

People on the Move: The Book of Numbers

Preparing a People

Lesson #2 for October 10, 2009

Scriptures: Numbers 5; 6; Ezekiel 33:15; Luke 19:8,9; Acts 17:28; 1 Corinthians 6:19,20

1. This lesson is a hodgepodge collection of stories. It deals with the challenges of having a very large group—apparently about 2 million people, although there are some real questions about that number—traveling through a desert wilderness, camping in a small space, and having the people still subject to communicable diseases and all the usual human problems: marital infidelity, sins against others in the camp, and the disagreements which would inevitably arise.
2. Remember that at this stage, the children of Israel had left Egypt, they had been organized into an orderly camping and marching arrangement, and they were expecting to enter the land of Canaan very soon. Normally, it would take less than two weeks to walk to Canaan. They had not yet left the foot of Mount Sinai. (Numbers 10:11,12) The cloud had not yet lifted to lead the way forward.
3. One of the very first things that God and Moses had to deal with was the possibility of communicable diseases. With no medical facilities of any kind at their disposal, any possible communicable disease had to be isolated or quarantined outside the camp.
4. What kinds of conditions would be immediately recognized as having a risk of being a communicable disease? Potentially contagious skin diseases, penile or vaginal discharges, and people who had come in contact with dead bodies. Dead bodies were a threat because the person may have died of some communicable and deadly disease. Remember that at that time, there was no knowledge of virus, bacteria, or parasite.
5. There were no medically trained personnel in the camp. Therefore, medical decisions were made by the priests—presumably with guidance from God. People who had possibly communicable disease issues were to remain quarantined outside the camp until proclaimed clean by the priest.
6. Today, we deal with medical problems in a very different way because we have access to trained medical personnel who presumably understand the precise cause of many of the ailments.
7. Read Numbers 5:3. In what way does a communicable disease “defile the camp”? God was supposed to be the ruler of the Israelite people at that time. That form of government is called a theocracy. Disease in the camp would be considered not only a threat to the health of others but a defilement of God’s community. They believed that being sick was some kind of curse from one of the “gods.” Thus, having such a disease was a “defilement” to a theocracy.
8. But, what about possible spiritual and moral defilement which might come about as a result of watching, reading, eating, doing, or even thinking things that separate us from God? Our world is awash in impure thoughts and words as well as temptations to actions which are completely against a Christian’s moral standards. Don’t those things contaminate us?
9. Do the rules from the book of Numbers seem antiquated, out of date, too extreme, and too intrusive into peoples’ lives to be appropriate for people in our day?
10. Consider some modern equivalents. If God were in charge of the refugee camps in Darfur, Sudan, what would He do? Think of how many people are dying there because of poor hygiene.

11. In a world where 50% of the marriages end in divorce, would God advise some kind of marital fidelity test for us today?
12. God recommended to the children of Israel some unusual—at least in our eyes—tests to separate the guilty or the diseased from the healthy and holy. What do you think God would recommend for Seventh-day Adventist churches in our day to deal with similar problems? Can you imagine lining up “unfaithful wives” in front of the church so they could be “tested”?
13. Read Numbers 5:5-7; Psalm 51:3,4; 1 Corinthians 6:19,20; and Acts 17:28. God was making it very clear that if they were to be His holy people, then, any sin against any other person in the camp or against God Himself was to be regarded as a serious offense against the Lord. We can understand that better if we remember that God had claimed every one of those people as His special possession or child and as a part of the larger family of Israelites. Thus, a sin against such a person was considered a sin against God Himself.
14. Very strict rules were in place to deal with those who stole someone else’s property. Read Numbers 5:5-8; Ezekiel 33:15; Luke 19:8,9. This is one of the few rules from the times of their sojourn in the wilderness that we see specifically being carried out even in the times of the New Testament.
15. Notice that after saying that any sin against a fellow Israelite was a sin against God, thus making it impossible to undo the wrong, nevertheless, God said that those people who had been wronged needed to be compensated. The guilty party was to return the equivalent in value plus at least 20%. If you recognize that virtually any sin is a sin against God, how do you “pay God back”?
16. Should we as Seventh-day Adventists adopt such a plan for the church today? How might it be implemented?
17. To most Christians living in our day, the solution to sin is to confess to God. Is that enough? Should matters of restitution be left in the hands of the civil authorities?
18. If we confess our sins, how does God deal with them? Are they “erased” from the books of heaven? Does God “forget” them? Is it possible for God to forget anything if He is truly omniscient? Read 1 John 1:8,9. How does God “cleanse” sin from our lives?
19. When looking at the regulations for the children of Israel in the wilderness and subsequently in the land of Canaan, many modern readers have suggested that those rules are much too strict. Does God demand that we follow His rules precisely? Was God going into too much detail? How detailed has God been in creating our planet? Have you seen the DVD entitled, “The Privileged Planet”?
20. Science, especially astronomy and biology, is discovering that our world is a very “privileged planet.” There are scores of very precise physical laws that make it possible for life as we know it to exist on this planet. If some of those laws were “off” by even one part in one billion, we would not survive. Did God design all those laws exactly right for our benefit? Could such laws have happened just by chance?

