

Message Series: The Whole Counsel of God, Message 6  
The Failure of God's People. Book of Numbers  
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Have you ever picked up a book, read the first few chapters, then jumped ahead to the end of the book and read the final few chapters, and concluded that you understood the book? When you open the Old Testament book of Numbers it begins with promise: the people of Israel are camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, the armies of Israel are numbered and organized with over 600,000 men of war, and the Levites are set aside to serve in the things of the Tabernacle with 8,500 set aside for service.

In chapter nine the people of Israel observed the Passover. They were organized physically and spiritually; things were right between themselves and God. Also in chapter nine there is a description of how God would lead them: they would be led by the cloud, the *Shekinah* glory, the dwelling place or presence of God. When the cloud tarried above the Tabernacle, they would tarry. When the cloud was lifted up, they would be as well. They were a people set apart to God and led by Him.

In chapter ten the silver trumpets are blown calling the families to stand in their appointed place, ready to move with their standards held high. Moses gives out a shout, "*Rise up, O Lord (10:35)!*" Then the whole nation of Israel began to march forward to take possession of God's promise.

What a scene that must have been!

If we then jump ahead to the final chapters of the book, in chapter twenty-six we find Moses numbering the people again, they still have over 600,000 men of war. He reminds them of God's promise, tells them how the land is to be divided, and tells them about six special Cities of Refuge.

In 33:53 God tells the people of Israel to take possession of the land of promise and settle in it for He had given it to them for a possession. Then the last four words of the final chapter (36:13) tell us they were camped along the Jordan River, right on the verge of entering into God's promise.

It all sounds very exciting, doesn't it! If all we ever read was the start and finish of this book we would have a picture of what could have been, a

picture of what should have been, but it would not be an accurate picture of what had been, because sandwiched in between the start and finish of the book is record of unbelievable horror. What should have been a two-week march turned into forty years of wandering due of sin and judgment, and chapter 26:64 tells us that all those originally numbered at the start of the book, with the exception of two, died.

The book of Numbers sets before us a terribly grim picture of sin and death, what can you and I possibly gain from its study? In 1 Corinthians 10:1-12, the Apostle Paul explains the value of the book of Numbers for us today...

In the book of Numbers, God wants us to see examples of failure to warn us and keep us from failing as they did. There are more examples of failure than the space of this lesson allows for, but I want to bring your attention to four that will summarize the book for us.

## **I. The Mixed Multitude**

The first example I want you to see is that of the mixed multitude in chapter eleven. See 11:4-6...

Do you know what a mixed multitude is? A mixed-multitude is a mingling of believer's and non-believers. According to Exodus 12 not all who came out of Egypt were the people of God. Some of them were Egyptians. Perhaps they thought they wanted the presence and promise of God, but they were never quite able to separate themselves from Egypt.

Here, just a few days into the journey, they started craving the food they grew up with; cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. But on the journey, all they had was *manna*, God's bread from heaven, and they were tired of it. Maybe you wonder what was so bad about that. I grew up in Tennessee and every now and then I desire the food I grew up with: canned sausage packed in lard, dried salted pork, fried pork fat, and soup beans and corn bread. Um, Um, Um, I am getting hungry just thinking of it! So what was so wrong with their desire?

Simply, they despised the provision of God. God was not enough; they wanted that they left behind more than the presence, provision, and promise of God. And, as they lusted for evil things, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:6, their evil desire spread to the people of God as well.

That's the example God wants us to learn from. Whenever you and I become unequally yoked with non-believers, it will always keep us back from the full experience of God's blessing. See 2 Corinthians 6:14-18...

Whenever our most valued relationships are with non-believers it will take a toll on our relationship with God, so God says *be ye separate* (2 Corinthians 6:17).

## **II. The Evil Report**

The second example of failure concerns the evil report found in chapters 13-15.

Twelve men, one from every tribe, were sent to spy out the land of promise and return with a report for the people. They found everything just as God had promised. Their report is found in 13:26-33...

