THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

The King Who Leads the Way

Numbers, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Leads the Way: The Book of Numbers, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

Copyright © 2026 Bill McLeod. All rights reserved.

Published by Papa Bill Books.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, which is in the public domain.

All Scripture quotations in this book are from the WEB. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” The book of Numbers sounds like it was named to scare readers away. Census lists, tribal totals, camp layouts, and more lists. If you’ve ever tried reading the Bible straight through, this might be where you started skimming.

Don’t. Numbers is one of the wildest books in the Bible. There’s fire from heaven, a plague of quail, a ground that opens up and swallows a rebellion, a staff that sprouts almonds overnight, a bronze snake on a pole, and a donkey that talks back to its owner. There are spies, giants, and a whole generation that walks right up to the edge of the promised land and then turns around.

Underneath all that action is a story about something you know well: the long, frustrating middle. Israel has been rescued from Egypt, but they’re not home yet. They’re stuck in the wilderness, complaining, afraid, and wondering whether God really knows what He’s doing. Numbers is about what happens when people are in between, and about a God who keeps leading, keeps providing, and keeps His promises even when His people don’t.

If you’ve ever felt stuck, afraid of failing, or tempted to go along with the crowd, this book is for you. Pack your tent. We’re heading into the wilderness.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Numbers in nine chapters: the census and the camp (Numbers 1–4), the priestly blessing and the journey begins (5–10), complaining and quail (11–12), the twelve spies (13–14), Korah's rebellion (15–19), the rock and the bronze serpent (20–21), Balaam and his donkey (22–24), Phinehas and the new generation (25–30), and the edge of the promised land (31–36). The lists and laws are summarized more briefly than the stories.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Numbers is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to understand the huge numbers in the census, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Numbers also includes violence and judgment. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note or an honest Real Talk. This book quotes Numbers in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the fourth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Numbers raises questions teens will ask. I've presented the main views fairly on the size of Israel's population, including the traditional reading of about two million people and the view that the Hebrew word elef can mean a clan or military unit rather than a thousand. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Numbers includes hard material: plagues and judgments, the story of Phinehas, and the war against Midian. These are handled carefully and age-appropriately, without graphic detail, with honest discussion of why they are troubling and why Christians do not take them as a model for violence today. Real Talk boxes address peer pressure, anxiety about failure, leadership, and grief, and point readers to trusted adults and, where relevant, the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees Numbers fulfilled in Jesus, the true bread from

heaven, the rock that followed Israel, and the one lifted up like the bronze serpent, while acknowledging that Jewish readers read Numbers in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will meet in Numbers a God who leads His people through the wilderness and never gives up on His promises.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

In the Wilderness

The English name Numbers comes from the Greek and Latin titles, which focus on the two censuses that bookend the book. In Hebrew it's called Bemidbar, which means in the wilderness, from its first verse. That's a better summary. Numbers covers about thirty-nine years of Israel's life between Mount Sinai and the edge of the promised land, most of it spent wandering in the desert.

Part Four of the Torah

Numbers is the fourth of the five books of Moses. Exodus brought Israel out of Egypt to Mount Sinai. Leviticus gave them the laws for living with a holy God. Numbers picks up with Israel getting ready to leave Sinai and march toward Canaan, the land God promised Abraham. Deuteronomy, the last book, records Moses' final speeches as they wait to cross the Jordan River.

Two Generations

Numbers is really a tale of two generations. The first census counts the generation that came out of Egypt. Because of their unbelief, they don't get to enter the land; they die in the wilderness over forty years. The second census, in chapter 26, counts their children, the new generation who will go in. The question hanging over the whole book is whether the kids will trust God more than their parents did.

Who Wrote Numbers?

Numbers says Moses recorded the stages of Israel's journey (Numbers 33:2), and Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Moses wrote the Torah. Many scholars believe Numbers was assembled from several older sources, with priestly material added later. Others hold that Moses is the main author, with later editing. Christians with different views agree that Numbers is God's Word.

The World It Came From

The wilderness between Egypt and Canaan, including the Sinai Peninsula and the Negev desert, is a harsh land of rock, sand, and scarce water. Bedouin people still live there with flocks of goats and sheep. To the east of Canaan lay the kingdoms of Edom, Moab, and Ammon, distant relatives of Israel, along with the Midianites and the Amorites. Numbers takes Israel through or around all of them on the way to the Jordan River.

How Big Was Israel?

The census in Numbers 1 counts 603,550 fighting men, which suggests a total population of perhaps two million people. Many Christians take that number at face value, as a sign of God's miraculous care. Others point out that the Hebrew word elef, usually translated thousand, can also mean a clan or a military unit, and suggest that the numbers were much smaller, perhaps twenty thousand or so. We'll look at both views in chapter 1. Faithful Christians hold different views.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

Numbers includes rebellion, plagues, and war. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of everything people do in it,

and it doesn't mean the violence in it is a model for us. When we come to these stories, you'll find a box. If anything you read brings up something painful in your own life, talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, pastor, or school counselor. If you ever feel hopeless or think about hurting yourself, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Numbers 1–4): The census and the camp.

Chapter 2 (Numbers 5–10): The blessing and the journey begins.

Chapter 3 (Numbers 11–12): Complaints, quail, and family conflict.

Chapter 4 (Numbers 13–14): The twelve spies.

Chapter 5 (Numbers 15–19): Korah's rebellion.

Chapter 6 (Numbers 20–21): The rock and the bronze serpent.

Chapter 7 (Numbers 22–24): Balaam and his donkey.

Chapter 8 (Numbers 25–30): Phinehas and the new generation.

Chapter 9 (Numbers 31–36): On the edge of the promise.

Contents

Setting the Scene 7

1 Counting the Camp *1–4* 11

2 The Blessing and the Cloud *5–10* 17

3 Complaints and Quail *11–12* 22

4 Grasshoppers and Giants *13–14* 27

5 Korah's Rebellion *15–19* 32

6 The Rock and the Snake *20–21* 36

7 Balaam and His Donkey *22–24* 42

8 Zeal and a New Generation *25–30* 48

9 On the Edge of the Promise *31–36* 53

Where This Points 58

CHAPTER 1

Counting the Camp

Numbers 1–4

Numbers opens about a year after the exodus. Israel has been camped at the foot of Mount Sinai for months. They've received the Ten Commandments, built the tabernacle, and learned the laws of Leviticus. Now it's time to move. And the first thing God tells Moses to do is count. "Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of the names, every male, one by one."

Why count? Partly for the army. The census lists the men twenty years old and older who could fight, because Israel was about to march into hostile territory. But there's something more. The census goes tribe by tribe, family by family, name by name. Each tribe has a leader, and every leader is named. In Egypt, the Israelites were just labor, a mass of slaves. Here they're counted because they matter. They belong to God's people, and God knows who they are.

> **REAL TALK** **You Count**
>
> It's easy to feel like just a number: a student ID, a score on a test, a follower count, a stat on a team. Numbers starts with a census, but the point isn't that people are numbers. It's that God counts people because each one matters. Jesus said that even the hairs on your head are numbered (Matthew 10:30), and He told a story about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to look for

one that was lost. If you ever feel invisible, remember that the God who counted the tribes knows your name, and you count to Him.

