

NUMBERS

Lesson 12 - Chapter 11

We've just concluded some chapters in Numbers that gave us a lot of detailed information that has been a bit hard to slog through but it was needed, just as learning multiplication tables is needed if we're going to be able use math in our lives. Numbers chapter 11 however begins a section of Torah that, for me, is one of the most fascinating and informative. It tells the story of the 38 years of Israel wandering in the Wilderness. And the next several chapters have as their theme complaining, lack of faith, and outright rebellion. Even more they record the SEVERE punishments that Yehoveh responded with for these outrages against Him.

This section of the Torah also seemed to fascinate the Apostle Paul. He referred extensively to the Book of Numbers in his writings, particularly when he was writing and speaking to the Corinthians. Apparently he saw great parallels between the behavior and condition of those Corinthians, Jew and gentile, who had come to belief in Christ and those Israelites who trekked around the wilderness of the desert reaches of the Middle East, mostly south of Beer-Sheva, 13 centuries before his day.

Let's prepare for this section of Numbers by reading a bit of what St. Paul had to say when he compared the Christians of Corinth to the Israelites of the Exodus.

READ 1CORINTHIANS 10:1 - 12

The Torah issues many sober warnings to those who would follow the God of Israel; Paul, a well-educated Jewish Rabbi completely understood this and realized that, of course, the advent of Christ does not change that situation. Disobedience towards God, even with redemption accomplished, does not somehow immunize a Believer against the possibility of divine punishment. Paul writes in Romans 15 what is perhaps the foundation of all of his teachings: ".....whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction....." What was written in the former days is referring to the Hebrew Bible, the Tanach, what we call the Old Testament. Or in a more general sense to whatever was written before the advent of Yeshua.

Paul's point of what we just read in 1Corinthians 10 is this: if God dealt severely with His set-apart and chosen people, Israel, why would you think He will not deal severely with His set-apart and chosen people in union with Messiah Yeshua? Are those who we commonly call "the church" no longer subject to God's righteous anger?

The first few verses of 1Corinthians 10 set up the parallel situation: those who traversed the

Wilderness were ALL immersed in Moses (which is short hand for "the Covenant of Moses"). In other words they were ALL redeemed, and they were ALL under God's Covenant. They ALL received the same spirit; they all were filled up with the Living Water of the Rock. Then Paul throws in this shocking reminder: despite their redemption and personal relationship with God, many of them did not survive when God strewed their rebellious bodies across the desert.

His conclusion as to what this means to followers of Jesus Christ is in verse 11: **CJB 1 Corinthians 10:11 *These things happened to them as prefigurative historical events, and they were written down as a warning to us who are living in the acharit-hayamim.***

Now frankly the majority of Christian denominations allegorize this away by explaining that it's a warning about things that cannot possibly happen to true Believers. A common theme among Christians today is that the God of the Old Testament is no more; or more accurately that He has fundamentally changed such that there is no more severity (even though Paul says so in Romans 11); there is no more punishment of sins and rebellion for the Believer (even though Yeshua says so in Matthew 7.

CJB Matthew 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, only those who do what my Father in heaven wants. 22 On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?' 23 Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'

No, says Paul and Yeshua, this is not a hollow warning, a toothless threat. My brethren hear me: this is another of those Christian doctrines that pleases us to hear it because it removes all repercussions for our decisions and our behavior, but it has no Scriptural basis. Rather what we are protected from is what the Bible alternately calls "the wages of sin" (spiritual death) and "the curse of the Law" (which is also spiritual death) that are two phrases meaning the same thing. They are one in the same only the former is stated in New Testament terms and the other in Old Testament terms.

Do you still believe that God no longer has a severe side? Or that being in Christ somehow pardons you from being disciplined or punished (in the sense of receiving divine or natural consequences) for your sinning? Oh, of course you are pardoned from the eternal death PROVIDED you do not renounce your allegiance to Yeshua by your own free will. But to be immune from God's mortal justice is nowhere known in the NT anymore than in the Old.

Let's listen to a little more of Paul in Romans 11; a section of the New Testament that is frequently jumped over or allegorized away in modern times.

READ ROMANS 11: 13 - 22

Paul teaches that (as has always been) God is severe and He is kind. He is kind to those who trust and obey, He is severe to those who fall away and rebel. God's essential nature has not changed. Remember Paul is talking to gentile BELIEVERS specifically and Jewish folks generally. He is talking to you and me so we cannot pretend this is not for us.

