

## NUMBERS: Rebellion, Judgment, and Mercy in the Wilderness

**1 The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel ... Numbers 1:1-2**

**Title:** Our English title *Numbers* is a translation of the Greek title *Arithmoi*. The Septuagint translators chose this title because of the two censuses of the Israelites that Moses recorded at the beginning (chs. 1–4) and toward the end (ch. 26) of the book. These numberings of the people took place at the beginning and end of the wilderness wanderings and frame the contents of Numbers. But a better title might be the one found in the Hebrew bible which comes from the fifth word in the book in the Hebrew text, *bemidbar*, meaning "**in the wilderness.**"

**Date of Writing:** The Book of Numbers was written between 1440 and 1400 B.C.

**Author:** Moses wrote it late in his life, across the Jordan from the Promised Land, on the Plains of Moab. Moses evidently died close to 1406 B.C., since the Exodus happened about 1446 B.C.:

*6 In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month ... (1 Kings 6:1)*

The Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years:

*<sup>13</sup> And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was gone. (Numbers 32:13)*

Moses died shortly before they entered the Promised Land:

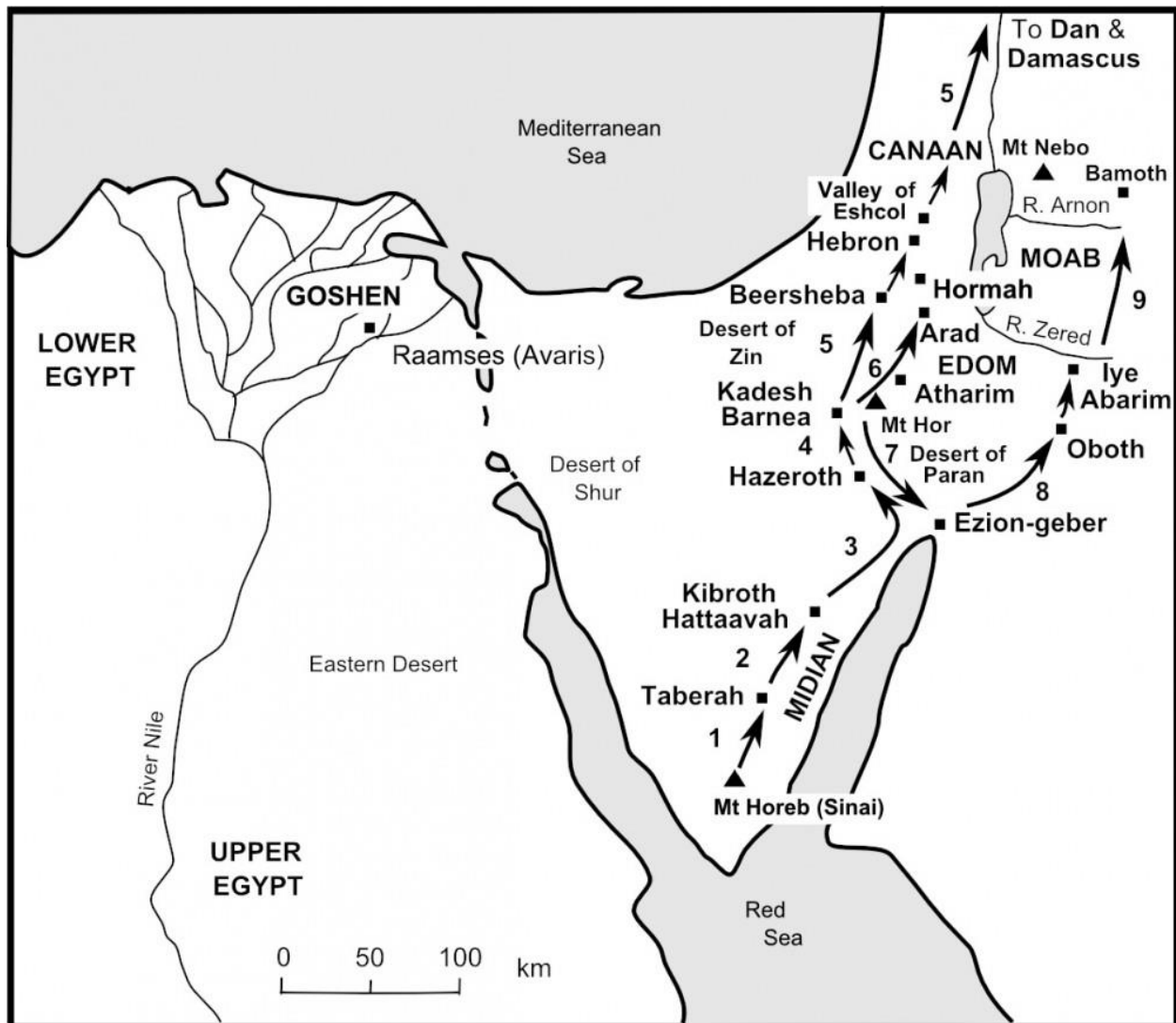
*<sup>5</sup> So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord, <sup>6</sup> and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. (Deuteronomy 34:5-6)*