The total is huge. "All those who were counted were six hundred three thousand five hundred fifty." If that's the number of fighting men, then the whole population, counting women, children, and older men, could have been two million or more. That's bigger than most cities in the United States today, walking through a desert.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Big Were the Numbers?**

Christians have two main ways of reading the numbers in Numbers. The traditional view takes them at face value: about 600,000 men and around two million people. That would mean God miraculously fed and watered a city-sized crowd for forty years, which fits a book full of miracles. Others point out that it's hard to fit that many people into the wilderness, or to imagine them outnumbering the nations of Canaan, which the Bible elsewhere describes as larger than Israel (Deuteronomy 7:7). These scholars note that the Hebrew word elef, normally translated thousand, can also mean a clan, a family group, or a military unit, as it does in Judges 6:15. On that reading, a tribe of 46 elef and 500 men might mean 46 units with 500 men in total, and Israel's army might have been closer to twenty thousand. Neither view questions that God rescued and led His people. Faithful Christians hold both views, and you can be one without calling the other unfaithful.

The Levites aren't counted with the army. They have a different job. "But the Levites shall encamp around the Tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel." They're the tabernacle crew. They take it down, carry it, and set it back up whenever Israel moves, and they guard it so nobody stumbles into God's holy presence by accident.

REAL TALK **Counted for a Purpose**

The census counted men who could go to war, and some readers notice that women and children weren't counted. That reflected the ancient military

purpose of this list, not God's view of their worth; Numbers itself goes on to tell the stories of Miriam and of the daughters of Zelophehad, and God's care for every family runs through the book. But the census also carried a sense of calling. Being counted meant being ready to serve. Today, every follower of Jesus, young or old, male or female, is counted in God's people and has a part to play. You don't have to wait until you're older to matter in God's plan.

Chapter 2 describes the layout of the camp, and it's beautiful when you picture it. "The children of Israel shall encamp every man by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses. They shall encamp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance from it." In the very center is the tabernacle, God's tent. Around it, in a close ring, are the Levites and priests. Then come the twelve tribes, three on each side: Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun on the east, facing the sunrise, where the entrance was; Reuben, Simeon, and Gad on the south; Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin on the west; and Dan, Asher, and Naphtali on the north. When they march, they keep the same order, with the tabernacle in the middle.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Banners and Standards**

Each tribe had its own banner, and each group of three tribes had a lead standard. The Bible doesn't describe what they looked like, but later Jewish tradition suggested that Judah's banner had a lion, Reuben's a human, Ephraim's an ox, and Dan's an eagle. Interestingly, those are the same four faces described on the living creatures around God's throne in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4. Whether or not the tradition is right, the picture of a camp gathered around God's presence on all four sides is a preview of heaven, where people from every nation gather around the throne.

Think about what this meant for an ordinary Israelite. Every morning, when you stepped out of your tent, you could look toward the middle of the camp and see the tabernacle, with the cloud of God's presence hanging over it. Wherever your tribe was camped,

north, south, east, or west, you were the same distance from God's dwelling as everyone else on your side. No tribe got to be first in every direction. Judah led the march, but the tribes behind them were just as close to the center. The camp was a living picture of what God wanted: a people gathered around Him, each with a place, each with a role, none forgotten.

The point of the camp was simple: God at the center. Everything else was organized around Him. "Thus the children of Israel did." For a moment, at least, everything was in order.

Chapter 3 explains why the Levites belong to God in a special way. Back in Egypt, God spared Israel's firstborn sons on the night of Passover, and He claimed every firstborn as His. Now He takes the Levites instead. "I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the firstborn." The tribe serves in place of the firstborn of every family. Chapter 4 gives the three Levite clans their jobs: the Kohathites carried the holy furniture, covered so they wouldn't see or touch it directly; the Gershonites carried the curtains and coverings; the Merarites carried the frames, posts, and bases.

> **REAL TALK** **Every Job Matters**
>
> The Kohathites got to carry the ark. The Merarites carried tent pegs. Guess which job sounds cooler? But the tabernacle couldn't stand without the pegs. Paul says the church is like a body, and the parts that seem weaker are actually essential (1 Corinthians 12:22). In your youth group, your family, or your team, you might not get the job that gets noticed. Maybe you stack chairs, run the slides, or text the new kid to see how they're doing. That's not a lesser job. That's holding the tent up.

REAL TALK **Is Your Life Centered?**

Look at the camp again: God's tent in the middle, everything else arranged around it. Now picture your life as a camp. What's in the center? Maybe it's your phone, your friends, a relationship, sports, grades, or what people think of you. None of those are bad, but they make terrible centers. When something other than God sits in the middle, everything else gets pulled out of shape. Numbers invites you to set up camp around Him, and let Him organize the rest.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Life in the Camp**

What was daily life like in a camp that size? Families lived in tents made of goat hair, like the black tents Bedouin people still use. Each morning, people gathered manna before the sun got hot. Women ground and baked it, and kids probably helped herd the flocks. Water was always a worry. Sanitation mattered too; Deuteronomy 23:12–14 told the Israelites to go outside the camp and bury their waste, which was remarkably good public health for the ancient world. When the trumpets sounded and the cloud lifted, everything had to be packed and loaded, tribe by tribe, in the order God had set. It was noisy, dusty, crowded, and exhausting, and yet God was right there in the middle of it all.

KEY VERSE

Thus the children of Israel did. According to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so they encamped by their standards, and so they set out, everyone by their families, according to their fathers' houses.

Numbers 2:34 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God had the census done name by name, family by family?
2. Which view of the big numbers in Numbers makes more sense to you, and why?
3. What would it look like to put God at the center of your life, like the tabernacle in the camp?
4. What's a behind-the-scenes job in your church or family that people don't notice enough?

TRY THIS *Draw a map of Israel's camp from Numbers 2, with the tabernacle in the center. Then draw a map of your own life, and put what's actually at the center. Compare them.*

CHAPTER 2

The Blessing and the Cloud

Numbers 5–10

Before Israel leaves Sinai, God gives some final instructions. Chapter 5 deals with keeping the camp clean, making restitution for wrongs, and a strange ritual for a husband who suspected his wife of unfaithfulness. That last one sounds harsh to modern readers, but in its setting it may actually have protected women. Instead of a jealous husband taking matters into his own hands, the case went to God, and a woman who was innocent would be cleared publicly.

Chapter 6 describes the Nazirite vow, a special promise an Israelite man or woman could make to be set apart for God for a period of time. A Nazirite didn't drink wine or eat anything from grapes, didn't cut their hair, and didn't go near a dead body. The most famous Nazirite was Samson, though he wasn't exactly a great example. Samuel and John the Baptist may have been Nazirites too. The point was that anyone, not just priests, could choose to give themselves wholly to God.

> REAL TALK **Set Apart by Choice**
>
> The Nazirite vow was voluntary. Nobody was forced to take it. People chose to say, for this season, I'm giving myself to God in a special way. Some Christians today do something similar: they fast from social media for a month, take a break from certain music, commit to purity, or set aside time to serve. The point isn't to earn God's love or to look holier than others. It's to

say yes to Him with your whole life. Is there something you might want to set aside for a season, to make more room for God?

Then comes one of the most beloved passages in the Bible. God tells Moses to give Aaron and his sons a blessing to speak over the people:

"The LORD bless you, and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine on you, and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up his face toward you, and give you peace." Then God adds, "So they shall put my name on the children of Israel; and I will bless them."

Look closely at those three lines. Each one gets a little longer in Hebrew, like a wave building. Each one starts with the LORD, God's personal name, three times. The blessing asks for protection: keep you. It asks for God's favor: His face shining on you, like a parent beaming at a child. And it asks for peace, the Hebrew word shalom, which means far more than the absence of trouble. It means wholeness, everything as it should be.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Oldest Bible Verses**

In 1979, archaeologists excavating ancient tombs at Ketef Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem, found two tiny silver scrolls, small enough to wear as amulets around the neck. When they were finally unrolled and read, they turned out to contain a version of the priestly blessing from Numbers 6. They date to around 600 BC, before the Babylonian exile, which makes them the oldest known copies of any text from the Bible. Someone more than 2,600 years ago wore God's blessing close to their heart.

