

GOD WITH US
Part 1: The Great Blessing
Genesis – Deuteronomy

Message 10 – Disaster in the Desert
Numbers 1-20

Introduction

The book of Numbers recounts the stalled movement of Israel from Mt. Sinai toward the Promised Land of Canaan. Sadly, the heart of the story revolves around Israel's repeated rebellion against the Lord and, finally, God's decision to allow the entire Exodus generation to die in the wilderness over the next 40 years. The original Hebrew title for this book was, *In the Wilderness*, a very apt description of what happened. A people destined to live in a land of promise ended up living in a desolate wilderness, all because they would not walk with God in faith and obedience. The book provides for us today a warning about the high costs of living life outside of the will of God. The Greek title, *Numbers*, reflects the two 'numberings' of the nation, one of the first generation that would die in the wilderness, and one of the second generation that would enter the Promised Land.

The Israelites prepare for their journey: 1:1-10:36

Israel remained camped at Mt. Sinai for one full year. Then, as they prepared to set out for the Promised Land, God gave final instructions as to how they were to make the journey *and* how they were to prepare to enter the land. A key phrase appears 19 times in Numbers: "*They did everything just as the Lord commanded*" (1:19). Strict obedience to God's commands was required in order to receive His blessing and abiding presence in the journey. Unfortunately, while Moses and his key leaders obeyed strictly in preparing the nation for their future, the nation as a whole never learned to walk in *daily* faith and obedience to Yahweh, resulting in their demise.

- **The first census: 1:1-54.** The book of Numbers opens, fittingly, with the first "numbering" of the nation. Every male, from twenty years old upwards (fighting age) was counted, the total number coming to 603,550. God chose the leaders who would number their respective tribes (1:4,5). The tribe of Levi was excluded from the census, as they were devoted to the service of the Lord.

- **The arrangement of the camp: 2:1-34.** The placement of the various tribes in the camp of Israel was very specific. Every tribe had a designated location, with the Tabernacle of God at the center of the camp.

- **The Levites numbered: 3:1-51.** The Levites (priests) were numbered separately from the other tribes. Specific duties were assigned to each of the Levitical family lines: Gershon, Kohath and Merari. God determined that the Levites would belong to Him *in replacement of all the firstborn in Israel who were spared on the night of the first Passover*, when Israel departed from Egypt. At the time of the census, there were 22,000 Levites. The firstborn males who had been spared on Passover eve were numbered at 22,273. The extra 273 firstborn males needed to be redeemed, since they belonged to the Lord (3:44-51). Five shekels per firstborn male = 1,365 shekels. This payment, along with the lives of the 22,000 Levites, constituted the ‘redemption price’ for all of the firstborn males that God had spared.

In the New Testament, Paul tells us that we, as believers, ‘belong to the Lord.’ Because of the death of Jesus on our behalf, God has ownership over our lives. “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN? For you have been bought with a price: therefore, glorify God in your body” (1Cor. 6:19,20). In a sense, then, we are all ‘Levites’ who have been redeemed by God to live for His purposes in this world, during our lifetime. We are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people BELONGING TO GOD, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness (our ‘Egypt’) into His wonderful light” (1Peter 2:9).

- **Responsibilities for carrying the Tabernacle: 4:1-49.** The Tabernacle and all of its furnishings had to be completely disassembled, moved and reassembled whenever the cloud of the Lord signaled a move to a new location. The priestly families of Gershon, Kohath and Merari each had specific ‘transport duties.’ They were not just carrying ‘furniture;’ they were carrying the sacred items that made up the house of God!

- **The test of adultery: 5:1-31.** Much of ch.5 concerns the test of adultery in situations where there was suspicion. While the ceremony of drinking ‘bitter water’ might appear strange to us, the bottom line is that it was not the water that necessarily caused a woman to become ill, thus revealing her guilt. *God’s judgment* would fall upon the guilty person *through* this ceremony. If we

wonder about a man's responsibility in cases of adultery . . . the penalty for a man was already spelled out in Leviticus 20:10 – death by stoning.