**Purpose of Writing:** We know that Israel wandered for 40 years before being granted access into the Promised Land. Numbers tells the story of that wandering. The Book of Numbers essentially bridges the gap between the Israelites receiving the Law (Exodus and Leviticus) and preparing them to enter the Promised Land (Deuteronomy and Joshua).

**Focus of the Book:** The Lord directed the message of Numbers toward the younger generation, children of the former slaves who escaped through the Red Sea. Except for Joshua, Caleb, and Moses, the older generation—everyone twenty years old or older at the time of the first census—died before the completion of Numbers, due to their disobedience and disbelief:

*<sup>22</sup> ... none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, <sup>23</sup> shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it. <sup>24</sup> But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. <sup>25</sup> Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea."*

*<sup>26</sup> And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, <sup>27</sup> "How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me. <sup>28</sup> Say to them, 'As I live, declares the Lord, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: <sup>29</sup> your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, <sup>30</sup> not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. (Numbers 14:22-30)*



1. **Num 11:1-3** At Taberah (meaning 'burning') the people complain and the LORD sends a fire which destroys part of the camp.  
**Num 11:4-32** The Israelites grumble again about the lack of meat. God hears their complaint and a flock of quails is blown in from the sea.
2. **Num 11:33-34** The LORD sends an epidemic on those who crave other foods. The place is called Kibroth Hattaavah (meaning 'graves of craving')
3. **Num 11:35** They move on and reach Hazeroth.  
**Num 12:1-16** Miriam, Moses' sister, criticizes Moses and her skin becomes leprous. She is only healed after Moses pleads with God to forgive her.
4. **Num 13:1-25** In c.1445BC, the Israelites reach Kadesh Barnea, an oasis in the Desert of Paran. Moses selects one man from each of the twelve tribes to go and explore the 'promised land' of Canaan.
5. Moses sends the twelve spies, including Joshua and Caleb, to explore the whole land of Canaan, from Beersheba and Hebron in the south to Dan and Damascus 150 miles to the north. The spies travelled north, secretly, for three weeks from the Desert of Zin in the south, beyond Beersheba (where Isaac had settled some 300\ years earlier) and on past Shechem (where Jacob had set up an altar and bought land for a tomb). From here they continued north to Rehob and Lebo Hamath ('Hamath Pass') in the far north of Canaan near Damascus. On their way back south, they passed

Hebron (where Abraham was buried in Machpelah Cave in c.1815BC) and cut a large cluster of grapes from the Valley of Eshcol before returning after forty days to the Israelite camp at Kadesh oasis in the Desert of Paran.

**Num 13:26-33** The twelve spies report back. The fertile land does indeed flow with milk and honey, but the cities are well-fortified and the inhabitants are strong. Only Caleb urges the Israelites to attack and claim the land.

**Num 14:1-19** The people complain and want to choose another leader and return to Egypt. Joshua and Caleb appeal to the Israelites to trust in God's protection. But the people are ready to rebel.

**Num 14:20-24** The LORD is angry and declares that "not one of them will see the land I promised to their ancestors" – except Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:23).

**Num 14:25** Moses is instructed by God, "leave tomorrow and follow the desert road towards the Red Sea".

**Num 14:26-35** The Israelites are condemned by the LORD to forty years of wandering as nomadic shepherds in the desert – one year for each day that the spies explored the 'promised land'.