The blessing ends with a remarkable line. By speaking it, the priests would put God's name on the people. In the ancient world, putting your name on something meant it belonged to you, the way you might write your name in a book or a jersey has a player's name on the back. God was saying, these people are Mine, and I'm not

ashamed to say so. The New Testament says something similar about believers: Jesus is not ashamed to call them His brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:11). If you belong to Him, His name is on you too. You're never nameless, and you're never unclaimed.

Chapters 7–8 describe the leaders of the tribes bringing gifts for the tabernacle, one tribe per day for twelve days, with every gift listed in detail, even though they're all identical. That might seem repetitive, but it makes a point: every tribe's gift mattered to God. Then the Levites are dedicated to their work. Chapter 9 describes Israel's second Passover, one year after the first, with an extra provision for anyone who couldn't celebrate on time because they were unclean or traveling. They got a second chance a month later.

Then comes the cloud. Over the tabernacle, God's presence appeared as a cloud by day and a fire by night. "Whenever the cloud was taken up from over the Tent, then after that the children of Israel traveled; and in the place where the cloud remained, there the children of Israel encamped." Sometimes it stayed two days, sometimes a month, sometimes a year. "At the commandment of the LORD they encamped, and at the commandment of the LORD they traveled."

> **REAL TALK** **Waiting**
>
> Imagine having your bags packed and not knowing whether you're leaving tomorrow or next year. That was life following the cloud. Waiting is hard, especially when you're waiting to hear back from a college, a coach, a job, or a friend, or waiting for something in your family to get better. The Israelites learned that waiting wasn't wasted time. God was still with them in the waiting; the cloud was right there over the camp. If you're in a waiting season, you're not forgotten. Keep doing the next faithful thing, and keep your eyes on Him.

REAL TALK **Blessed to Bless**

The priestly blessing wasn't something the people earned. It was spoken over them, every day, simply because they belonged to God. You might be used to hearing what you need to do better, from teachers, coaches, parents, maybe even yourself. But before God asks anything of you, He speaks a blessing over you. And blessing is meant to spread. You can bless other people with your words: thank a teacher, encourage a friend who's struggling, tell your parents something you appreciate about them, pray for someone by name. The world is full of people who rarely hear anything good said about them. Be the one who says it.

Chapter 10 adds silver trumpets to signal the camp to gather or march, and then, finally, Israel sets out from Sinai. Moses invites his brother-in-law Hobab, a Midianite who knew the desert, to come along and be their guide. And every time the ark moved forward, Moses prayed, "Rise up, LORD, and let your enemies be scattered!"

KEY VERSE

The LORD bless you, and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine on you, and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up his face toward you, and give you peace.

Numbers 6:24–26 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which line of the priestly blessing means the most to you right now, and why?
2. What would it mean for God's face to shine on you?
3. Why do you think God made Israel follow the cloud instead of giving them a map?
4. What are you waiting for right now, and how can you trust God in the waiting?

TRY THIS *Memorize the priestly blessing. Then pray it over three people this week, by name, and tell at least one of them you did.*

CHAPTER 3

Complaints and Quail

Numbers 11–12

Israel has been on the road for three days, and the complaining has already started. "The people were complaining in the ears of the LORD." God's fire burns at the edges of the camp until Moses prays and it dies down. They name the place Taberah, which means burning.

Then it gets worse. Some of the foreigners traveling with them start craving other food, and soon everyone is crying. "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish, which we ate in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic; but now we have lost our appetite. There is nothing at all except this manna to look at."

Notice what's happening. They remember the food in Egypt but not the whips. They describe it as free, but it cost them their freedom. And they're bored with manna, the miracle bread God sent from heaven every single morning. It's like complaining that your free lunch from a billionaire is the same every day.

> REAL TALK **The Good Old Days**
>
> Nostalgia can play tricks on you. When things get hard, it's easy to remember the past as better than it really was: your old school, your old friends, an old relationship, even old habits you've left behind. The Israelites wanted to go back to slavery because they missed the cucumbers. Sometimes the pull to

> go back to something unhealthy is strongest right after you've left it. If you've walked away from something that was hurting you, a toxic friendship, a bad habit, a dangerous situation, expect some cravings. That doesn't mean you made the wrong choice. It means you're in the wilderness. Keep going, and talk to someone you trust when it's hard.

Moses hits a wall. He pours out his frustration to God, and it's raw. "Why have you treated your servant so badly?" He asks whether he gave birth to these people, that he should carry them like a baby. "I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me." He even asks God to take his life if things are going to continue like this.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **When It's Too Much**
>
> Moses was one of the greatest leaders in history, and he still got to the point where he wanted to die. If you're ever feeling crushed, like you're carrying more than you can handle, you're not weak and you're not alone. Notice that God didn't scold Moses for being honest. He gave him help. You need help too, and asking for it is a sign of strength. Talk to a parent, a school counselor, a pastor, or another trusted adult. If you ever think about ending your life, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. In an emergency, call 911.

God answers Moses in two ways. First, He shares the load. He takes some of the Spirit that was on Moses and puts it on seventy elders, so they can help lead. Two of them, Eldad and Medad, stayed in the camp instead of coming to the tent, but the Spirit came on them anyway, and they began to prophesy. Joshua, Moses' young assistant, wants Moses to stop them. Moses' reply is wonderful: "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" Centuries later, at Pentecost, that wish came true (Acts 2:17–18).

Second, God gives them meat, and more than they bargained for. Moses wonders how God could possibly feed so many, and God answers, "Has the LORD's hand grown short?" Then "a wind from the LORD went out and brought quails from the sea." The quail pile up around the camp, and the people gather them for two days straight. But the story ends badly. "While the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the LORD's anger burned against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very great plague." They name the place Kibroth Hattaavah, the graves of craving.

> **REAL TALK** **Getting What You Want**
>
> The quail story is a warning: sometimes the worst thing that can happen is getting exactly what you're demanding. The problem wasn't that the Israelites wanted meat. It was that they rejected God and His gift, wishing they'd never left Egypt. Psalm 106:15 puts it sharply: God gave them what they asked for but sent a wasting disease among them. Ever wanted something so badly that you were angry at God for not giving it to you? A relationship, an opportunity, a thing? Sometimes His no is protection. It's okay to ask God for what you want. It's not okay to treat Him like a vending machine, or to decide He's not good when He doesn't deliver.

Paul later points back to these wilderness stories and says they were written as warnings for us. "Don't grumble, as some of them also grumbled, and perished by the destroyer." He isn't saying it's wrong to be honest with God about how you feel; Moses was, and the psalms are full of honest complaints. Lament brings your pain to God. Grumbling turns your back on Him, deciding He isn't good and you'd be better off without Him. The difference isn't how strong your feelings are. It's which direction you're facing.

In chapter 12, the conflict hits Moses' own family. His older sister Miriam and his brother Aaron start criticizing him. Their complaint starts with his wife, a Cushite woman, probably from Ethiopia or

Sudan, but the real issue comes out next: has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn't He spoken through us too? It's jealousy, dressed up as concern.

The text adds an important note right here. "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all the men who were on the surface of the earth." Moses doesn't defend himself. God does. He calls all three to the tent and says that He speaks to prophets in visions and dreams, "My servant Moses is not so. He is faithful in all my house." God speaks to Moses face to face. When the cloud lifts, Miriam's skin has become diseased, white like snow.

