

THROUGH THE WILDERNESS TO PALESTINE

Message #6
BIBLE SURVEY

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In our survey of the Bible, we have come to the book of Numbers. The children of Israel have been brought by God's providence, through the leadership of Moses, out of the land of Egypt, have encamped at Mount Sinai where they received from him the law with all of its regulations governing the many aspects of their lives, and now they are preparing at the opening of the book of Numbers for the departure from Sinai into their own promised land of Palestine.

The first ten chapters of the book of Numbers tell us of the preparations which were made for the departure from Sinai on their journey back home to Palestine. From the tenth chapter of the book through the fourteenth chapter there is the record of the journey from Sinai to Kadesh-barnea which was at the entrance to the land of Palestine. This was an eleven day journey. When they came to Kadesh-barnea, the border of the land, you recall that they sent spies into the land of Palestine to see who was there now and what they were like and what trouble they might expect in regaining possession of the homeland. The spies came back and the majority report said that they should not go into the land because there were giants there, and they would have nothing but trouble since they could not possibly conquer them. The minority report agreed that there were giants. They did not minimize the difficulties or overlook the obstacles, but they also recognized that God was with them; that God had promised them deliverance and God had promised them this land.

The people sided with the majority, and in unbelief then, because they did not believe that God was able to take care of them they decided not to go into the promised land. Now the Lord punishes unbelief. This is undoubtedly the greatest sin that a person can commit. Some of the people did not believe God when they said, "Let's return to Egypt." You find this in Numbers 14:4, "Let us make a captain, and let us return to Egypt." God punished them for the unbelief that they had exhibited on this occasion. The punishment is recorded at the end of the fourteenth chapter of Numbers beginning at verse twenty-nine, "Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me." All of them were to fall in the wilderness except the little ones and Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who had brought in the minority report and who had believed God and urged the people to go into the land. The people were to wander in the wilderness forty years because of this unbelief exhibited at Kadesh-barnea.

So the years of wandering are recorded for us beginning at the fifteenth chapter of the book of Numbers and continuing through the twenty-first chapter. They wandered in the wilderness as a punishment for their unbelief.

In the twentieth chapter of Numbers in this time of wandering, Moses also does something that brought punishment upon him. Once before when the people wanted water, he had been told by God to strike a rock and water would come out. We find this record in Exodus 17. Here, Moses struck the rock when God told him merely to speak to the rock, and God punished him for this act of disobedience. It seems to us to be a very little thing, but God is interested in obedience in all things, and

when Moses disobeyed God on this occasion, the Lord punished him by excluding him from personally bringing the people into the land of Palestine. "The Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore, ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them" (numb. 20:12). So for this act of disobedience to the word of God which was exhibited in Moses' smiting the rock when he should have spoken to the rock, God brought the punishment of excluding him from actually leading the people into the land of Palestine.

Sin is a terrible thing, and when we sin, though God does forgive the sin as God did forgive Moses, God does not usually erase the history that has already been recorded. Moses never had another opportunity to right this wrong. Moses was never given a chance to make up for this in order that he might personally lead them into the land of Palestine. Forgiveness is one thing and God grants this upon confession, but the erasing of history is another thing, and generally God does not allow this to happen because history is a part of our record. When we sin and are out of fellowship and fail to walk with God, then this becomes a part of our historical record. When we lose time, when we wander from the will of God, then we cannot regain or recapture that time. We can get back on the right track and God will forgive but those days are gone; history has been written and it cannot be changed. So it was with Moses when he sinned here during the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel.

The same was true with Edom. We find an interesting account here in chapter 20 concerning the land of Edom. Edom refused to let the children of Israel pass a certain way, and God did not forget this either because we read all the way through the Old Testament of God's punishment upon Edom for their treatment of Israel. In the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, we read again of Edom deserving punishment simply because she refused to help the children of Israel as they wandered during these years in the wilderness.

The book of Deuteronomy is a restatement of the Law of Moses which was recorded also in Exodus and Leviticus. So in the history of the Old Testament, we pass from Numbers to the book of Joshua.

Joshua records, in the first twenty four chapters of his book, the conquering and dividing of the land of Palestine, the homeland of the people. Joshua was appointed as Moses successor and preparations were made to cross the Jordan. It was crossed (chapters 3 and 4). You read then about the conquest of Jericho, the falling down of the walls of Jericho in chapters 5 and 6 of the book of Joshua, then the sin of Achan in chapter 7--a sin of just keeping a little thing for himself. But again this was a matter of disobeying God, and this matter of disobedience or unbelief was very severely punished in the case of Achan.

Conquests of other parts of the land are recorded in the succeeding chapters and the division of the land of Palestine is recorded beginning at chapter 13 of the book of Joshua. Now there are lots of little things, a lot of history, a lot of movement here that teach certain lessons. I think in this particular section of the Bible, when Israel is moving from Sinai through the years of wilderness wandering and

finally, after serving the forty years of punishment, into the land of Palestine itself, the chief lesson that we see in this section of the Bible is that small things are important especially when they are matters of obedience or disobedience to God. At Kadesh-barnea, God punished because of their unbelief. Moses' striking the rock instead of speaking to it (Numbers 20), seems like a little thing but it was a matter of disobedience to what God had specifically said. The Edomites refused passage to the children of Israel in Numbers 20 for what they undoubtedly thought were very good reasons, does not seem like a major thing and yet to God it was a very important thing which He punished. The sin of Achan which again did not seem like a very big thing (Joshua 7) but a thing which God had commanded and which Achan disobeyed, this He punished. And in the ninth chapter of Joshua, something we did not mention, a league that was made with the Gibeonites, seems like a little thing, and yet this is something which created friction ultimately and which finally helped divide the nation later. Little things--God is interested in little things because God wants obedience in all things.

When you read this section of the Bible, I think the thing that stands out in all of these historical events is the fact that God is interested in having His people obey Him--obey Him even if they do not understand all that's being said or why, but obey Him because he said so. Actually if you look at it this way, you'll see quite easily that disobedience is really an example of our unbelief. When we disobey, in effect we're saying, "Lord you're not right, and I don't believe you're right. I believe that I'm right. I believe that I have the answer instead of you." Disobedience is really unbelief and unbelief is the sin that is most serious in God's sight. If you're not a Christian today, I invite you to believe in Jesus Christ. Unbelief is serious and will be punished, not be forty years of wandering, but by an eternity separated from God. If you are a Christian then God wants you to walk by faith. He wants you to trust Him and be obedient to every detail of His revealed will in His written word. He's interested in the small things of life. He is interested in helping us in the small things of life and He is interested in having us obey Him in all things.