**Num 14:36-38** All the spies who explored Canaan - except Caleb and Joshua - are struck down by a plague and die.

6. **Num 14:39-44** Some Israelites change their minds about abandoning the fertile land of Canaan and decide to attack. But the first attempt to invade the 'promised land' fails because the people attack against God's wishes.

**Num 14:45** The Amalekites and Canaanites pursue the defeated Israelites as far as Hormah in southern Canaan.

**Num 15:1-41** Moses receives more guidance on religious offerings, unintentional sin and breaking the Sabbath.

**Num 16:1-50** Criticism of the leadership of Moses comes to a head and Korah leads a rebellion. He is killed by an earthquake. Other rebels are struck down by a plague.

**Num 17:1-13** Aaron's staff blossoms and produces almonds. This is seen as a sign that God will continue to bless his leadership.

**Num 18:1-32** Aaron is given instructions about the duties of priests and Levites.

**Num 19:1-22** Moses and Aaron are given instructions on the 'water of cleansing' (used by the Israelites to 'wash away' sins), prepared from the ashes of a red heifer.

- (Back to # 4 ...) **Deut 1:46** The Israelites stay at the oasis of Kadesh Barnea for "a long time".

**Num 20:1** Nearly forty years after leaving Egypt, Moses' sister Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh Barnea in the Desert of Zin.

**Num 20:2-13** The Israelites become desperately short of water. Moses strikes the rock twice with Aaron's stick and water gushes out. The spring at Kadesh is called Meribah (meaning 'complaining') because the people of Israel complained against the LORD (see also Numbers 27:14).

**Num 20:14-21** As the Edomites were descended from Jacob's brother Esau (see Genesis 32:3 & Deuteronomy 2:8), Moses sends messengers to the King of Edom requesting safe passage through his territory lying to the southeast of Canaan. But the king sends a large and powerful army against the Israelites and will not allow them to pass through Edom.

**Num 20:22-29** The Israelites leave Kadesh in c.1407BC and travel north toward Canaan, skirting to the west of Edom. At Mt Hor, Aaron dies and is succeeded as Chief Priest (see Exodus 28:1) by his son Eleazar.

**Num 21:1-3** As the Israelites come closer to Canaan, the Canaanite King of Arad attacks them in the northern Negev Desert on the road to Atharim and many Israelites are captured and led in captivity north to Arad. A detachment of Israelite commandos mounts a daring raid deep into Canaanite territory to the north. After a fierce struggle, the King of Arad is eventually defeated at Hormah (meaning 'destruction'), near Arad, but the Israelites decide that it would be more prudent to retreat southwards and to attack Canaan from the east.

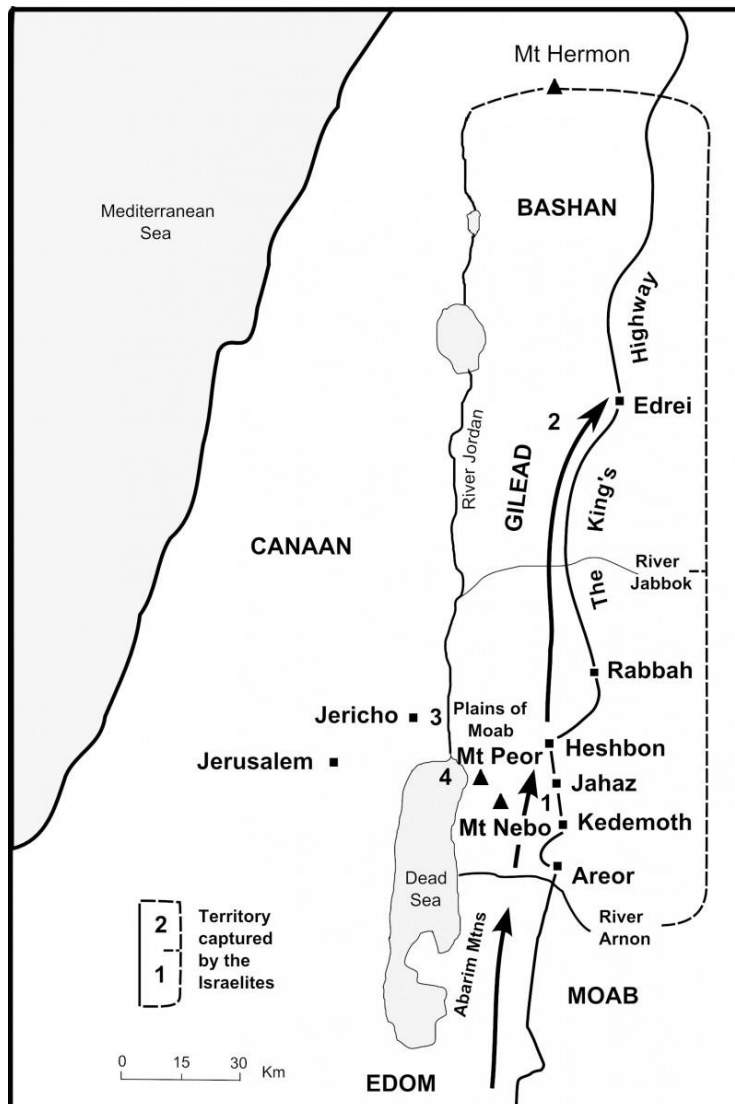
7. **Num 21:4-5** The Israelites turn south from Mt Hor and retrace their steps towards Ezion-geber and the Red Sea in order to skirt round to the south and east of Edom.