So what we are going to study in Numbers over the next several weeks sets down the fundamental principles that guided Paul in his life and are reflected in his epistles that are the basis for what ***should be*** church doctrine, yet often is not.

In Numbers we see that virtually the first thing Israel does upon leaving Mt. Sinai is to rebel. Even Moses becomes a grumbler. Over the next 15 chapters we will have detailed for us 6 identifiable rebellions and every one of them was both real and represents a "type" of rebelling against Yehoveh. Some of the rebellions were by the people in general, some by the tribal leaders, some by the Levites, and even some by Moses. In essence just as the 7 churches of Revelation are both real and types, so do the rebellions of the people of Israel in Numbers present us with a ***pattern*** that we can expect to occur within the church. And when I say church don't start thinking in terms of Baptists and Methodists and Catholics, etc. That is don't picture denominations and institutions and buildings. Rather think of individual Believers and then various groups of Believers.

In a larger view we are about to spend several weeks looking at matters of human relationships, human leadership, the limitations of men, the expectations and demands of God, and the divine consequences for our failures.

Let's read Numbers 11.

READ NUMBERS 11 all

Chapter 10 ends with this optimistic, prayerful, joyful poem, which expresses the mental and emotional state of the people of Israel as they begin to strike camp for their journey to the Promised Land:

NAS Numbers 10:35 Then it came about when the ark set out that Moses said, "Rise up, O LORD! And let Thine enemies be scattered, And let those who hate Thee flee before Thee." 36 And when it came to rest, he said, "Return Thou, O LORD, To the myriad thousands of Israel."

The very next sentence of Torah, verse 1 of Numbers 11 says this:

NAS Numbers 11:1 Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD; and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.

How much time passed between Numbers 10:36 and Numbers 11:1? How long did it take for their attitude and behavior to change rather radically? Three days! How often we've fallen on our knees or raised our hands to the Lord in praise and adoration, and then in a matter of hours wind up flat on our faces in defeat. Should we be depressed about this and just give up? No. In some ways, we should expect it. Not in the sense of expecting to be defeated before we ever start our journey, but in the sense that while we do have God's Spirit within us we still carry around these fleshly tents AND that evil inclination that is inherent to our natures. So some amount of failure is inevitable.

That said the amount of failure is largely connected to our will. Just how much are we willing to believe God, and put our time and energies into knowing God? How much are we willing to resist the Devil and our own desires in favor of obedience to the Lord? There is a direct quid pro quo set up in both the OT and NT in that regard. Walk with the Lord and fail less. Walk away from the Lord, take our own path, and fail more.

You see of all the myriad of reasons we MUST have Yeshua it is because humanness and failure before God go hand-in-hand. When we studied Leviticus we saw just how multi-faceted and inescapable sin is. How insidious uncleanness is. How hopeless is our condition.... without Our Savior. We WILL sin. We WILL fail. But we can also minimize the depth of our sin and failure IF we commit ourselves to the commands of God, and to the power of the Spirit, and to the Salvation of our Messiah.

Verse 1 says that the people became a group of complainers. Actually we're not told exactly what they were complaining about. Yet we can infer that it had to do with the difficult marching they were currently enduring because the verses just preceding 11: 1 (that is the last several verses of chapter 10) are all about their marching and following the fire-cloud.

And in all fairness the degree of difficulty they were facing was formidable. Can you imagine the amount of choking dust kicked into the air by 2 -3 million people and hundreds of thousands of animals? They were not on some nicely groomed highway although they would have been following some type of known trail; but where I believe they were (north of Midian in the hilly and rocky desert terrain) was very challenging to walk over. Every family had small children. Every family had elderly and infirm. In the winter the nighttime temperatures often dropped below freezing; every day during in the extended summer season it was well over 100 degrees. This was not, under the best of circumstances, a pleasant time.

Worse they took their complaint directly to the Lord. And the text says it was **bitter** complaining. Actually the word for **bitter complaint** in Hebrew is " *'al ra'*". *Al* meaning complaint and *ra* literally meaning evil. So while bitter is correct, we need to understand that the essence of the word bitter is rooted in evil. The idea of this phrase is that the Israelites responded to God's **tov**.....His kindness, His good.....with *ra'*..... Evil, bitterness.

The result of this unbelievably brazen act was that God punished them with fire. What was this fire? Well, first and foremost it was divine and supernatural. It may have been lightning. It may have been similar to what Yehoveh rained down upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Whatever it was it did NOT come from the Wilderness Tabernacle that was in their midst; and we can know this because it says the fire broke out on the "outskirts" of the encampment.