Aaron begs Moses for help, and Moses, the one who was attacked, prays for his sister. "Heal her, God, I beg you!" God heals her, but she has to stay outside the camp for seven days. And here's a touching detail: the whole nation waits. They don't move on until Miriam is brought back in.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Moses' Cushite Wife**
>
> Cush was the region south of Egypt, roughly modern Sudan and southern Egypt. Scholars debate whether this wife was Zipporah, the Midianite woman Moses married in Exodus 2, or a second wife. Either way, Miriam and Aaron seem to have used her foreign background against Moses. Some readers note the irony: Miriam complains about a dark-skinned woman, and she's struck with skin that's white as snow. Whatever the details, God sides with Moses, and the story offers no support for prejudice against people of other ethnicities. If anything, it rebukes it.

KEY VERSE

The LORD said to Moses, "Has the LORD's hand grown short? Now you will see whether my word will happen to you or not."

Numbers 11:23 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you tend to complain about? What would it look like to replace complaining with gratitude?
2. Why do you think the Israelites remembered Egypt as better than it was?
3. Moses told God honestly that he couldn't handle it anymore. How honest are you with God about how you feel?
4. How did Moses respond when his family criticized him? What can you learn from that?

TRY THIS *Go one full day without complaining. Every time you catch yourself starting to, stop and name one thing you're thankful for instead. Write down how it went.*

CHAPTER 4

Grasshoppers and Giants

Numbers 13–14

Israel has reached the southern edge of Canaan, near a place called Kadesh. The promised land is right there. God tells Moses to send twelve men, one leader from each tribe, to scout it out. Two of them will become famous: Caleb from the tribe of Judah, and Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim.

For forty days the spies travel through the land, from the southern desert all the way to the far north. At a valley near Hebron, they cut a single cluster of grapes so huge that two men have to carry it on a pole between them. They come back loaded with grapes, pomegranates, and figs, and give their report. “We came to the land where you sent us. Surely it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.”

Then comes the word that changes everything: however. “However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. Moreover, we saw the children of Anak there.” The descendants of Anak were known as giants. The spies get more and more dramatic. “There we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim. We were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Giants?**

The Anakites seem to have been a clan of unusually tall people living around Hebron. Goliath, centuries later, came from the same area of Philistine cities where survivors of the Anakites settled (Joshua 11:22). Ancient Egyptian letters from around this period also describe tall, fierce warriors in Canaan. The mention of the Nephilim is interesting, since the Nephilim in Genesis 6 lived before the flood. Some scholars think the spies were exaggerating, using the scariest word they knew, the way someone today might call a big opponent a monster. Either way, notice who's telling the story: the frightened spies. They said they looked like grasshoppers. That was their own view of themselves.

Caleb tries to calm everyone down. "Let's go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it!" But the other ten won't have it. "We aren't able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we." And their fear spreads through the camp like wildfire.

That night, the whole community weeps. By morning they're furious. "We wish that we had died in the land of Egypt, or that we had died in this wilderness!" They accuse God of bringing them there to die, and they say their children will be taken as plunder. Then they say to one another, "Let's choose a leader, and let's return into Egypt."

REAL TALK **Ten Against Two**

Ten spies said no. Two said yes. The crowd went with the ten. That's how peer pressure works. When most people around you are saying something is impossible, or that something wrong is no big deal, it's incredibly hard to be the one who disagrees. Caleb and Joshua saw the same giants as everyone else. The difference was that they also saw God. Standing with them cost them: the crowd literally talked about stoning them. If you're the only one in your friend group who won't go along with something, whether it's cheating, vaping, drinking, mocking someone, or sharing something you shouldn't,

you're in good company. And if the pressure ever puts you in danger, get out and call a parent or trusted adult. A real friend will understand.

Joshua and Caleb tear their clothes in grief and plead with the people. "If the LORD delights in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it to us: a land which flows with milk and honey. Only don't rebel against the LORD, neither fear the people of the land; for they are bread for us." In other words, the giants are lunch. "The LORD is with us. Don't fear them." The crowd responds by picking up stones.

Then God's glory appears at the tent. God tells Moses He will destroy the people and start over with Moses, making a nation from him instead. It's a test, and Moses passes. He prays for the people who have just rejected him. He reminds God of His reputation among the nations, and then he quotes back to God the description God gave of Himself on Mount Sinai: "The LORD is slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness, forgiving iniquity and disobedience."

God forgives them, as Moses asked. But forgiveness doesn't erase consequences. This generation, who saw the plagues of Egypt and the miracles in the wilderness and still refused to trust Him, will not enter the land. They will wander for forty years, a year for every day the spies explored, until that whole generation has died in the wilderness. Their children, the very ones they said would be taken as plunder, will be the ones who go in. And there's a special word for one man. "But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and has followed me fully, him I will bring into the land."

REAL TALK **Afraid of Failing**

The Israelites were so afraid of failing that they refused to try. Fear of failure can do that to you too. Maybe you don't try out for the team, don't apply,

don't raise your hand, don't share your faith, don't ask that person to hang out, because you're afraid it won't go well. Fear says: you're a grasshopper. But your worth isn't measured by whether you succeed. And sometimes the bigger failure is never trying. If anxiety about failing is making it hard to sleep, eat, or get through the day, that's worth talking to a parent, counselor, or doctor about. Anxiety is common and treatable, and getting help is a smart move, not a weak one.

Hebrews looks back on this moment and gives the verdict in one sentence: "We see that they weren't able to enter in because of unbelief." It wasn't the giants that kept them out. It wasn't the walls or the weapons. It was that they didn't trust God. The same God who split the sea and sent bread from heaven had promised them the land. The question was never whether the Canaanites were strong. It was whether God was faithful. And because they decided He wasn't, they spent forty years wandering in circles in sight of the place they could have called home.

The story has one more painful twist. When the people hear the verdict, they change their minds. Now they want to go up and fight. Moses warns them that God isn't with them in this, but they go anyway, and they're beaten badly. It's a sad pattern: refusing when God says go, and going when God says stop. Faith isn't just being brave. It's trusting God's timing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caleb at Eighty-Five**

Caleb's story doesn't end in Numbers. Forty-five years later, after the wilderness wandering and the conquest of much of Canaan, Caleb comes to Joshua and says he's eighty-five years old and still as strong as the day the spies went out. He asks for the very hill country around Hebron where the giants lived, the place that terrified the other spies. And he takes it (Joshua 14:6–15). The man who followed God fully as a young man was still following Him fully as an old man. That's the kind of faith worth building now.

KEY VERSE

If the LORD delights in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it to us: a land which flows with milk and honey.

Numbers 14:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The spies all saw the same land. Why do you think they came back with such different reports?
2. When have you felt like a grasshopper? What made you feel that way?
3. Have you ever been the only one in a group to say no? What happened?
4. What would it look like for you to follow God fully, like Caleb?

TRY THIS *Write down one thing you've been too afraid to try. Write down what you're afraid will happen, and then what God says about you. Then take one small step toward it this week.*

CHAPTER 5

Korah's Rebellion

Numbers 15–19

After the disaster at Kadesh, you might expect God to go quiet. Instead, chapter 15 opens with instructions for offerings to bring when you come into the land. It's a quiet promise. Even after the failure, God is still talking about when, not if. The chapter also gives Israel tassels to wear on the corners of their clothes. "It shall be to you for a fringe, that you may see it, and remember all the LORD's commandments, and do them; and that you don't follow your own heart and your own eyes." Observant Jewish men still wear these fringes, called tzitzit, today.

Then comes the biggest rebellion in the book. Korah, a Levite from the Kohathite clan, along with Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuben, and 250 well-known leaders, confront Moses and Aaron. "You take too much on yourself, since all the congregation are holy, everyone of them, and the LORD is among them! Why do you lift yourselves up above the LORD's assembly?"

