

Led by the Pillar of Cloud and Fire (Numbers 7-9)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

I. Introduction

- a. Jesus' predominant way of teaching was through using parables to convey spiritual truth.
 - i. These were simple stories in which the main elements corresponded to different characters (God, Jesus, Satan, angels, good people, bad people, etc.), different spiritual characteristics (having a good or bad heart, for example), or even different places (the world, heaven, the lake of fire).
 - ii. Many listeners did not 'get' the significance of the parables at the time Jesus told them. Some did. However, in general, we have the benefit of His explaining the meaning of the parables, afterward.
- b. Jesus gave *two reasons* why He spoke in parables. Both point back to prophecies in the Old Testament.
 - i. Read **Matthew 13:10-17**.
 1. Here Jesus quotes **Isaiah 6:9-10**, when the prophet Isaiah is in the throne room, and the Lord asks who is willing to address His people.
 2. The parables test the hearts of the people. Some will close their eyes and harden their hearts, instead of turning to God.
 - ii. Read **Matthew 13:34-34**.
 1. Here Jesus quotes from **Psalms 78:2** (designated **Psalms 77:2** in the LXX).
 2. Certain things are spiritual mysteries that God has kept secret from the beginning, but which He will speak to us in parables or riddles that we will need to apply ourselves to figure out!
- c. Read **Psalms 78:2** (designated **Psalms 77:2** in the LXX).
 - i. After admonishing the people to give heed to His law and to pay attention to the words of His mouth, the Lord says, "I shall speak to them in parables...". Then he recounts the story of Israel's exodus journey (which is found in **Exodus** and **Numbers**).

- ii. **Question:** Is there any connection between the psalmist's opening challenge (pay attention; I will speak in parables to reveal mysteries kept secret from the beginning) and what follows (the exodus journey)?
1. **My Answer:** Yes, I believe so, based on what Paul said in **1 Corinthians 10**, likewise in **Hebrews 3-4** and **Jude v. 5**.
 - a. In addition to the story of the exodus journey being historically accurate, it also provides a parable that reveals things of great spiritual significance, hidden from long ago.
 - b. The exodus journey of the Israelites is an allegory of the *spiritual journey that we Christians are on*.
 - i. Note: the Christian faith came out Asia, not Europe! It is from a cultural setting where parables and allegories often were used to communicate spiritual truth.
- iii. **The Challenge:** Let us read these stories from **Numbers** and wrestle to understand their significance for us, just as we would when encountering a parable told by Jesus.
1. This requires more mental work on our part: to determine who the characters represent, and what the spiritual lessons are for us, that are hidden within the story. This is not a task for the spiritually lazy!
 2. If we skip over this material as 'boring/irrelevant', or just listen to hear 'interesting insights' from early Christians or others, we risk skipping over critical lessons the Holy Spirit has provided for us in the **Numbers** text. These are important lessons embedded there *to equip us to make it to the end!*
 3. We can learn how to read and to unlock Old Testament parables and allegories (in this case, with the help of insights from the New Testament).
 4. As an active reader, you will need to ask questions of the text as we proceed.
 - a. Do these Old Testament characters or story details represent anything that will be revealed fully, later?
 - b. Is God trying to teach me something through these stories?

- c. For example:
 - i. We know that Jesus was foreshadowed by the Passover Lamb and by the High Priest.
 - ii. We are called to be members of a spiritual priesthood, God's holy nation.
 - iii. We are "the church of the firstborn".
 - iv. Paul admonishes us in **Romans 12** to offer our bodies as "living sacrifices" (**Romans 12:1**).
 - v. We will see many more parallels if we look carefully! It is very important to be reading both the Old Testament and the New Testament, to piece these things together and unlock these parables, "mysteries kept secret from the foundations of the world" (**Matthew 13:35**).