**Num 21:6-9** Many are bitten by poisonous snakes in the southern Negev Desert. The LORD commands Moses to make a bronze snake on a pole so that those who are bitten may look up at it and be healed. The bronze snake is revered and later called the 'Nehushtan' (2 Kings 18:4).

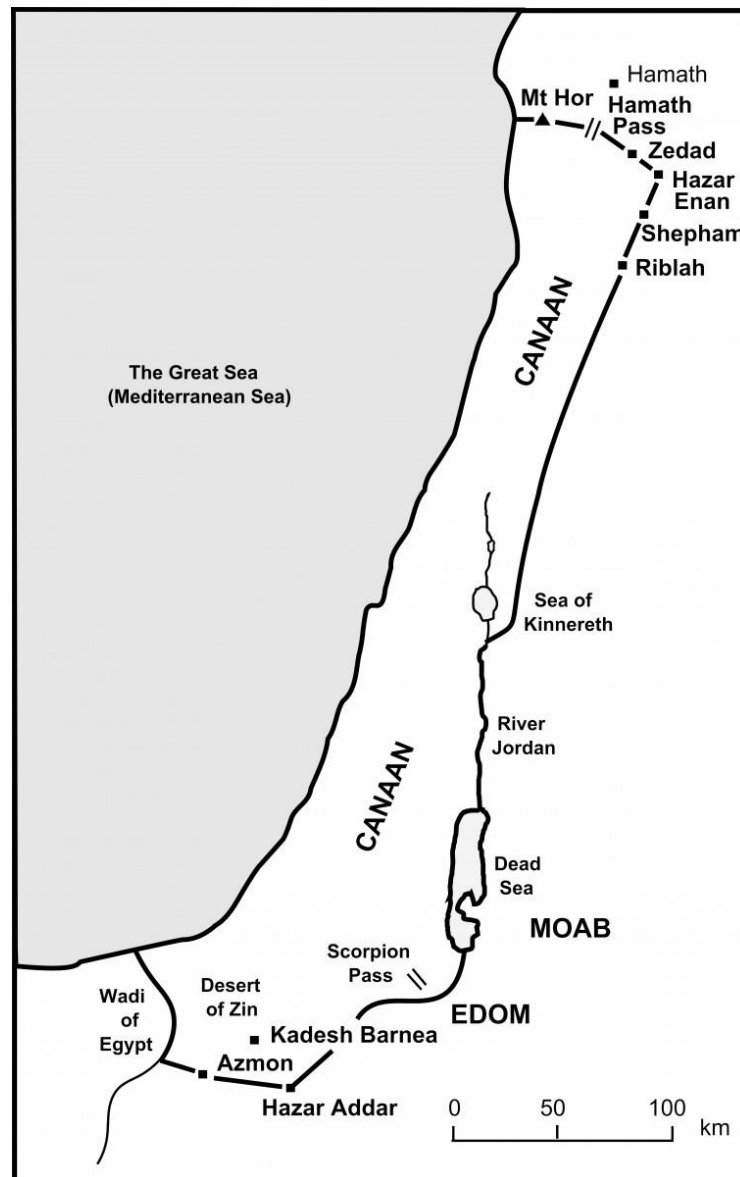
8. **Num 21:10-12** In 1407BC, thirty-eight years after the spies had been sent out from Kadesh (see Deuteronomy 2:14), Moses leads the Israelites north again towards Canaan. They avoid Edom by travelling some 60 miles across the inhospitable and arid stony desert plateau to the east of the River Jordan past Zalmonah and Punon (meaning 'precious stone') to reach the territory of Moab.