Moses interceded (which was his job) and God stopped the punishment. The place where they were when this happened was named **Taberah**; in Hebrew **Taberah** means, "burning". It was usual among the ancients (and especially so among the Hebrews) to name places after incidents that occurred there. And so we have rebellion number one along with its consequences.

Verse 4 elucidates the NEXT rebellion, which concerned food. At the outset let me point out

that there is some minor disagreement over the location of this 2nd rebellion. Some scholars say they broke camp at Taberah and moved and then this 2nd rebellion happened. Others say that they stayed at Taberah for a while and it was at Taberah that this 2nd rebellion also occurred. I think they were still at Taberah due to the plain reading of the text. That they would add another name (Kibroth-Hataavah) to the same place is not unusual.

What we see begin to shape up is that there is going to be a parallel between the travel from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, and then the travel from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh. Here we have an example: there is a cry for meat. We saw this back in Exodus and the Lord responded by sending them Quail to eat.

Now the first words of verse 4 indicate that it was a certain group of people who began the complaint for meat and then the complaining spread throughout the camp. And that group of complainers is called, in Hebrew, **'asafsuf**, and it means rabble, riffraff. This term is constructed very similarly to another unique Hebrew word that was used back in Exodus: **'erev rav**, which means mixed multitude. Scholars are fairly unanimous that **'asafsuf** is referring to that mixed multitude; the thousands of non-Israelites that followed along from Egypt and were required to camp on the outskirts of the Israelite encampment. In other words these complainers were resident aliens; they were the folks who were NOT Hebrews; they were foreigners who wished to remain foreign. No doubt the reference to the fire breaking out in the outskirts of the camp in the first rebellion is connected with the use of the word **'asafsuf** to describe just WHO it was who started all the complaining for more variety in their diets. These first two rebellions began due to the pagans who had attached themselves to Israel, but who also did not share their faith or their mission. They just wanted whatever benefit they could glean from being near this favored people, but also wanted to avoid the difficulties.

Now the next verse adds an interesting twist. Why were they complaining about meat? They had herds and flocks. The meat they wanted was fish! Why fish? Because that was their main diet for protein when they were slaves in Egypt.

A fascinating series of finds around Avaris, and at the foot of the pyramids of Giza, and near the fabulous underground tombs in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, all confirm that the staple food for the laborers, the construction workers whether Hebrew or Egyptian was fish. Enormous quantities of fish bones were found everywhere scattered in what were obviously well equipped eating areas that could feed hundreds at a time. And that makes sense. The Nile was a great source of fish. It was a VERY long river that stretched the length of Egypt. So pretty much anywhere one was in Egypt fish was abundant and available. And, fish could be easily dried, preserved and transported. Cattle could only be raised in certain areas of Egypt where there was sufficient pastureland and beef spoiled in hours. So beef was more expensive and less available except to the wealthier of society.

Of course out in the wilderness they also could not have a garden except if they stopped for extended periods of time, which they did sometimes. So in verse 5 they also complain they're not getting fresh fruit or vegetables.

Their staple since leaving Egypt was manna. And they were already sick to death of it. Fried

manna, boiled manna, roasted manna, baked manna.....RAW manna. It apparently tasted quite good as verses 7 and 8 explain. But this is NOT a diet that they were used to, nor did it provide a whole spectrum of tastes like what they were used to back in the land of Goshen.

As sick as the people were of Manna, Moses was equally sick of the people. He was exhausted and disgusted and beaten down. It would be funny if it weren't so sad, because verse 10 says: "The Lord was angry, and Moses was distressed." What a mess. The completely demoralized Moses goes to the angry Lord and basically says: I'd rather be dead than deal with these people any more. Moses goes on to say what did I ever do to deserve this? I didn't create this people. I didn't think up this grand plan. This wasn't MY covenant that was made that YOUR people should have their own land. So why are they MY burden?

Moses says, where am I supposed to get all this variety of food that they're all complaining about? How am I supposed to please everyone at the same time? One wants this, the other wants that. On second thoughts, just shoot me. I mean Moses was REALLY in a mood. Interestingly after Moses blows up at God, God doesn't chastise him for it. Rather He goes about addressing the requests. I recall my dear departed father telling me so many years ago, that it was OK to get mad at God and to tell Him just how you feel. He can take it. And you know, in reality, the closer a relationship we have with someone the more we're free to communicate and share our fears and disappointments and concerns. And that is actually what Moses was doing. Moses had an honest relationship with God. He told God of his frustrations. He told God what was going on inside of Him. And God didn't punish Him or say "don't YOU ever talk to me like that". See Yehoveh isn't insecure; He knows who He is and who you are. We're told to approach God, pray, in spirit and in truth. Well Moses approached God in truth, even if it wasn't in a particularly edifying spirit. We should follow that example.