II. Review from Prior Lessons

- a. Timeframe: the story begins about one year after the first Passover and exodus from Egypt.
- b. Subjects we have covered thus far, in the prior lessons, include:
 - i. General census of the tribes of Israel (all men 20 and older; Levites not included). Numbered by family and tribe. Total = 603,550 men.
 - 1. Census used (among other things) to assign tribes to places around the tabernacle (N, S, E or W side).
 - ii. Census of Levites, one month old and above. Total = 22,000. (**Numbers 3:1-39**)
 - 1. Levites are broken down into three groups: Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites.
 - 2. All the priests were descended from Aaron, who was descended from Kohath.
 - a. Kohathites also had the honored responsibility of breaking down and setting up and transporting the sacred things in the Holy Place and Most Holy Place (including the ark).
 - iii. Census of firstborn males of Israel, age one month and older. Total = 22,273. (**Numbers 3:40-51**)

1. God wants to use Levites to redeem all the firstborn of Israel, one-for-one. Money was paid to cover the extra firstborn exceeding the 22,000 Levites.
- iv. Census of active duty-aged Levite men, ages 25-50. (**Numbers 4:34-49**)
- v. Various rules (**Numbers 5-6**) regarding
 1. Being unclean
 2. Restitution for sins against others.
 3. Procedure for determining whether a wife has been unfaithful
 4. Nazirite-type vows. (No grape products/wine/vinegar, no interaction with dead bodies, no razors/haircuts.)
- vi. The famous way for priests to bless the people. (**Numbers 6:22-26**)

III. Gifts from 12 Tribes over 12 Days

- a. Read **Numbers 7:1-17**.
- b. Overview/summary of **Numbers 7**.
 - i. The tabernacle is set up.
 - ii. Each of the 12 tribal leaders brings gifts to the priests for the dedication of the altar.
 - iii. One tribe brings its gifts per day. Judah comes first. Therefore, this takes 12 days. Everyone (every tribe) sacrificed and gave.
 - iv. **Question:** Any lessons for us?
 1. I see this as being like a 12-cylinder engine that is hitting on all cylinders. Or, to use a rowing-based analogy, everyone in the boat is 'pulling their weight'. All parts of the "church (congregation) in the Wilderness", the term Stephen uses in **Acts 7:38** to describe the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.
 2. Everyone needs to be contributing in some way to meet the needs of others in the church. Love others as ourselves, and show that by what we do, by sacrificing and serving one another.
 - a. Rising up to take on more responsibility (as we anticipate moving to multiple house churches in the future).

- b. Serving and pitching in to help with food, children, meals, etc. That includes all parts: single and married.
- c. Helping the poor, missions work, etc.
- d. Read **2 Corinthians 8:12-15** and **9:6-15**.
 - i. God wants us to share equally in sacrificing so that no one is burdened.
 - ii. God loves a cheerful giver.
- c. Read **Numbers 7:89**.
 - i. The voice of God is heard speaking from above the mercy seat (cover) of the ark of the covenant. I think of this as being like the throne of the Lord, between the cherubim.

IV. Levites Consecrated for Service

- a. Overview/summary of **Numbers 8**.
 - i. Levites are consecrated for tabernacle service.
 - ii. Wash clothes, sprinkle with water, and shave off all hair. A bull sacrificed for the sin offering, to make atonement for them.
 - iii. Levites are considered God's firstborn. They take the place of the firstborn from among the Israelites (who were to be devoted to the Lord).
- b. Read **Numbers 8:13-19**.
 - i. As we discussed in the prior lesson, the Levites became the *firstborn of God*.
 - ii. Now we are *the priests of God*, the church of the firstborn (**1 Peter 2:9-10, Hebrews 12:23**). The priests and Levites point to how we are supposed to be.
 1. We, like they, have been called to a ministry of praying, offering sacrifices and eating the spiritual food and drink.
 2. We are called to cleanse ourselves from sin; to be set apart as a holy priesthood.
 3. Among all the people, we are God's special, treasured possession.

4. We are called to pray for all the others around us, including for those in authority in the government *even if we believe they are corrupt*, as the rulers in Paul's day were. (**1 Timothy 2:1-2**)

c. Read **Numbers 8:23-26**.

- i. 'Retired' priests are assigned to *guard duty*, perhaps functioning more like security guards.

V. Passover Celebrated in the Wilderness at Mount Sinai

a. Read **Numbers 9:1-14**.

b. In this passage, the Lord commands Moses to keep the Passover *on the 14th day of the first month*.

- i. Note: the book of **Numbers** begins with the command to take a general census on *the first day of the second month (Numbers 1:1-2)*. That occurs *after* the events described in **Numbers 9:1-5**, the second Passover celebration.

