

## ***People on the Move: The Book of Numbers***

### ***Cities of Refuge***

Lesson #13 for December 26, 2009

Scriptures: Numbers 33-36; Joshua 20:1-7; Ephesians 2.

1. This lesson covers the final preparations that needed to be made before apportioning the land of Canaan to the Israelites. Forty-eight cities were to be given to the tribe of Levi as their inheritance, and six of those cities—three on each side of the Jordan—were to be designated as cities of refuge.
2. All of the adult men who left Egypt were dead. Did all the adult women die as well? A new generation was looking forward to their new home. But, in spite of the wonderful dreams they had for their new home, provisions needed to be made for problems that would arise. God's promises would be fulfilled; He would take them into the promised land. But human foibles and sins needed to be dealt with.
3. Read Numbers 33:1-4, *GNB*. After discussing their departure from Egypt it says, "...By doing this, the LORD showed that he was more powerful than the gods of Egypt." (Compare Exodus 12:12) The God of the Israelites had proven that He was not helpless or lifeless like all the other gods of other nations. He was a God who was alive and could make things happen. The news of what had happened spread like wildfire around the Middle East.
4. In Numbers 33:5-49 are listed at least the major campsites all the way from Egypt until they crossed the Jordan. Why do you think Moses wrote those down? A review of one's past is a great way to remember all that God has done for us. At the same time, it reminds us of our failures. Unfortunately, almost none of those sites has been archaeologically identified.
5. As we know, there is a great debate among biblical scholars and archaeologists today about exactly what happened during those 40 years. Some of the more critical scholars do not believe the exodus and the wandering in the wilderness even happened. Why do you think there is no archaeological evidence of those years? In those dry deserts, shouldn't there be some bones left? Shouldn't there be some artifacts left behind? Some have suggested that we are looking in the wrong place. They think that the Israelite wanderings occurred in the Arabian Peninsula instead of the Sinai Peninsula. A number of new archeological remains are being discovered almost daily in Palestine and Egypt. It is possible that some of that evidence will still be discovered. The skeptics will likely still continue to doubt no matter how much is discovered.
6. Read Numbers 33:50-56. This describes something of interest. In Exodus 23:20-33, God promised to send an angel ahead of them to drive out the inhabitants of the land. In the passage for today, He told the Israelites that *they were to drive out* the inhabitants. Why had God changed His instructions? A short time later in Deuteronomy 20:16-18, He told them that all of the inhabitants must be utterly and completely destroyed. How do we fit those three pieces of instruction together? What would have happened if they had allowed God to conquer the land as He had originally indicated?
7. Perhaps the most important thing to notice in each passage is that no trace of the Canaanite's pagan, obscene religion, their idols, or their fertility-cult symbols were to be left. All traces of their religion were to be completely and utterly destroyed. Do we know what actually happened historically? Did the Israelites clearly and completely follow God's instructions? The book of Joshua makes it clear that after a while, they got tired of war and failed to carry out God's instructions. (Joshua 13:1-7; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12,13; 19:47; but

how do you explain Joshua 21:43-45?) At least portions of every one of the powerful nations that were supposed to have been driven out from Canaan were left behind. Large portions of the land were conquered, but the Israelites ended up with groups of pagans scattered throughout their land. And it was not long before the Israelites were beginning to adopt the religious customs and practices of the Canaanites. Why didn't they conquer and remove all the Canaanites? Why were they not willing to let God guide them in conquering the land? Wouldn't He have helped them as He did at Jericho?

8. Reading between the lines, it seems that they wanted to conquer their enemies themselves by their own military prowess so their enemies would look to them as a powerful nation instead of looking to their God as the One who had conquered the land on their behalf. They grew tired of war. But if God had been allowed to guide at every step, wouldn't it have been easy for them? (Compare Jericho)
9. Notice that unlike the other tribes, the Levites were not given a tribal land. Why were they scattered out among the other 12 tribes? They were supposed to be the religious guides and instructors for all of Israel. Shouldn't they have been setting up schools and other means of leading the people spiritually? (Read Judges 18-21 for some record of what the Levites were doing.) Why were they given only small garden and flock areas surrounding the 48 cities? Was that enough area to house them and their flocks and herds? Remember that the Levites were to be supported by the tithes. How much are we doing to spread the gospel to those living around us?
10. How many cities of refuge were there? What specifically was the function of those cities of refuge? Those cities were to provide a safe haven for accused murderers to flee to until their cases could be carefully investigated.
11. Read Numbers 35:9-21. Specific details were given by God about how to distinguish between those who were guilty of murder and those who were simply guilty of manslaughter. How would you define the difference between murder and manslaughter? The key is intent. Why is that such an important distinction? Were there courts set up in the cities of refuge to deal with such matters? How much careful investigation took place to try to determine exactly how the death occurred? In light of those relatively simple instructions, how often do you think murderers were allowed to live and those guilty of manslaughter were stoned? Did God supernaturally make sure that each case was judged correctly?
12. If someone killed one of your relatives, could you—and would you—pursue them and kill them as the “avenger of blood”? Would you consider such a system of private justice fair? Were the avengers motivated by justice, anger, or revenge? Could you follow the eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth rule? (Exodus 21:24; Deuteronomy 19:21) What would you do if someone entered your home at night and threatened your family? Were the Levites given special guidance from God in deciding each case?
13. When the high priest died, those pronounced guilty of manslaughter were allowed to return to their tribal areas. Doesn't that seem a bit arbitrary? How were they supposed to support themselves while the high priest was still alive? Did any of them later suffer death at the hands of an avenger? If an avenger killed one of them after the high priest died, would that avenger then be guilty of murder?
14. Why did God ask the Israelites themselves to administer that justice? Shouldn't God have taken care of it Himself? Why didn't He advise them to go to the high priest and ask via the Urim and Thummim for the verdict of guilty or not guilty? During their journey through the wilderness, God Himself had administered justice on several occasions—for example, Nadab

and Abihu (Leviticus 11); Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16). So, why did God at this time ask the Israelites themselves to administer the justice? Wasn't it about time for them to start taking some responsibility and thinking for themselves?

