Egyptians who had come with them began to long for the good things of Egypt. You see more people came out of the Exodus or were part of the Exodus besides the Hebrew people.

There were Ethiopians, Gentiles and there were Egyptians that came with them. Now these Egyptians longed for the good things of Egypt. And Egypt is a symbol, remember, of our old life of sin of the world we might say.

Now there's allegory in this. It says, this added to the discontent of the people of Israel and they wept. Oh for a few bites of meat.

Oh that we had some of the delicacies and fish we enjoyed so much in Egypt. Now the real serious thing about this is not so much the fact that they preferred meat to manna. I don't think that's the point.

The point is this. Notice in this passage of Scripture in Numbers 11, five times they say, oh for Egypt. Oh for Egypt.

What they're really longing for is not so much meat. They're longing for Egypt. And allegorically this is a picture of a person who's been saved.

God has delivered them from their sinful lifestyle, from their spiritual Egypt. And after they've been saved and delivered, they turn around one day and they say, oh for Egypt. And they begin to long for the old sinful ways and some of the old sinful friends and perhaps some of the old sinful relationships.

And this is a source of grief to God. When someone who's been delivered from Egypt turns around and says, oh for Egypt. Now God says to Moses in this passage, tell the people to purify themselves for tomorrow they shall have meat.

Tell them the Lord has heard your tearful complaints about all you left behind in Egypt. See that's the focus, not the meat. And so he says he's going to give them meat until it comes out their noses.

Because he says you have rejected the Lord and you have wept for Egypt. You see that's the theme. It says that after he sent them this meat, he also sent a plague.

Psalm 106 verse 15 puts it this way, he granted their requests but he sent leanness to their souls. And he did that, it says, because these people had lusted for meat and for Egypt. They lusted for Egypt.

That was the thing that grieved God. Now in this story we see I think a beautiful truth by application. And here again it has to do with the fact that God has made us creatures of choice.

The first thing Jesus says when he meets the Apostles in the Gospel of John is this. He asked the question, what do you want? That's the very first thing he said when he met Andrew and some of these disciples. What do you want? Have you ever noticed how Jesus put people to the test frequently by asking them the question, what do you want me to do for you? He told that woman at the well, he said if you only knew who you were talking to, boy what you would ask me for.

If you only realized who you're speaking with, what would you ask me for? We know it's a great test of your spiritual character when you realize that you're talking to God in prayer and God says to you, what do you want? It says in the scripture that he will give us the desires of our heart. Now that's a great consolation but that's also a great challenge because what are the desires of your heart? Are the desires of your heart for the true riches, for spiritual things? Or are the desires of your heart for Egypt? Do you really say in your heart of hearts, oh for Egypt. Someone has said that it's as if your life is a book and it's God's idea to write this book and so he has a title and he has a table of contents and a forward and introduction and then at some point he hands the pen to you and he says here finish the story any way you want to.

Now I have a plan for the story of your life. I have a table of contents here and I'll reveal it to you if you really want to know what it is. But you're a creature of choice, write the story any way you want to write the story.

Now whatever you want you can have, that's the bottom line. You want meat? God will give you meat till it comes out your nose. You want to sleep around? You want to live a life of sin? You can do that.

There are a lot of people in this world who want the same thing. Just a matter of time until you meet up with them and you can have anything you want. Or you can have the true riches, the spiritual riches that God wants to give you.

You can have the blessings of God that are described here as the promised land. You can have God's good and acceptable and perfect will for your life. God's will is always good.

It's always perfect and it's the only thing that's acceptable in his sight where you're concerned. You can have that. You can have the true riches or you can have Egypt.

The choice is yours. Whatever you want he'll give it to you. I think it's arresting in the book of Numbers that he granted their requests and he sent leanness to their souls.

That could be the epitaph of many people who profess to be believers. Now I think another arresting incident in the book of Numbers is in chapter 13 when they send the spies in to spy out the land of Canaan. They send in 12 spies to do reconnaissance in the land of Canaan and I'm sure you're familiar with the story.