In an article entitled “*God and Nature: A Biblical Approach to Origins*,” L. James Gibson, director of the Geoscience Research Institute, examines the possibility that life and the universe are a product of chance. He writes, “Two lines of evidence strongly point to the insufficiency of chance in causing the origin of nature. First, the universe has a set of specific properties without which

life would be impossible. The relative strengths of the fundamental forces, such as gravity and the forces of the atomic nucleus, along with the values of the physical constants, such as the speed of light, are finely tuned in a way that makes life possible. Slight changes in these factors could make it impossible for atoms and molecules to exist. . . probability is vanishingly small that all these factors would be so finely tuned by chance.” He adds: “The probability that amino acids would arrange themselves by chance into sequences appropriate for life is so remote as to be unthinkable.” So, how does he explain the mystery of life? He concludes, “Design seems a compelling explanation for the origins of the universe and life. . . The evidence for design implies that God acted with purpose to create both.”—*Ministry*, November 2007, pages 16,17.

So does God care about the details of our lives? If He did not, we could not survive!

Had the Sabbath been universally kept, man's thoughts and affections would have been led to the Creator as the object of reverence and worship, and there would never have been an idolater, an atheist, or an infidel. (GC 437.2)

As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe that the final conflict will come down to a disagreement over Sabbath vs. Sunday. Why does God care? It is because of what each of those days stand for? What those days stand for is becoming a huge issue in our world today.

21. If God went to such trouble to create a world just exactly right for our existence, do you think He cares about how we care for our bodies and our relationships with other beings living on this earth?
22. Read Numbers 5:11-31. This seems very strange to us. It gives a rule for dealing with husbands who were suspicious that their wives had been unfaithful to their marital vows. Olive oil and incense represented happiness and pleasure and were not to be included in this sacrifice. What does it mean for “the belly to swell and the thigh to rot”? (KJV) Some modern versions suggest that this implies getting a sexually transmitted disease. Would you want such a test to be enforced today? Would it cause a change in the behavior of Christians? Think of all the problems in our world that have resulted from marital infidelity! If we had a precise method of knowing—from God Himself—who had committed adultery, would we be better off? If it were the men lined up in front of the church, how many shrunken genitals (GNB) would it take for some of the infidelity to stop!
23. Was the marital infidelity test the basic equivalent of a lie-detector test?
24. Many people have asked the question, “Why doesn’t this apply to men as well as women?” In actual fact, Jesus gave a test for men which is much tougher than this one. Read Matthew 5:27-30.
25. When you read about this test in Numbers 5, do you think God was directly involved in the outcomes of these tests? Or was the woman in most cases so frightened by the whole process that if she was guilty, she would confess? What was the rule for dealing with known adultery? It was the death penalty. (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22-27)
26. It is helpful to realize that tests of this nature were very common in the surrounding societies in Moses’ day. No doubt, that test was an adaptation or modification of a test that the men of Israel demanded be continued. Look at some of the known examples of such tests:

The dust (aa) from the floor of the sanctuary is presumed to be ritually pure,

derived from the inner sacred space. It carried no intrinsic deleterious effect, but such activity has parallels in the literature from Mari and Babylon. Dust from the gate area, which were protected by great deific figures, was consumed with water from the river and used in water ordeals in several judicial cases. The suspected individual was then thrown into the river or required to swim a given distance from the shore. If the person survived, he was innocent; if he drowned, he was guilty. In the present case the woman stands in a position of servility or contrition, with her personal offering in her hands, echoing an oath recited by the priest, and drinking a potentially potent potion. Her fate lay in God's hands. . .