It sounds almost reasonable. Aren't all God's people holy? Isn't Moses acting like a dictator? But Moses sees what's really going on. He reminds Korah of the incredible privilege he already has. "Is it a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself?" Korah wasn't fighting for everyone's equality. He wanted the priesthood for

himself. And Dathan and Abiram refuse even to come talk. They call Egypt the land flowing with milk and honey, and accuse Moses of dragging them into the desert to die.

REAL TALK **Jealousy and Power**

Korah's problem wasn't that he had no role. He had one of the most important jobs in Israel. His problem was that he wanted someone else's. Jealousy works like that. It takes something good God has given you and makes it feel like nothing, because someone else has something you think is better. Social media makes it worse, because you're constantly seeing the highlight reels of other people's lives. If you notice yourself resenting someone's position, popularity, or success, ask: what has God already given me? And how can I use it well?

Moses proposes a test. Korah and his 250 followers will bring censers with fire and incense before the LORD the next day, and God will show whom He has chosen. When the moment comes, God tells everyone to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Moses says that if these men die a normal death, then God hasn't sent him. But if the ground opens up, everyone will know. As soon as he finishes speaking, "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all of Korah's men, and all their goods." Fire comes out from the LORD and consumes the 250 men offering incense.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Korah's Children**

Here's something easy to miss. Numbers 26:11 says that the sons of Korah did not die. Korah's family line survived, and generations later, his descendants became worship leaders in the temple. Eleven psalms are titled for the sons of Korah, including Psalm 42, As the deer pants for the water brooks, and Psalm 46, God is our refuge and strength. The family of a rebel became a family of worshipers. Your family's story doesn't have to be your story. God can write something new.

You'd think that would settle things. But the very next day, the whole community grumbles against Moses and Aaron, accusing them of killing the LORD's people. A plague breaks out. Moses tells Aaron to grab his censer, fill it with fire from the altar, and run into the middle of the crowd to make atonement. And Aaron, the old high priest, runs. "He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed." It's one of the most powerful pictures in the Bible of what a priest does, and Christians see in it a picture of Jesus, who stands between us and death.

To end the arguments for good, God tells each tribe to bring a staff, with its leader's name written on it. They're left overnight in the tabernacle. "On the next day, Moses went into the Tent of the Testimony; and behold, Aaron's rod for the house of Levi had sprouted, budded, produced blossoms, and bore ripe almonds." A dead stick came to life overnight. Aaron's staff was kept in front of the ark as a reminder.

> **REAL TALK** **Criticizing Leaders**
>
> Is it ever okay to challenge a leader? Absolutely. The Bible is full of prophets who confronted kings, and Paul publicly corrected Peter (Galatians 2:11). If a leader, including a pastor, coach, teacher, or youth leader, is abusing their power or hurting people, it's right to speak up and to tell another trusted adult. Korah's problem wasn't that he asked questions. It was that he was grabbing for power and rejecting the leaders God had chosen. Healthy challenge says, this is wrong and needs to be fixed. Rebellion says, I should be in charge. Know the difference.

Jude, one of Jesus' brothers, later mentions Korah in a warning about people who cause division in the church, saying they "perished in Korah's rebellion." It's a reminder that the danger Korah represents isn't just ancient history. Wherever people are more interested in their own status than in serving God and others,

the same rebellion can grow. Churches, youth groups, and friend groups can be torn apart by someone who wants control. The cure is the opposite of Korah: humility like Moses', who fell on his face before God instead of defending himself, and courage like Aaron's, who ran into the plague to save the very people who had grumbled against him.

Chapters 18–19 return to the priests and Levites. They receive no land, because God Himself is their share. "I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel." Chapter 19 describes the ashes of a red heifer, mixed with water, used to cleanse people who had touched a dead body. After so much death in the camp, God provides a way back to cleanness.

KEY VERSE

He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed.

Numbers 16:48 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Korah wasn't satisfied with the job God had given him?
2. When is it right to challenge a leader, and when is it rebellion?
3. What does it mean to you that the sons of Korah became worship leaders?
4. How is Jesus like Aaron standing between the dead and the living?

TRY THIS *Read Psalm 42 or Psalm 46, written by the sons of Korah. Write down one line that speaks to you, and put it somewhere you'll see it this week.*

CHAPTER 6

The Rock and the Snake

Numbers 20–21

Chapter 20 jumps ahead almost forty years. Most of the wilderness generation has died. The chapter begins with a funeral: Miriam dies and is buried at Kadesh. Then, once again, there's no water, and once again, the people turn on Moses and Aaron. They wish they had died with their brothers. Why did you bring us to this terrible place? There's no grain, no figs, no grapes, no pomegranates, and no water to drink.

Moses and Aaron go to the tent and fall on their faces, and God's glory appears. God gives clear instructions. "Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it pour out its water."

Speak to the rock. That's the command. But Moses has had it. He gathers the people and snaps, "Hear now, you rebels! Shall we bring water out of this rock for you?" Then "Moses lifted up his hand, and struck the rock with his rod twice, and water came out abundantly." The people drink. God still provides. But then He says something devastating to Moses and Aaron. "Because you didn't believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Was Striking the Rock So Bad?**

It can seem unfair. Moses led Israel for forty years, and he's banned from the promised land for hitting a rock instead of talking to it? Interpreters have suggested several reasons. Moses disobeyed a direct command. He lost his temper and called God's people rebels. He said, Shall we bring water, as though he and Aaron were the ones doing the miracle. And he failed to show the people God's holiness at a moment when everyone was watching. Leaders are held to a higher standard because their example shapes so many others (James 3:1). Paul later sees something deeper in the rock: "the rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Some Christians think that since the rock had already been struck once, back in Exodus 17, striking it again spoiled a picture of Christ, who was struck once for all.

REAL TALK **One Bad Moment**

Moses blew it in one angry moment, and it cost him. Maybe you've had a moment like that: words you can't take back, a post you shouldn't have made, a choice that had real consequences. It's okay to grieve that. But notice how the story ends. Moses keeps leading. God keeps talking with him. And centuries later, in the Gospels, Moses appears on a mountain in the promised land, talking with Jesus at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:3). One failure didn't define his life, and God still brought him into the land in the end. If you're stuck replaying a mistake, talk to God about it, make things right where you can, and talk to a trusted adult if the guilt or anxiety is overwhelming. Your worst moment is not your whole story.

Moses and Aaron's failure also shows how anger can sneak up on even the most faithful people. Moses had been patient with this people for decades. He had prayed for them, pleaded for them, and carried them. But on this day, worn out and grieving his sister, he snapped. If you're exhausted, stressed, or grieving, you're more likely to lose your temper too. That doesn't excuse it, but it does mean you need to take care of yourself: rest, eat, talk to someone, and ask God for help before you reach your breaking point.

The chapter continues with more hard news. The king of Edom, descended from Jacob's brother Esau, refuses to let Israel pass through his land, even after Moses promises they won't drink a drop of his water without paying for it. Israel has to go the long way around. Then Aaron dies on Mount Hor. Before he dies, Moses takes Aaron's priestly robes and puts them on his son Eleazar. The whole community mourns Aaron for thirty days.

In chapter 21, after their first military victory, the people get impatient on the long detour around Edom, and they complain again. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, there is no water, and our soul loathes this disgusting food!" That disgusting food is manna, the bread from heaven. God sends venomous snakes among the people, and many die.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Snakes in the Wilderness**
>
> The deserts of the Sinai and the Arabah, the valley south of the Dead Sea where this probably happened, are home to several dangerous snakes, including the carpet viper and the horned viper. Their bites can be deadly. The Hebrew word for these snakes is seraphim, which means burning ones, maybe because their bite burned. It's the same word used for the fiery angels around God's throne in Isaiah 6. Interestingly, archaeologists excavating an ancient copper mining site at Timna, in the Arabah, found a small copper snake in a shrine there.