So here is God's solution to the gripes: take 70 elders (lay leaders of Israel) and bring them to the front of the Tabernacle. In other words, present them to God so they can be authorized to share the burden. Recall that God called for 70 elders to come part way up the side of Mt. Sinai, with Moses, way back in Genesis. Understand: this was not a council designed to give Moses more advice (he already had more advice and suggestions than he could handle). Rather these men were to take on part of the burden. They were to DO, not to suggest.

Now the next several verses speak of something that we ought to pay close attention: it talks of God's *ruach*, His spirit. I'm not sure that within the Body of Believers that there is any more controversial aspect of the Godhead than the work of the Holy Spirit. But it seems to me that here is an opportunity to gain some understanding of the Spirit.

In verse 17 God says that He is going to anoint these 70 elders as leader-assistants for Moses. But in order for these 70 to be not just ordinary run-of-the-mill supervisors and accountants and judges God was going to put upon these men the **same spirit** that was upon Moses. This was the ONLY way these men would carry the authority of God, which was absolutely necessary to carry out their new duties. Actually what it says is that God was going to SHARE or DRAW UPON the Spirit that was upon Moses, with the 70. The Hebrew is *ve-'atsalti min*, and literally it means to reserve or to withdraw.

So is what we have here a Spirit transplant from Moses to the 70? Does the thought of a spirit transplant sound a little odd or strange to you? Well this sort of thing is going to happen again 13 or so centuries later on Pentecost. During the feast of Shavuot (Pentecost in Greek) immediately after Christ's death, the same spirit that empowered Yeshua was now to be shared and bestowed among men. It is interesting that Yeshua says that the Spirit could not come until He was gone. Why not? Well this is a matter that requires some speculation. Was it, possibly, that since His baptism and the Spirit of God descending upon Him, that Yeshua was the SOLE container of the Holy Spirit on Earth for a time? Was this, perhaps, all patterned after Moses whereby for a time Moses seemed to be the ONLY human upon whom God had endowed His spirit? Therefore when it came time for Moses' authority and duties to be shared, it had to draw FROM Moses (the sole earthly container of it) onto the 70 men.

Of course I **do** think that is what is happening..... in some way that is almost impossible to verbalize. Our Messiah instructed us that it is the job of every spirit-filled Believer to feed the flock; to care for the body of disciples; to take the HIS message to the world and make new disciples. It is the job of certain spirit-filled Believers to lead other Believers. But we're not to do any of it in our own power.....though we could succeed (at least outwardly) to some level. And, we were to start doing this after Jesus left, and in the same power and authority that He had: the Ruach HaKodesh....the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was with us in person, He bore the burden Himself. Now WE are to share the burden with Him. This is what is meant by we are to pick up our OWN cross and follow Him. This is all about burden sharing. Frankly, this whole teaching makes our general Christian passivity look pretty irresponsible, doesn't it?

Let me be clear: it's not that the Holy Spirit has some finite amount to Him. But there is only ONE spirit of God. I don't believe I can explain this much better nor do I think there is a better word-picture of how the Ruach, the Holy Spirit works, than right here in Numbers with Moses and the 70. And how it was after this pattern that it's NT version, first in Christ and then from Christ to the Believing community, would be manifest.

By the way: notice that the 70 HAD to be brought before the Lord.....be brought to the Wilderness Tabernacle. Why? Because it was God doing the Spirit transplant, not Moses. And by doing it at the Sanctuary of God it was clear to all that it was NOT by the power of Moses it was by the power of God that the miracle of the Spirit would be attributed. It's the same with us. We can witness to folks, and we can say we brought people to the Lord. True enough. But like Moses who led those 70 to the Tabernacle, the dwelling place of God, that's as far as we can take them. In a certain sense we can persuade and get them to agree to come before the Lord, but from that point forward it is strictly a miracle and work of God that the Holy Spirit be transplanted into each new Believer.

Now next week we'll continue and behold as God gives the Israelites.....and the foreigners....meat. Quail, in fact, it was just like He did once before. But, there is going to be a major difference. It is that the first time, He did it in His grace to provide a real and tangible need. This time, He will do it in anger, to make a point. And, there is going to be an enormous price to pay for provoking God in this manner.