The response of the people is provided in 14:1-2...

Of the spies only Joshua and Caleb saw the promise rather than the problem and they tried to persuade the people to trust God's promise, but to no avail. God's judgment is pronounced in 14:33-34...

God's commentary on all of this is provided in Hebrews 3:7-4:2...

Do you understand what God has said? It is possible to have God's promise right in front of us and still come short. It is possible to hear God's Word preached and not profit from it. That's what happened to the children of Israel.

Caleb and Joshua proclaimed the opportunity, God's promise was right there for the taking. But all the rest could see was the problem, and so they failed to mix the Word preached with faith. Faith is acting on God's promise and unless you and I do that in our relationship with God we will never enjoy His promised blessings. Instead we will be wandering through life unfulfilled, wondering what's so special about being a Christian.

## **III. The Brass Serpent**

The third example I want you to notice is the story of the brass serpent. See 21:4-9...

Once again, the people are discouraged about the journey and their discouragement led to complaining. Certainly, that is nothing new, but the reason this stands out as an example for us is because of what the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:9...

To *tempt* is to put to a test. In Matthew 4:6, when Satan dared Jesus to place Himself in harm's way, Jesus responded in verse 7, "*Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.*" We do not put God to test, instead, we trust Him.

When the Israelites continued to complain, they were putting God to the test, they were saying, *God, You are not taking good care of us.* The Apostle Paul said they tempted Christ and admonishes us not to do the same. The Christ of the New Testament is the God we encounter in the book of Numbers.

For that reason, I find the second New Testament use of this example very exciting. See John 3:14-15...

To look to the brass serpent set up by Moses in the wilderness took an act of faith; they had to believe God's promise to heal them. To look to Jesus takes the same if we expect to be healed of our condemnation of sin. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves, but when we look to Jesus by faith, we simply take God at His promise that whosoever believes in Him *will not perish but have everlasting life.* (John 3:16)

#### **IV. The Matter Of Peor**

The last example I want you to notice concerns the matter of Peor. This really starts in Numbers chapter twenty-two with Balaam. Balak, the Amorite, had summoned Balaam to curse God's people, promising him great riches. From the start, God made it clear that this was against His will, but Balaam kept looking for a loophole because he desired the riches. Balaam desired wealth over God's will. Some would say they desire both, and that's what Balaam would have said, but it was obvious that wealth was his priority. In the end God never allowed Balaam to curse His people. Every time he opened his mouth to do so, out came blessing. It was very frustrating for Balak. But what Balaam could not accomplish openly, he did accomplish

in private. According to Revelation 2:14 he advised Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel: immorality and idolatry. See Numbers 25:1-3 and 18...

They could not openly curse the people of Israel but were able to entice Israel to curse themselves through sin, *Come, be our friends, have a good time, enjoy our women!* Sin is rarely obvious; it never shouts out to us, *If you do this you will be sinning against God!* Instead, it entices the desires that are already within us and deceitfully leads us astray. See James 1:14-15...

God wants us to be on our guard. Sin promises a good time but produces death. Twenty-four thousand Israelites died in Peor, and just think of all the wasted lives even today due to the deceitfulness of sin!

Back in 1 Corinthians 10:12, after telling us that the book of Numbers was written for our admonition, the Apostle Paul gives this warning, *“let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”*

All those people who passed through the Red Sea, all those people who were led by the Cloud, all those people who ate Manna, and all those people who drank the water from the rock, died in the wilderness because of sin. God's presence, provision, and promise were not enough. According to Hebrews four, they came up short; the Word of God preached did not profit them because it was not mixed with faith.

And here's the thing: the examples we've considered, and all the others found in the book of Numbers won't do a thing for us if we don't act on them by faith.

So I ask you, is there a promise you yet need to possess? Is there a sin you yet need to confess?

Hebrews 3:7-8 say, *“Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness.”*

Now is the time for us to mix what we have read and heard with faith.