This time, the people actually admit they were wrong. They come to Moses and say, We sinned. Pray for us. Moses prays, and God gives a surprising answer. "Make a venomous snake, and set it on a pole. It shall happen that everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So "Moses made a serpent of bronze, and set it on the pole. If a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked at the serpent of bronze, he lived."

Notice also what God didn't do. He didn't remove all the snakes from the camp. The danger was still there, and people were still being bitten. Instead, He provided a remedy for anyone who would use it. That's a lot like life. Following God doesn't mean you'll never face danger, temptation, or pain. The snakes in the camp were real. But God's answer was real too, and it was available to anyone, no matter how badly bitten, no matter how many times they'd complained before. Nobody was too far gone to look.

Think about how strange that is. The cure wasn't medicine. It wasn't a ritual or a sacrifice. It was just looking, trusting God enough to turn your eyes to the thing He provided. And it was a picture of the very thing that was killing them.

Fifteen hundred years later, Jesus used this exact story to explain His mission. Speaking at night to Nicodemus, a respected teacher, He said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Then comes the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16. Like the bronze snake, Jesus would be lifted up on a pole, the cross. Like the snake, He would take the form of the very thing that was killing us; Paul says God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us. And like the Israelites, all we have to do is look to Him and trust.

BACKGROUND CHECK **When Good Things Become Idols**

The bronze serpent has a sad later chapter. Israel kept it for more than seven hundred years, and eventually people started burning incense to it and worshiping it, even giving it a name, Nehushtan. Good King Hezekiah finally smashed it to pieces (2 Kings 18:4). Something God had used to heal His people had become an idol. That can happen to good things in our lives too: a church tradition, a worship experience, a spiritual leader, even a Bible verse

can become something we trust instead of God. The snake was never the point. The God who healed through it was.

REAL TALK **Losing People**

In just one chapter, Moses loses his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron. They'd been through everything together: Egypt, the plagues, the sea, the wilderness. If you've lost someone close to you, a grandparent, a parent, a sibling, or a friend, you know how heavy that can be. Israel took thirty days to mourn Aaron. Grief takes time, and there's no right way to do it. It can help to talk with someone you trust, write about the person you lost, or keep something that reminds you of them. If the sadness feels like too much or you ever think about hurting yourself, call or text 988 any time. God is close to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18).

The chapter ends with Israel's victories over two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, east of the Jordan. After forty years of wandering, the new generation is finally winning battles and gaining ground.

KEY VERSE

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a venomous snake, and set it on a pole. It shall happen that everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."

Numbers 21:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God was so serious about Moses striking the rock?
2. Is there a mistake you keep replaying? What would it take to let God have the last word on it?
3. Why do you think God's cure for the snakebites was simply to look?
4. How does the bronze serpent help you understand John 3:14–16?

TRY THIS *Read John 3:1–21. Rewrite verses 14–16 in your own words, as if you were explaining them to a friend who has never heard of Numbers.*

CHAPTER 7

Balaam and His Donkey

Numbers 22–24

Israel is camped on the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan River from Jericho, and the king of Moab is terrified. His name is Balak, and he's watched Israel defeat two Amorite kings. He knows he can't beat them in battle. So he tries something else: a curse.

Balak sends messengers, with a fat fee, to a famous diviner named Balaam, who lived far to the north, near the Euphrates River. "Please come now therefore, and curse this people for me; for they are too mighty for me." Balak believes Balaam's words have power. "I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Balaam Outside the Bible**
>
> Balaam isn't just a character in Numbers. In 1967, archaeologists working at Deir Alla in Jordan, not far from the plains of Moab, found an inscription written in ink on a plastered wall, from around 800 BC. It begins by calling itself the account of Balaam son of Beor, a seer of the gods, and describes a vision of disaster he received at night. It's one of the few times a person from the Bible appears in an ancient text from outside Israel. Clearly, Balaam was famous across the region, and his reputation lasted for centuries.

That night, God speaks to Balaam. "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." So Balaam sends the messengers home. Balak sends more important officials with a

bigger offer. Balaam says all the right things: "If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I can't go beyond the word of the LORD my God." But he also invites them to stay the night while he asks God again. That's a red flag. God has already answered. Balaam is hoping for a different answer, because he wants the money. This time God lets him go, but only to speak what God tells him.

Then comes one of the funniest scenes in the Bible. Balaam saddles his donkey and sets off with the Moabite officials. God is angry, and the angel of the LORD stands in the road with a drawn sword. Balaam doesn't see a thing. But the donkey does. She swerves off the road into a field, and Balaam beats her to get her back on the path.

The angel moves to a narrow path between two vineyard walls. The donkey sees him again and presses against the wall, crushing Balaam's foot. Balaam beats her again. Then the angel stands in a spot so narrow there's no way around, and the donkey simply lies down under Balaam. He's furious, and beats her with his staff.

Then "the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?'" And here's the best part: Balaam argues back, as if a talking donkey is a perfectly normal thing. "Because you have mocked me, I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would have killed you." The great seer, famous for seeing what others can't, is being outseen by his donkey, and he's threatening to kill her with a sword he doesn't have while an angel with an actual sword stands right in front of him.

The donkey's reply is wonderfully calm. "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long until today? Was I ever in

the habit of doing so to you?" And Balaam, defeated in a debate with his donkey, mutters, "No."

REAL TALK **Seeing What Others Don't**

The donkey saw the danger. Balaam, the professional prophet, didn't, because he was blinded by what he wanted. Money, popularity, or a relationship can do that to you. You get so focused on getting what you want that you miss what's obvious to everyone else. Sometimes God sends a donkey: a friend, a parent, a coach, even a little sister who says, are you sure about this? It's annoying. It might even be humiliating. But it might also save your life. Who are the people in your life who see things you don't? Do you listen to them, or do you get angry?

"Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the LORD's angel standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed his head, and fell on his face." The angel tells him that if the donkey hadn't turned aside, he'd have killed Balaam and spared her. Peter later summed it up: "A speechless donkey spoke with a man's voice and stopped the madness of the prophet."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Did the Donkey Really Talk?**

Some readers take the talking donkey literally: God, who made donkeys and mouths, can certainly give one words for a moment. Others see the story as told with deliberate humor and irony, maybe even shaped like a fable, to make a serious point about a seer who couldn't see. Both groups agree on the point. And it's worth noticing that the New Testament treats the event as real (2 Peter 2:16). Whatever your view, the joke is on Balaam, and on anyone who thinks they can outsmart God.

Balaam arrives, and Balak takes him up to a high place where he can see the Israelite camp. Seven altars, seven bulls, seven rams. Balak waits for the curse. Instead, Balaam blesses Israel. "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? How shall I defy whom the LORD has not defied?"

Balaam's confession is ironic, given what we've just seen. He says he can only speak what God puts in his mouth. "I will speak the word that God puts in my mouth." That's exactly what his donkey had just done. God used a donkey to speak to a prophet, and now He uses a greedy prophet to speak blessing over His people. If God can speak through a donkey and through Balaam, He can speak through anyone, including you, on your worst day. It's not about how impressive the messenger is. It's about the God who gives the message.

Balak is horrified. He tries a different mountain, and then another one, as if a better view might change God's mind. Each time, Balaam blesses Israel more. In the second oracle, he declares one of the great truths of the Bible: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and he won't do it? Or has he spoken, and he won't make it good?" In the third, he looks out over the tribes camped in order around the tabernacle and says, "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, and your dwellings, Israel!" Jewish worshipers still say those words, Mah tovu, when entering a synagogue.