- ii. Therefore, chronologically, the second Passover celebration described in this passage took place before Moses took the first census in **Numbers chapter 1 and 2**.

c. This Passover is the 1-year anniversary celebration of the original Passover event, the final plague that led to Israel's escape from Egypt.

d. There is provision for a 'do-over' of the Passover observance, for those unable to participate in Passover at the regular time.

- i. For those people, it would be observed one month later.
- ii. The resident aliens could participate, as well.

e. **Question:** What do we learn about the character of God here?

- i. The Lord is serious about obedience. Those who failed to keep the Passover would be cast out.
- ii. He wants His people to remember important things He has done in the past.
 1. This is for our own good.
 2. We will tend to stray if we forget what God has done; in this case, how He destroyed the firstborn of Egypt in the 10th plague and delivered Israel.

3. As Christians, we remember the Lord's death and resurrection as we come together weekly to take the Lord's Supper.
- iii. He also is accommodating to circumstances. If someone was unable to keep the Passover at the regular time for a legitimate reason (on a far journey, unclean from contact with a dead body, etc.), He made an allowance and gave them another opportunity a month later.
- iv. Sometimes He includes very specific requirements that we don't understand at the time. In this case, the reason would not be revealed for over 1,000 years.
 1. The specific calendar day and time for the Passover observance was important (during the first month of the year, on the 14th day, sacrificed at twilight).
 2. The unusual requirement repeated here is: "Don't break any of its bones."
 - a. He is preparing His people, even here, for the coming of Christ approximately 1400 years later.
 - b. We can trust that if God tells us to do something specific, there are good reasons, even if we don't (yet) understand those reasons.
 - c. This may be for our own best interest, or for the best interest of the kingdom overall, or for some future purpose even beyond our lifetime.
 3. Even back then, God had concern for the Gentiles.
 - a. We find similar indications of this throughout the Old Testament; for example, in **Jonah** regarding the Ninevites.

VI. Led by the Pillar of Cloud

- a. Read **Numbers 9:15-23**.
- b. Consider the history behind this special cloud that accompanied the Israelites.
 - i. Read **Exodus 13:17-22**.
 1. This pillar of cloud and fire appeared right after the Passover Lamb was slain and eaten, and after the 10th Plague, the death of the firstborn (**Exodus 12**).

2. Appeared first in Egypt. However, it would lead them to the Red Sea, across it, and then through the Wilderness all the way to the Promised Land.
 3. Pillar of cloud by day and fire by night “to show them the way”. It led them and could be followed by them 24/7.
- ii. Read **Exodus 14:15-22**.
1. The Angel of the Lord and the pillar of cloud *both* accompanied the people.
 - a. The expression “*the Angel (= Messenger) of the Lord*” was understood by early Christians to be the Word of God, the Son of God (prior to the incarnation of Jesus).
 - b. The Angel of the Lord is not the same as the cloud. Both accompanied the Israelites and led them out of Egypt.
 - c. After showing the way to the Red Sea, both the pillar of cloud and the Angel of the Lord move to a position behind the people, separating them from the pursuing Egyptian army, while God is preparing the Red Sea for the people to cross it.
 - i. The cloud leads the people, but also protects them from their enemies.
- iii. Read **Exodus 40:15** and **40:28-32**.
1. Covered the tabernacle and filled it with the Lord’s glory after Moses set up everything.
 2. Was over the tabernacle throughout the entire journey. When (and only when) it ascended, they would pack up everything and depart, following it.
 3. It appeared as a cloud by day and as fire by night.
- iv. Read **Wisdom of Solomon 18:1-4**.
1. The pillar was *a guide* for their unknown journey, and a “harmless sun” to show them the way.
- c. Significance of the cloud in that story, for us.
- i. Read **1 Corinthians 10:1-2**.
 1. “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea,

all were *baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea....*" (**1 Corinthians 10:1-2**, NKJV).