15. Read Numbers 35:6-34. Why did God consider murder to be a defilement of the land? When someone committed murder, did that make the whole group somehow partially guilty? What is the reason that God said that they needed to remove such defilement? How long do you think the Israelites maintained their awareness that the land belonged to God and that He lived among them? Today, people are killing other people at an incredible rate. Kids are carrying guns to school. Has murder contaminated our land?
16. Those guilty of manslaughter were expected to remain in the city of refuge until the current high priest died. What happened to those who were judged guilty of murder? They were to be stoned to death. Who did the stoning? Would you feel comfortable living in one of the cities of refuge? Since the system of tribal inheritance had been clearly spelled out, and therefore, the refugees could not purchase land, what did they do in the cities of refuge? Would they be expected to build houses and live there for years? What kind of employment did they have?
17. How distinct, how separate, or how integrated were the cities of refuge and the cities of the Levites in the tribal areas where they were located? Did the Levites make any attempt to keep themselves aloof from the local tribe's people? Since there was no temple yet, and since Jerusalem was still in the hands of the Jebusites, what did the Levites who were scattered throughout the country do? Did they take turns ministering at Shiloh where the "tent" was located?
18. Was the apportioning of those cities to the Levites some kind of protection to prevent them from trying to accumulate wealth?
19. Read Ephesians 2:19-22. Are Christians today living among people of the world in order to serve a priestly function? How effective are we at reaching out to our neighbors? Are we converting our neighbors, or is the world converting us? Do we have any record of how effective the tithing system was at supporting the Levites in their cities?
20. What happened to the tribe of Dan? They were apportioned an area near the Philistines. They were never able to drive the Philistines out. Members of the tribe of Dan ended up moving to a far distant area in the northern part of the country. There, they conquered a city with its villages and settled down. What happened to the Levitical cities that were supposed to be among them? Read Joshua 19:47 and Judges 18.
21. If a person accidentally killed another but could not move fast enough to get to a city of refuge or if the city of refuge was at some distance and the avenger caught the killer before he reached the city of refuge, did that imply that he was guilty?
22. He who fled to the city of refuge could make no delay. Family and employment were left behind. There was no time to say farewell to loved ones. His life was at stake, and every other interest must be sacrificed to the one purpose—to reach the place of safety. Weariness was forgotten, difficulties were unheeded. The fugitive dared not for one moment slacken his pace until he was within the wall of the city.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pages 516, 517.
23. Christians know that there is no sin that is beyond the forgiveness of Christ. Even a murderer can be forgiven. But, often when we commit sin, we judge ourselves guilty and

have a very hard time even forgiving ourselves. What does God expect us to do about that? What assurances does God give us about the freedom that we have in Christ? (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14)

24. Read 2 Samuel 22:3. Do we think of Christ as our rock of refuge? If so, how do we flee to Him? How does He protect us? When we flee to Christ, do we feel fully protected?
25. What are we to learn from this lesson about how God regards the sanctity of life? Does this teach us anything about abortion? Or euthanasia? Notice clearly that no sacrifice or payment could be accepted that would allow the person judged guilty of manslaughter to return home until the high priest died. Did the death of the high priest in one way or another represent Christ's death? Did the people view the death of the high priest in such a way?
26. What have we learned from the book of Numbers? First of all, we have only a small fraction of the information about all that happened during those years. God and Moses were dealing with a group of former slaves who had little or no education and whose ideas about what was right or wrong were based largely on conditions and beliefs in Egypt. We know almost nothing about most of the years of their wanderings. We know that God miraculously provided for their every need, and He did it every day. When they were faithful to Him, they were protected from dangerous creatures and dangerous diseases. This God, Yahweh, was no wooden or stone idol. He was real, and He could take care of people.
27. We have learned that in dealing with the people, God was very patient in most cases. But, in some cases He seemed to act with considerable severity. (Numbers 15:30-36) Why was that? God knew that certain kinds of deliberate and rebellious sins would bring disaster on the whole congregation if not dealt with summarily. God knows that sin if left unchecked will destroy us. By contrast, God had a wonderful relationship with Moses. Moses and God were friends. God also made provision for an orderly transition of government.
28. Furthermore, if we read the book of Deuteronomy, we see that God spelled out in great detail exactly what would be the result of obedience and of disobedience. In fact, God's predictions were so precise that critical scholars do not believe that even God Himself could know all of those details in advance. Therefore, they would say that material was written much later and was written as history after the events themselves took place!
29. The children of Israel had to go back into the wilderness and wander around for 40 years because they were not willing to trust God to take them into the land as He had promised. It has now been 165 years since the "great disappointment." Why haven't we entered the heavenly Canaan? How many generations of Adventists have to die before we learn to trust God enough to cooperate with Him in finishing the work? Isn't it time for us to wake up and follow God's instructions and get ready? Think of all the additional help that has been given us: the entire Bible, the writings of Ellen White, and the record of the failures and successes of all our spiritual ancestors. What more could God do for us?

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