By now Balak is clapping his hands in fury and telling Balaam to go home with no payment. But Balaam has one more oracle, and it reaches far into the future. "I see him, but not now. I see him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel." Jewish readers came to see this as a prophecy of a coming king, the Messiah, and many Christians connect it with the star the wise men followed when Jesus was born (Matthew 2:2).

> **REAL TALK** **You Can't Be Cursed**
>
> Some people worry about curses, bad luck, or what other people say about them. Maybe someone has said something cruel about you that you can't

shake, or you've been told you'll never amount to anything. The Balaam story says something powerful: nobody can curse those whom God has blessed. People's words can hurt, and it's okay to talk about that with someone you trust. But they don't get the final say over your life. God does. And in Christ, He's already spoken a blessing over you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Balaam's Bad Ending**

After all those blessings, you might expect Balaam to become a hero. He doesn't. Numbers 31 reveals that he advised the Moabites and Midianites to lead Israel into idolatry, and he dies fighting against Israel. The New Testament remembers him as a warning. Peter says he loved the wages of wrongdoing (2 Peter 2:15), and Jesus, in Revelation, warns a church about people who hold the teaching of Balaam. Balaam is a sobering example: someone who said the right words about God, even beautiful ones, but whose heart was set on money. Saying the right things isn't the same as following God.

KEY VERSE

God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and he won't do it? Or has he spoken, and he won't make it good?

Numbers 23:19 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Balaam asked God a second time after God had already said no?
2. What can make people blind to things that are obvious to others?
3. Who in your life is like Balaam's donkey, someone who sees danger you might miss?
4. What does it mean to you that God's blessing can't be reversed?

TRY THIS *Look up Numbers 23:19 and Hebrews 6:18. Make a list of three promises God has made in the Bible that you need to remember this week, and write 23:19 at the top.*

CHAPTER 8

Zeal and a New Generation

Numbers 25–30

Balaam couldn't curse Israel. But he found another way to hurt them. Numbers 31:16 says it was through his advice that what happens next took place. Balaam seems to have realized that if he couldn't turn God against Israel, he could tempt Israel to turn against God.

Israel is camped at Shittim, and Israelite men begin sleeping with Moabite women, who invite them to the sacrifices of their gods. "The people ate and bowed down to their gods. Israel joined himself to Baal Peor, and the LORD's anger burned against Israel." It's a total betrayal, sexual and spiritual, right on the edge of the promised land. A plague breaks out in the camp.

Then, while the leaders and people are weeping at the entrance of the tabernacle, an Israelite man brazenly brings a Midianite woman past them, right into his tent. Phinehas, Aaron's grandson, a priest, takes a spear, follows them, and kills them both. The plague stops. By then 24,000 have died. God says Phinehas "has turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them," and He gives him a covenant of peace.

REAL TALK **Is Phinehas a Role Model for Violence?**

No. This is one of the hardest stories in Numbers, and it needs to be read carefully. Phinehas was a priest acting in a unique moment in Israel's history, when God Himself was judging the nation for open rebellion, and the Bible treats it as a one-time act tied to that judgment. Sadly, throughout history some people have used this story to justify violence in God's name, attacking people they considered sinful. That's a terrible misreading. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword (Matthew 26:52), and the New Testament never calls Christians to use violence to punish sin. Paul says the weapons of our warfare aren't the weapons of the world (2 Corinthians 10:4). What Christians can learn from Phinehas is that sin is serious and that God's honor matters. The way we show that zeal today is in our own repentance, in prayer, in protecting the vulnerable, and in love, never in hurting people. If anyone ever uses religion to justify violence or threats, against you or anyone else, tell a trusted adult or call 911.

REAL TALK **The Pull of the Crowd**

The sin at Baal Peor started with an invitation to a party. Then came the food, then the worship, then everything else. Temptation rarely shows up looking dangerous. It usually shows up looking fun, with people who seem friendly and a crowd that's already doing it. That's why who you spend time with matters so much. It's not about avoiding everyone who doesn't share your faith; Jesus spent time with all kinds of people. It's about knowing where your boundaries are before you get to the party. Paul says, "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able, but will with the temptation also make the way of escape." Sometimes the way of escape is just calling your mom to pick you up.

It's also worth noticing what God did after the judgment at Baal Peor. He didn't abandon His people. He made a covenant of peace, and in the very next chapter He began preparing the new generation to enter the land. Sin was serious, and it had real consequences. But God's plan to bless His people, the plan Balaam

couldn't curse, didn't fail because of their failure. That's a pattern throughout the Bible, and it's good news for anyone who's blown it badly. God's discipline is real, but His promises are stronger.

In chapter 26, God tells Moses and Eleazar to take a second census. Thirty-eight years have passed since the first one. The total is about the same, slightly smaller. But the names are all different. "There was not a man left of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun." A whole generation has passed away. Their children are ready. The book of Numbers has turned a corner, from death to new life.

Then come five remarkable young women. Their names are recorded carefully: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, the daughters of Zelophehad. Their father had died in the wilderness with no sons, and under the inheritance system, land passed through sons. That meant their family's share of the promised land would vanish.

So they do something gutsy. They walk up to the entrance of the tabernacle and stand in front of Moses, Eleazar the priest, the tribal leaders, and the whole assembly, and they make their case. "Why should the name of our father be taken away from among his family, because he had no son? Give to us a possession among the brothers of our father."

Moses doesn't know the answer, so he brings their case to God. And God's answer is clear. "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right. You shall surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers." God not only grants their request; He makes it a law for all Israel. If a man dies with no son, his inheritance goes to his daughters.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Women and Inheritance**

In the ancient Near East, women generally didn't inherit land, though there were some exceptions in places like Mesopotamia. The daughters of Zelophehad stand out because they spoke up in public, before the most powerful leaders in Israel, and God sided with them. Their story is told again in Numbers 36 and Joshua 17, where they receive their land. Jewish tradition praised them as wise, knowledgeable, and righteous. Their courage changed the law for everyone after them. If you see something unfair, you can speak up respectfully, through the right channels, even if you're young and even if nobody else has.

REAL TALK **Speaking Up**

The daughters of Zelophehad didn't riot, and they didn't stay silent. They showed up, stated their case respectfully, and trusted that God cared about justice. That's a model for you. If you see something unfair at school, at church, or in your community, you don't have to wait until you're an adult to say something. Talk to a teacher, write a letter, bring it to student government, or ask your parents to help you find the right person to talk to. Do your homework, be respectful, and be brave. Sometimes young people see what's unfair more clearly than anyone else.

Notice who these young women were. Their father had died in the wilderness, part of the generation that didn't trust God. They had every reason to be bitter, or to give up on the promised land altogether. Instead, they believed the promise so strongly that they fought for their share of a land they hadn't even entered yet. They were planning for a future they couldn't see. That's faith. The new generation in Numbers isn't just counted. It's characterized by people like these five sisters, who take God at His word.

Moses then asks God to appoint a leader to take his place, "that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep which have no shepherd." God chooses Joshua, "a man in whom is the Spirit."

Moses lays his hands on Joshua in front of the priest and the people, giving him some of his authority. Chapters 28–30 then list the offerings for each day, week, month, and festival, and give rules about vows.

KEY VERSE

The daughters of Zelophehad speak right. You shall surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers. You shall cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them.

Numbers 27:7 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Balaam's advice to tempt Israel was more dangerous than his curses?
2. How should Christians show zeal for God today, without hurting anyone?
3. What do you admire about the daughters of Zelophehad?
4. Is there something unfair in your world that you could respectfully speak up about?