They're told to check out the land and see what the land is like and to check out the people and see what the people are like, whether they're many or few, weak or strong. They're to check out the cities and see if

they're villages or if they're fortified cities that would be hard to attack. Well when the 12 come back they can't say enough about how fruitful the promised land is.

They picked a cluster of grapes and it took two of them with a pole to just carry that cluster of grapes. They had to put the cluster of grapes on a pole and it took two men to carry that cluster of grapes. That's some idea of how fruitful the land was.

So they come back and they say the land is fruitful, it's indescribably fruitful, but they say the people are giants, the people are warriors, they're powerfully built people and their cities are fortified cities, tremendously fortified cities. And they say those people were so huge we felt like grasshoppers when we were anywhere close to them. Now you have another but in the report of the spies.

It says, but Caleb reassured the people as he stood before Moses, let us go up at once and take it for we are well able to conquer it. Caleb and Joshua are two of the 12 spies who give a positive report. All the other spies give a negative report.

Now God is so impressed with this and I think this is an arresting thing in the book of Numbers. God is willing to trade this whole nation of people somewhere between two and three million people for those two men. He says all of you are going to die in this wilderness and I'm going to take those two men with me into the promised land, Caleb and Joshua, because they wholly followed me and they believed.

You see the premium God places, the emphasis, the value God places upon faith. When he finds two men who have faith, he says you're worth more to me than two million people. Now I think that's very arresting.

One of the greatest characters in the scripture in terms of faith is Caleb, this little man Caleb. There's an interesting sequel to this story in Joshua chapter 14. Forty-five years later when they have finally crossed the Jordan and invaded Canaan, they come to the city of Hebron.

Now when Caleb was one of those spies, he went into Hebron and he saw the city of Hebron. He thought it was just the greatest thing he ever saw, the city of Hebron. He was so excited about Hebron and he believed that God would give them the ability to conquer Hebron.

Now when he reported this way back to Moses, Moses said Caleb when we finally go in there you're going to get the city of Hebron. It's going to be yours. Well forty-five years later after going around the desert, you know, and all of this, Caleb marches into the presence of Joshua who's now the leader.

Moses is dead and Joshua's the leader. And Caleb says you remember what Moses said about you and me when we brought back that good report? Well I've been crisscrossing the wilderness for 45 years. He said I've had five years here in Canaan, 40 years in the wilderness.

He said I was 40 years old when Moses made that promise. I'm 85 now, but he said I'll tell you something, I'm just as strong now as I was back there when I was 40. I'm able to go out and come in and he said I know God will be with me and I'll be able to conquer the city of Hebron, so give me Hebron.

And so Joshua gave the city of Hebron to Caleb and he went up and conquered that city. You see this is a beautiful character, this man Caleb. All those other people when they were in the wilderness moaning and groaning and griping so much so that God had to send snakes out to bite them because they griped so much, you know.

Caleb's sitting there, you know, looking like a space cadet and they say Caleb what are you thinking about? He said I'm just thinking about those grapes up there in Hebron. I'm just thinking about the fertile soil up there and the beautiful city that it is. He never lost that vision.

You see when these spies came back and gave their report, ten of them were like the average board in the average church in America. They were they were experts in what you might call giantology, you know. They could tell you all about the problems and the obstacles.

On the average church board when you introduce a project, a challenging project that's going to take a lot of faith, usually this is the percentage. If you have twelve men on that board, ten are going to be experts on the obstacles and the problems and tell you all the reasons why it can't be done. Men like Caleb and Joshua who don't see the Giants so much as they see God.

Sure they see the Giants. They see the problems but they see God. The problems are big but their God is bigger.

Now men with vision like that are very rare but they're greatly needed. It's arresting, I believe, to realize in the book of Numbers that God takes into the promised land these two men who had this tremendous faith. Now another arresting incident in the book of Numbers is in chapter 21 where the people gripe so much God sends the snakes out to bite them.

And you know a lot of preachers wish they had a barrel of snakes every now and then. They could just turn loose on the people that are griping. But this shows you how much God hates complaining and griping.

It's the antithesis of faith, of course. So he sends the snakes out to bite these gripers. And then when a lot of them were dying from their snake bites he sends out his merciful message.

