

February 26 - March 4

Week 9

This week our readings take us into the second year of Israel's time in the wilderness, and already we will begin to see preparations for entering the land of Canaan. Yet the Israelites' progress is hampered by problems of various kinds. As you read this week, notice this mix of preparation and problems in the development of the story. How is God still very much at the center of the story? What role does the covenant with God play in this part of the story? What details of the story seem most surprising? What details do you find most encouraging?

Day 1

Read Numbers 6-9

Act 2 - Scene 3 - Reading 19

This passage describes the Israelites' preparations to leave Sinai, especially the consecration of the priests and the final steps in setting up the tabernacle. The conclusion in Numbers 9:15-23 emphasizes God's presence among the Israelites and his guidance of them. Think about the importance of preparation even in small tasks but especially in key transitions in life. Recognize how vital it is to walk with God in times of preparation and transition.

Are there life events or transitions for which you are preparing at present?

What principles from this section of Numbers can guide you at this time?

Day 2

Read Numbers 10-13; Psalm 90

Act 2 - Scene 3 - Reading 20

It is now the beginning of the second year since God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. The passage today from Numbers shows them moving out toward the land of Canaan. Yet notice that progress was accompanied by problems—with resources, leadership, and courage. Note how these problems can negatively affect God’s people even when he is working among them, especially when their hearts are spiritually dull.

What are some current problems in your family, church, or community?

How can you encourage yourself and others to look to God in a fresh way?

Bring your problems to God today, softening your heart toward him.

How does Psalm 90 put in perspective who God is and who we are as his people?

Pray the words of Psalm 90.

Day 3

Read Numbers 14-16; Psalm 95

Act 2 - Scene 3 - Reading 21

The reading from Numbers today begins and ends with accounts of rebellion against God. The refusal to enter the land and Korah's rebellion are key turning points in the story. Notice that the rebellion was against the Lord, but the people focused their anger on the Lord's leaders, Moses and Aaron. Korah accuses "a very humble man, more so than anyone on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3) of seeing himself as greater than anyone else (see 16:3)! Notice the emotions driving those who rebel. Reflect on the effects of emotions in our relationship with God and others. Notice ways Psalm 95 contrasts a life of worship with a life of rebellion.

How do patterns of worship work against rebellion in our lives?

Day 4

Read Numbers 17-20

Act 2 - Scene 3 - Reading 22

The passage today continues to make distinctions between what is clean and what is unclean, between the leaders and the people, and between the priests and the people. Think about the roles these distinctions play in the developing story.

How is the distinction between clean and unclean revealed in your life as a Christ follower? For part of the answer, read the instructions on the sacrifice of the red cow (see Numbers 19:1-10) in light of Hebrews 9:13-14.

As the Israelites finally came to the end of the forty years in the wilderness and moved toward the occupation of the land, they began to battle people groups on the outskirts of the land. Our conflicts today are different. In Ephesians 6:10-13 Paul said our battle is not against flesh and blood but rather against spiritual forces that fight against God's cause in the world.

What are the ways we fight this battle, according to Ephesians 6:14-17?

Day 5

Read Numbers 21-24

Act 2 - Scene 3 - Reading 23

Several times in the Pentateuch (with Jacob and then with Moses) God sent someone on a journey only to confront that person along the way. In Numbers 22:20-22 God told Balaam to do exactly what he had told him. Perhaps when God was angry in verse 22, he was responding to specific actions or intentions of which the reader is not told. The story as a whole drives home that our loving, sovereign God in heaven, and his overall plan of salvation, overrides the superstitious schemes of people.

In the story look for humor (a talking donkey) and irony: God used an apostate prophet to bless his people even as they were about to participate in pagan worship (see Numbers 25)!

Praise God today for ways he is working in your life, even through people who are not his followers.

Day 6

Read Numbers 25-28

Act 2 - Scene 3 - Reading 24

As you read this passage, notice details that point to preparation for entering the land: the census, the commissioning of a new leader, the struggle against paganism, and so forth.

It is difficult to read about the harshness of judgment on those who mixed with other people and embraced their religion, but meditate on what this reality must say about the serious (even horrible) nature of sin and God's zeal for holiness. Notice that God said Phinehas was zealous for holiness "with my zeal" (Numbers 25:11). Ultimately, God would pay for sin by the death of his own Son in place of sinners, demonstrating both the unimaginable cost of sin and the unfathomable depths of his grace.

What would it look like for you to be zealous for holiness in your life with God's zeal?

Day 7

Reading Summary for Week 9

In the Hebrew Scriptures “Numbers” is named “In the Wilderness” (Bemidbar). This title aptly summarizes these readings (including the psalm texts). We’ve observed how God used Moses to lead Israel from Sinai to Kadesh. Then the people rejected God’s plan and ended up wandering for forty years. The bronze serpent story wonderfully depicts looking at God’s provision in order to find life. The strange account of Balaam shows God using utterly flawed humans to accomplish his purposes.

Prayer/Meditation

Jesus, thank you for glimpses of yourself in the book of Numbers. You are the water-giving rock. Symbolically you are the bronze serpent lifted up, giving life to all who look on with faith. You are the star from Jacob and the scepter from Israel. Lord, help me not to be like the Israelites, who were so hesitant to follow your guidance that they needlessly ended up in the wilderness. Let me never be found in a spiritual desert that is of my own making. Amen.