TRY THIS *Pick one injustice you care about. Find out who has the power to change it, and write them a respectful letter or email stating your case, like the daughters of Zelophehad.*

CHAPTER 9

On the Edge of the Promise

Numbers 31–36

The last chapters of Numbers take place on the plains of Moab, with the promised land in view across the Jordan. Chapter 31 describes a war against the Midianites, who had led Israel into sin at Baal Peor. Balaam is killed in the battle. The chapter includes a harsh command to kill many of the Midianite captives, which is difficult to read.

> **REAL TALK** **The Midianite War**
>
> Numbers 31 is one of the hardest chapters in the Bible, and it's okay to say so. Christians have wrestled with passages like this for centuries. Several things are worth knowing. This was a one-time judgment connected with the events of chapter 25, not a general command for all time. Many scholars note that ancient war accounts often used sweeping, exaggerated language, and Midianites appear again as a powerful people later in Judges 6, so the chapter may not describe total destruction. Above all, Christians read every war passage in the Old Testament through Jesus, who taught His followers to love their enemies and not to take up the sword. No one can use these chapters to justify violence today. If this passage troubles you, that's a sign your conscience is working. Talk about it with a pastor, youth leader, or parent, and don't be afraid to bring your questions to God.

In chapter 32, the tribes of Reuben and Gad, who had huge herds of livestock, notice that the land east of the Jordan is great for grazing.

They ask Moses if they can stay there instead of crossing over. "Don't bring us over the Jordan." Moses explodes. "Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here?" He reminds them of the spies at Kadesh, whose fear discouraged the whole nation and cost them forty years.

The Reubenites and Gadites come back with a better offer. They'll build pens for their flocks and towns for their families, but their fighting men will cross the Jordan and lead the charge until the other tribes have their land too. Moses agrees, but he gives them a warning that has become famous. "But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out." They keep their word; in Joshua 22, they return home after fighting alongside their brothers.

> **REAL TALK** **Don't Sit It Out**
>
> The tribes of Reuben and Gad weren't wrong to want the land east of the Jordan. They were wrong at first to want it while letting everyone else fight. It's easy to do that in a family, a friend group, a team, or a church: enjoy the benefits while others do the hard work. Moses' question still stings. Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here? Where are you sitting it out while others carry the load? Maybe it's chores at home, a group project, or serving at church. Show up for your people.

Chapter 33 lists every stop on Israel's journey from Egypt to the plains of Moab, more than forty campsites. "Moses wrote the starting points of their journeys by the commandment of the LORD." It's like a scrapbook of the wilderness years. Some of the names recall amazing moments, like the crossing of the sea and the water at Elim. Others recall disasters. All of them are part of the story, because God was there at every one.

There's something hopeful about the fact that God told Moses to write all this down. The wilderness years were mostly a story of failure, and yet God wanted them remembered, every campsite, because every one was a place He had been faithful. Your story isn't only made up of victories either. But God doesn't erase the hard chapters. He redeems them, and someday you'll be able to look back and see His hand at every stop.

Chapter 34 marks out the borders of the promised land. Then chapter 35 gives the Levites forty-eight cities scattered throughout the tribes, so that God's teachers and priests would live among all the people. Six of those cities would be special: cities of refuge.

Here's how they worked. In the ancient world, if someone was killed, a relative of the victim, called the avenger of blood, had the duty to take revenge. But what if the death was an accident? What if two men were cutting wood and an axe head flew off and killed one of them (Deuteronomy 19:5)? God made a way to protect the innocent. "You shall appoint for yourselves cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the man slayer who kills any person unwittingly may flee there." The cities were spread out so anyone could reach one quickly. And they were for everyone, "for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the foreigner living among them."

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Refuge Worked**

When someone fled to a city of refuge, the elders heard the case. If the death was murder, the killer was handed over for justice; the cities didn't protect the guilty. If it was an accident, the person was safe inside the city. They had to stay there until the death of the high priest. Then they could go home, free. Jewish tradition says that roads to the cities of refuge were kept in good repair, with signs at every crossroad pointing the way: Refuge, refuge. Christians have long seen these cities as a picture of Christ. Hebrews describes believers as those "who have fled for refuge to take hold of the

hope set before us." And it was the death of the high priest that set the refugee free. Jesus, our High Priest, died to set us free.

REAL TALK **A Safe Place**

Everyone needs a city of refuge, a place to run when life is dangerous or overwhelming. If you're not safe at home, if someone is hurting you or threatening you, you need a real, physical safe place and a trusted adult who can help, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, coach, or relative. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, or call 911 if you're in danger. And for the guilt, fear, and pain you carry inside, God Himself is a refuge. Psalm 46 says He is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. You don't have to run alone.

REAL TALK **Looking Back**

When you reach the end of something, a school year, a season, a hard chapter in your life, it's worth looking back the way Numbers 33 does. Not just at the highlights, but at the whole route. Where did you mess up? Where did God provide? Who helped you? What would you do differently? Israel's journey list includes Kibroth Hattaavah, the graves of craving, right alongside Elim with its twelve springs. Both were part of the story. You can't change your past, but you can learn from it, and you can thank God for walking with you through every stop.

The book ends where it began, with the daughters of Zelophehad. The leaders of their tribe worry that if the daughters marry men from other tribes, their land will pass to those tribes. So God allows the daughters to marry whomever they think best, as long as it's within their father's tribe, keeping the land in the family. The five sisters marry their cousins, and their inheritance stays secure. It's a quiet ending, but a hopeful one. The new generation is ready. The land is in sight. And God is still keeping His promises, down to the last field.

KEY VERSE

These six cities shall be refuge for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the foreigner living among them, that everyone who kills any person unwittingly may flee there.

Numbers 35:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How do you handle passages like Numbers 31 that trouble you?
2. Where are you tempted to sit it out while others do the hard work?
3. How are the cities of refuge a picture of Jesus?
4. Who are the safe people in your life, and how could you be a safe person for someone else?

TRY THIS *Make your own journey list like Numbers 33: write down ten important places or moments in your life so far, good and bad. Next to each one, write where you see God in it now.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Numbers ends with Israel camped on the plains of Moab, looking across the Jordan River at the promised land. A whole generation has died in the wilderness. Even Moses won't get to go in. The new generation is ready, but the question remains: can anyone actually trust God enough, and obey Him enough, to receive His promises?

Jewish readers treasure Numbers as the story of God's patience with His people in the wilderness, and Jewish worshipers still recite the priestly blessing. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw Jesus all over Numbers. Paul says the rock that gave Israel water was a picture of Christ: "the rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus called Himself the true bread from heaven, the real manna. And when Jesus explained His mission to a religious leader named Nicodemus, He pointed straight to Numbers 21: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14–15). Look and live.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. Like Israel in the wilderness, you're never out of His sight.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all grumbled and rebelled.

Israel complained, doubted, and turned back. The Bible says all of us have turned from God in our own ways.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Like the snakebite in the camp, sin is deadly. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus was lifted up for you.

Just as the bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole, Jesus was lifted up on the cross. He died for our sins, and He rose again.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The bitten Israelites didn't heal themselves; they just looked at what God provided. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've complained, doubted You, and gone my own way. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You for being patient with me. Thank You that Jesus was lifted up on the cross for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm looking to Him now. Forgive me and heal me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Lead me through the wilderness and bring me home. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Numbers 13–14 and 21, then read John 3 and 1 Corinthians 10, and watch how the wilderness story points to Jesus.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Follow the cloud. Israel moved when God moved. Spend time with God every day in prayer and Scripture, and ask Him to lead you, one step at a time.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Numbers was written so that God's people would learn from the wilderness and trust Him. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Numbers is right, the God who led His people through the desert hasn't stopped leading, and He hasn't given up on you.

God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and he won't do it? Or has he spoken, and he won't make it good?

Numbers 23:19 (WEB)