He tells Moses, take a serpent of brass and erect it on a pole at the center of the camp. And any of these snake-bitten gripers who will get down to the center of the camp and look at that pole, if they just look at that pole with that brass serpent on it, they'll be healed of their snake bite. Well a lot of these snake-bitten gripers said that defies all the laws of medical science.

What can looking at a piece of bronze have to do with my snake bite? So they died like flies from their snake bite. But some of them said, well you know it isn't very scientific, but at least it's hope. And I sure am dying.

I'm swelling up here like a toad and I'm dying of the snake bite. It's the only hope I've got. So they had somebody carry them or drag them or they crawled to the center of the camp.

And when they looked at this brass serpent, one of the great miracles of the Bible, just like that they were healed of their snake bite. Now that's a beautiful story. Some people think that the medical insignia where you have a serpent, you know, comes from this.

Actually I think that comes from the Greek mythology and the God of Mercury. But it's interesting that a serpent could be a sign of healing, you know, in any sense. And it's interesting of course that this is one of the miracles of the Old Testament.

It's just an Old Testament miracle until you come to the third chapter of the Gospel of John. When you come to the third chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus makes an application to this miracle. And he shows us that this is more than just an Old Testament miracle, as great as that is.

Jesus is staying up all night with a rabbi named Nicodemus. And as he and that rabbi, Nicodemus, talk, Jesus says to Nicodemus, Nicodemus, I must be lifted up on a cross, just like Moses lifted up that serpent on that pole. I must be lifted up on my cross because I'm God's only begotten Son.

And as God's only begotten Son lifted up on that cross, I'm God's only solution for the sin problem. And I must be lifted up on that cross because as God's only Son and God's only solution, I'm God's only Savior. He I'm the only Savior he's got.

Now in the third chapter of John, beginning at about verse 14 through verse 21, I believe Jesus makes the most dogmatic statement he ever makes. And he makes a lot of dogmatic statements like, I'm the way and there's no other way. But this is a more dogmatic statement.

He says, I must be lifted up like Moses lifted up that serpent of brass. Because just as Moses lifted up the serpent of brass and when people looked to it, they were healed and made whole of their snakebite. When I'm lifted up on that cross, when people will look to that cross and believe it, their sin problem is going to be solved.

That's God's only solution to the sin problem. And that makes me God's only Savior. This is one of the beautiful illustrations in the New Testament of what it means to believe the gospel about Jesus Christ.

And as Jesus tells us this dogmatic statement about who he was and what he was and why he was in this world, God's only Son, God's only solution, God's only Savior, he links the whole teaching, the whole statement, to this miracle back there in the book of Numbers. That means that this miracle in the book of Numbers, in addition to being a great miracle, is another one of these types of Jesus Christ. Remember that word type is from the Greek word tupos, from which we get the word for a printer's type.

A type is a little object lesson, it's a little symbol that's supposed to make an impression upon you and me. Now I believe that's the purpose of this miracle in the 21st chapter of the book of Numbers. So in the book of Numbers we see a lot of truth that's allegorical, a lot of truth that is arresting.

It's arresting to see what happens when the tent is raised and the cloud comes upon it and fills it and divine guidance centers around that little tent of worship. We have such a beautiful allegorical arresting picture there of how God leads us by the way he leads those people there. I think it's allegorical again and it's very arresting when you see that story about the meat and the manna and how when they longed for Egypt God said you can have it, you can have whatever you want.

I think that's allegorical and that's arresting. I think it's arresting to see them send the spies in and to see the twelve spies come back and two of them have faith and ten of them do not. It's very arresting to realize by the way that those ten spies that had no faith were struck dead because they had no faith.

And finally it's very allegorical and very arresting to see the gospel of Jesus Christ stated so dogmatically and stated so clearly, illustrated by this story of the snake-bitten grippers being told to just look at that serpent of brass on a pole because if they just look with faith they'll be saved. I wonder have you taken that look? Have you looked to Jesus Christ, lifted up on his cross and just put your faith and trust in all that he did for you there? This is your only solution because he is your only Savior.

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