Hammurabi Code: "If a man's wife is accused by her husband, but she was not caught while lying with another man, she shall make an oath by the god and return home." "If a finger has been pointed at a man's wife because of another man, but she has not been caught lying with the other man, she shall leap into the River for the sake of her husband." (*The New American Commentary*, article on Numbers 5:11-31)

27. One of the common things to be done with a suspected unfaithful wife was to throw her into a river. If she swam out safely, her innocence would be assumed. But think of how many factors might have affected the "judgment" in such a case. What if the woman did not know how to swim? At least in the version of the test given by Moses, there was no room for the priest or the husband to manipulate the results. God and the woman's conscience were left to make the decision. That was a great improvement over what was being done in other nations at the time.
28. In light of all this discussion, it is important to remember that God promised them freedom from disease and problems when they left Egypt if they would just be faithful to Him. (Exodus 15:26) It may help to point out the fact that in ancient times, diseases were very often considered to be curses from the "gods." Many diseases were thought to have distinct spiritual components.
29. The Adventist Health Study conducted at Loma Linda University over the last several decades has demonstrated that those people who carefully followed the instructions given to us from God through the spirit of prophecy lived an average of 10 years longer than typical Americans. Why do you think this is? Is God intentionally blessing them? Is it possible that in addition to the benefits of not smoking, not drinking alcohol, and not eating harmful things such as unclean meats or even clean meats, there are still some things we do not understand but which we should follow because of God's guidance?
30. If you had been God looking down on things at Mount Sinai, what would you have done to try to organize that mass of unruly people to produce some kind of social order? Of course, the ideal would be that every individual would do what is right because it is right! If people had learned to love their neighbors as they loved themselves, (Leviticus 19:18) to not cheat the poor or the disadvantaged when they could, (Ezekiel 33:15; Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 19:8,9) and if we all recognized that our bodies are to be temples of God, (1 Corinthians 6:19,20) and remembered the incredible price God has paid to buy us back after we fell into sin, wouldn't the problem of misunderstandings and fights breaking out between individuals have disappeared? What would it be like if every member of every Seventh-day Adventist church did what was right because it is right? Wouldn't we be in heaven by now?
31. In our previous lesson, we discussed the fact that the tribe of Levi had been set aside to serve

as priests. Furthermore, only the household of Aaron was to be high priests, and only they were allowed to enter the Most Holy Place in the sanctuary. This meant that all others were excluded from serving in the role of priest. In this light it is interesting to read Exodus 19:4-6 and compare 1 Peter 2:9 where God's people are all called "a kingdom of priests" even "a holy nation." Why is there that apparent contradiction in ideas?

32. However, God did make provisions for certain individuals—by taking special vows and following very strict guidelines—to set themselves and their lives apart for a period of time in dedication to the Lord. (Numbers 6:1-21) Look at the lives of several individuals who apparently had Nazirite vows: Samuel (1 Samuel 1:10,11), Samson (Judges 13:2-5; 16:17), and John the Baptist. (Luke 1:15) Are there any provisions for doing such a thing in our day?
33. Why do you suppose that in those days not cutting one's hair was equivalent to saying you were consecrated to the Lord? Why does it have such a different connotation in our day?
34. Why do you think such Nazirites were forbidden to partake of anything produced from grapes? Was it that so much of what was produced from grapes ended up being at least partially fermented? Or was there a symbolic meaning? For example, it takes a number of years to produce a good vineyard. Thus, the vineyards and the production of grape juice represented a settled people at home on their own land. By contrast, the Nazirites recognized that they were pilgrims on the way to a heavenly kingdom. (Hebrews 11:16) Does the way that we live demonstrate that we are looking for a better kingdom? Or, are we living very comfortably here in this sinful world?
35. Read Numbers 6:24-26. Many will recognize this prayer as the one used by Elder H.M.S. Richards in his sermons on many, many occasions. What does this prayer tell us? Does it suggest that we are totally dependent upon God for everything? (Compare John 15:5; Hebrews 7:25) Was this prayer to be used only by the priests in blessing the people rather than by the people themselves? This prayer calls for God's blessings, His sustaining and keeping power, and assures those who remain loyal to Him that He gives His smile and His peace.
36. No doubt, these passages were written by Moses in connection with certain events that happened at the foot of Mount Sinai. The individual sections do not seem to be related to each other in any particular way.
37. Once again, this suggests that God reaches down and meets us where we are. It also demonstrates that God recognizes the importance of strict obedience to His requirements and that He is always willing to bless those who obey Him. God is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His people. (COL 69.1) What are we doing to make that "longing" happen? Are we taking God's guidance seriously? Are we ready to enter that "better kingdom"?

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Last Modified: September 10, 2009

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