2. The Red Sea crossing was a foreshadowing of Christian baptism.
3. They were baptized "in the cloud and the sea", as we are baptized and born again "of the water and the spirit" (**John 3:3-5**).
 - a. Several early Christian writers saw this statement of Jesus as applying to Christian baptism, when we die and are buried with Christ, and are spiritually reborn to a new life (see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Baptism: Meaning of Baptism').
 - b. Peter explained that when we are baptized, we receive the Holy Spirit.
 - i. "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.' And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation.' Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." (**Acts 2:38-41**, NKJV)
 - ii. **Question:** If the water of the Red Sea crossing foreshadowed the water of baptism, *what did the cloud represent?*
 1. **Obvious Answer (to Me):** The *Holy Spirit*.
 - iii. **Question:** What does the story about the cloud in **Exodus** and **Numbers** show us about the importance of the Holy Spirit, on our own spiritual journey?
 1. Note that the cloud appeared for the first time, in the **Exodus 13** account, *after the Passover Lamb had been slain*.
 - a. Read **John 14:15-17** and **16:5-15**.
 - i. Jesus said that He must depart *in order for the Spirit to come*.

1. Jesus had to depart *in order for the Spirit to come*. This statement has had a great impact on me, helping me to better appreciate the *importance* of the Holy Spirit in our lives today!
 - ii. The Spirit would be with them and *would dwell in* them.
 - iii. The Spirit will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment.
 1. As the Holy Spirit was involved in leading the people to the water, I believe the Spirit is involved in convicting people of sin and bringing them to Christ today as well, even before they enter the water!
 - iv. The Spirit would also *guide* them. (Same Greek root word as in Wisdom of Solomon where it said the cloud was a guide to the Israelites.)
- d. Another look at the Holy Spirit.
- i. The Spirit was involved at the beginning of everything.
 1. Read **Genesis 1:1-2**.
 - ii. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead also lives in us.
 1. "But if the *Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead* dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit *who dwells in you*." **(Romans 8:11, NKJV)**
 - iii. Characteristics of the Spirit
 1. Read **Isaiah 11:1-4**.
 - a. Sevenfold Spirit (LXX), perhaps also seen in the lampstand in the Holy Place of the tabernacle, which had seven lights.
 2. *Wisdom* is listed first among the attributes.
 3. *Fear of God* also is one of the attributes of the Spirit!
 - a. Therefore, how can someone be filled with the Spirit if they are *lacking the fear of God*?

- b. How can someone claim that the fear of God is *no longer necessary*, if it is one of the fundamental attributes of the Holy Spirit?

- e. **Question:** If the Israelites are the church, the Red Sea is baptism, the time in the Wilderness is the time of testing here on earth, the Promised Land is the reward we are looking for at the end, and the righteous few (Joshua and Caleb) are those who will make it to the end... *what are we to learn from the cloud in this story?*
 - i. Let us go only when and where the cloud leads us!
 - ii. The cloud is at the very center of their camp (the church). We should organize ourselves around it accordingly.
 - iii. The cloud is absolutely critical. It is more important than GPS, Waze or Google Maps to show us the way we need to go on our own spiritual journey.
 - iv. The cloud does not necessarily lead us by the fastest, most direct route. However, it leads us by the timing God intends, for our own good, and to accomplish His purposes.

- f. **Question:** How can we know *where the Spirit is leading us*, today?
 - i. Is it just a feeling, or something that is primarily emotion-based?
 - ii. We know for sure that the Spirit reminded the apostles of everything that Jesus said and led them into "all truth". We also know that the Spirit inspired the prophets. Therefore, anything that contradicts what the Word of God says cannot be from the Spirit!
 - 1. "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, *but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*" (2 Peter 1:19-21, NKJV)
 - iii. However, sometimes the Spirit can move us in a specific direction in life, apart from (but in no way contradicting) the Scriptures.
 - 1. **Question:** Should we make plans in life (spiritually), or just pray and see 'where the Spirit leads us'?
 - 2. Read **Acts 16:6-10**.

- a. Paul had a good plan, but the Spirit blocked it and had other ideas! The Spirit redirected him to Macedonia instead.
- b. Keep an open mind and pray for the Spirit to guide us.
- c. Many Christians become discouraged when the plans they make in this life get derailed. However, be aware that the Spirit may be leading us in *other, better directions*.
 - i. “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’” **(James 4:13-15, NKJV)**
 - ii. As Jesus instructed us, let us pray *for the Lord’s will to be done*, and ask for more of the Spirit. **(Luke 11)**
- d. Pray for the Spirit to lead us individually and as a group, and let us stay righteous and follow all the clear directions we have from the Spirit, in the Scriptures!
 - i. **Question:** If someone is not already following the clear instructions provided by the Spirit in the word of God...
 1. ... why should they think that the Spirit will put them into the ‘bonus round’ and give them *even more*, personalized direction?