9. **Num 21:13-15** The Israelites avoid any confrontation with their distant relatives, the Moabites, as they travel a further 35 miles north from the River Zered across the rocky plateau region of the Mountains of Moab to the steep-sided gorge of the River Arnon (which enters the Dead Sea opposite En Gedi). This deep valley marked the border of the territory of the Amorites.

**Num 21:16-20** The Israelites continue another 25 miles across the dry limestone plateau via Beer meaning 'a well'), Mattanah, Nahaliel and Bamoth to "the valley of Moab where the top of Mt Pisgah [i.e. Mt Nebo] looks over the desert".



1. **Num 21:21-24** When the Israelites reach Kedemoth, they send messengers to King Sihon - the king of the Amorites who is occupying the northern area of Moab - requesting safe passage through his territory. They assure him that they will travel along the King's Highway, and they promise not to plunder the fields and vineyards alongside the road. King Sihon refuses and attacks the Israelites at Jahaz. The Israelites defeat the Amorites and occupy the land of northern Moab from the River Arnon to the River Jabbok.
2. **Num 21:25-32** All the Amorite cities, including Heshbon (Tell Hisban, 12 miles southwest of Amman) and Jazer are captured.  
**Num 21:33-35** As the Israelites continue to move north, King Og of Bashan is defeated at Edrei. The Israelites then occupy all the land of Gilead and Bashan from the River Arnon to Mt Hermon.
3. **Num 22:1** The Israelites set up camp in c.1406BC on the Plains of Moab east of the River Jordan opposite Jericho.  
**Num 22:2-8** King Balak of Moab hears of the defeat of the Amorites and sends for Balaam - a soothsayer and prophet - who is living at Pethor near the River Euphrates in Aram (see Numbers 23:7) so he can pour curses on the Israelites.  
**Num 22:9-35** God appears to Balaam and forbids him to curse the Israelites. Balaam, nevertheless, attempts to travel to Moab, but the angel of the LORD stands in the way of Balaam's donkey. The donkey lies down, so Balaam hits it with his stick. But the donkey says "What have I done to make you hit me three times?" The angel reveals himself to Balaam, and tells him to say to Balak only what he commands.  
**Num 22:36-41** King Balak meets Balaam at Ar, a border town on the River Arnon. They look out over the Israelites on the Plains of Moab from a pishgah at Bamoth Baal (an altar to Baal).  
**Num 23:1-12** King Balak wants Balaam to curse the Israelites, but instead Balaam blesses them.  
**Num 23:13-26** Balaam is taken by King Balak to the Field of Zophim on top of another Pishgah. Again, he refuses to curse the Israelites.
4. **Num 23:27-24:25** Balaam is then taken to the top of Mt Peor. He blesses the Israelites and foretells their victory over the King of Moab.  
**Num 25:1-17** The Israelites camp at Abel Shittim ('the valley of acacia trees') in Moab. Some of the Israelite men have sexual relationships with Moabite women and become involved in the worship of Baal at Mt Peor. They are put to death for disobeying God.  
**Num 26:1-65** A second census takes place in Moab. The total number of adult Israelite men is recorded as 601,730.  
**Num 27:1-11** Moses establishes a legal ruling regarding the inheritance of property when an Israelite dies without a son and heir.  
**Num 27:12-14** Moses is commanded to "Climb this mountain in the Abarim Mountains" (Numbers 27:12) and to look out across the 'promised land' before he dies.  
**Num 27:15-23** Joshua is commissioned by Eleazar the priest to succeed Moses.  
**Num 28-30** Moses receives further guidance about offerings, religious festivals and vows.  
**Num 31:1-54** The Israelites defeat the five kings of Midian and kill Balaam. The spoils are divided amongst the soldiers, the priests and the community.  
**Num 32:1-19** The Israelite tribes of Reuben and Gad, together with half the tribe of Manassah, ask if they can opt out of any further fighting. They want to stay in the lands of Gilead and Bashan east of the River Jordan that were taken from King Sihon and King Og (see Numbers 21:33-35). This includes the towns of Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo and Beon.  
**Num 32:20-42** Moses refuses, but agrees that after crossing the River Jordan and helping the other Israelites to conquer Canaan, they may return here and settle with their large herds of cattle and their flocks of sheep and goats.  
**Num 33:1-56** The author recaps on the story so far - producing a summary of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to Moab.



**Num 34:1-29** The boundaries of **Canaan** are mapped out and elders are appointed to assign the land after the conquest to the remaining nine and a half Israelite tribes.

**Num 35:1-34** Provisions are made to allocate towns and pastureland to the Levites. Six of the settlements are to become 'cities of refuge', to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee (see Joshua 20:7).

**Num 36:1-13** Further provisions are made to prevent land passing from one tribe to another.

## Critical Themes:

### 1) The \_\_\_\_\_ of God ...

He provided the \_\_\_\_\_ that would guide and guard them. He provided the \_\_\_\_\_ who would teach and lead them. And most of all, He provided His own \_\_\_\_\_ that would assure them of His blessings, protection, and provision.

<sup>22</sup> *The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>23</sup> "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,*

<sup>24</sup> *The Lord bless you and keep you;*

<sup>25</sup> *the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;*

<sup>26</sup> *the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

<sup>27</sup> *"So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." (6:22-27)*

### 2) The \_\_\_\_\_ of God ...

When the Israelites failed to obey God, He did not desert them but disciplined them in love.

God disciplined the people for their disobedience, but He always directed them toward the realization of His purpose for them as He disciplined them. The years of wilderness wandering were years of *education* rather than *abandonment*.

### 3) The \_\_\_\_\_ of God ...

In the third section of Numbers (chs. 22 – 36), God's persistence in bringing Israel to the threshold of the land is prominent. God protected Israel from her enemies and provided for her needs. Even though Israel had been unfaithful, God persisted in demonstrating faithfulness to the nation that He had chosen to bless (cf. 2 Tim. 2:12).

### 4) The \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ ...

A major theological theme developed in the New Testament from Numbers is that sin and unbelief, especially rebellion, reap the judgment of God. First Corinthians specifically says – and Hebrews 3:7 – 4:13 strongly implies – that these events were written as examples for believers to observe and avoid. We are not to "set our hearts on evil things" (1 Corinthians 10:6), or be sexually immoral (1 Corinthians 10:8) or put God to the test (1 Corinthians 10:9) or gripe and complain (1 Corinthians 10:10).

### 5) The \_\_\_\_\_ of God ...

Numbers teaches that the failures of God's people cannot frustrate His plans. In Exodus, God revealed that the opposition of His enemies cannot defeat Him. In Numbers, He revealed that the failure of His human instruments cannot defeat Him either. God's chosen instruments, His people, can postpone God's purposes, but they cannot preclude them (prevent them from happening).

J. Sidlow Baxter believed that the central message of Numbers may be expressed in the words of Romans 11:22: "See then the kindness and severity of God." He wrote the following:

*"In Numbers we see the severity of God, in the old generation which fell in the wilderness and never entered Canaan. We see the goodness of God, in the new generation which was protected, preserved, and provided for, until Canaan was possessed. In the one case we see the awful inflexibility of the Divine justice. In the other case we see the unfailing faithfulness of God in His promise, His purpose, His people.*

*"Closely running up to this central message of the book are two other lessons – two warnings to ourselves; and these also may be expressed in words from the New Testament. The first is a warning against presumption. Turning again to the Corinthian passage which we have just quoted in full (I Cor. x. 1-12), we find that this warning against presumption is the lesson which Paul himself sees in the book of Numbers. After telling us that 'all these things happened unto them as types' for us, he says: 'Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.'*

*"The second warning is against unbelief. In Hebrews iii. 19 we read: 'They could not enter in (to Canaan) because of unbelief'; and then it is added – 'Let us therefore fear lest, a promise being left us of entering into His rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.' And again: 'Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief' (iii. 12).*

*"Thus the New Testament itself interprets the book of Numbers for us. This fourth writing of Moses says: 1. 'Behold the goodness and severity of God.' 2. 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed ...' 3. 'Take heed lest there be in you – unbelief.'"*

**Next week: Deuteronomy – The Covenant with the King**