- **Nazirite vows: 6:1-21.** A Nazirite vow was one of complete dedication to the Lord for a specific work for a set amount of time. During this time, the hair was not to be cut. No wine or strong drink was allowed. There was a specified offering at end of period of time. Samuel was placed under a lifetime Nazirite vow by his mother (1Samuel 1:10,11). Samson was probably the notable Nazirite; yet he was most famous for violating the vow and suffering God's judgment as a result.

The Nazirite vow allowed a person to enter into a special time of devotion and dedication to the Lord. Have you ever considered an extended 'Sabbath,' a period of time where you devote yourself to seeking the Lord so as to retune your heart to His heart? Or, have you ever taken a period of time and devoted it to serving the Lord in a specific work or mission? In these ways, we can imitate the ancient practice of the Nazirite vow, thereby strengthening our walk with God.

- **The Aaronic blessing: 6:22-27.** Special blessings were prominent in the religious life of ancient Israel. Recall the Genesis accounts of the blessings pronounced by the patriarchs over their children. A special blessing was given to the High Priest Aaron and his sons, to pronounce over the people of Israel. In later times, this blessing was pronounced at the Temple twice a day.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.' So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them" (6:22-27).

This Aaronic blessing reveals *the essential heart of God* toward His people. God so desires to *enjoy* His love relationship with His people. Yet, much like little children with their parents, or athletes with their coaches, or students with teachers . . . the children of God must live under the authority of God in order to experience the gracious aspect of His character. The blessing of God comes not just because a set of words are spoken; rather, because we order our lives under His authority.

- **Offerings of the leaders: 7:1-89.** The entire work of the priests at the Tabernacle depended upon the faithful and regular offerings of the people. The leaders of Israel made offerings to be used by the priesthood in the performance of their duties. It is common in church fund-raising campaigns today to have ‘leadership commitments’ to open the campaigns, a practice founded upon the example of leadership offerings in Numbers.

- **Levites cleansed to serve: 8:1-26.** Just as Aaron had earlier been set apart and commissioned into service as the High Priest, so now the Levites were cleansed and put into service at the Tabernacle. They were to serve from age 25-50, after which they would retire and become adjunct assistants.

- **The first Passover Feast: 9:1-14.** Israel had been camped at Mt. Sinai for one full year when God instructed them to celebrate their first annual Passover memorial feast. The actual events of the Exodus from Egypt were still very fresh in the minds and hearts of the people. Though the year had been trying in many ways, this feast should have renewed their commitment to trust their God and to expect His faithfulness to be displayed in the coming year.

- **The cloud to signal a move: 9:15-23.** The movements of Israel were completely determined by the movements of God, as indicated by the movements of the cloud that lingered over the Tabernacle.

“Whenever the cloud was lifted from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the sons of Israel would camp. At the command of the Lord the sons of Israel would set out, and at the command of the Lord they would camp; as long as the cloud settled over the tabernacle, they remained camped” (9:17,18).

- **The trumpets to announce movements: 10:1-10.** Much like a modern siren might signal a community to take shelter, so the ancient Israelites had their warning siren. Trumpets were used by the priests to signal regular movements, or special movements in preparation for war.

- **The first movement of the camp: 10:11-36.** The first section of Numbers comes to a climax with the first movement of the camp of Israel toward the Promised Land. They had been camped at Mt. Sinai for a little over 1 year, preparing themselves for this moment. Now, the cloud (God’s presence) moved for the first time and the camp of Israel moved with it.

“Thus they set out from the mount of the Lord three days’ journey, with the ark of the covenant of the Lord journeying in front of them for the three days, to seek out a resting place for them. The cloud of the Lord was over them by day when they set out from the camp” (10:33,34).

Whenever the camp set out, Moses would shout these words:

“Rise up, O Lord! And let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee from Your presence” (10:35).

Then, when the camp came to rest again, He would say:

“Return, O Lord, to the myriad thousands of Israel” (10:36).

Thus, the Israelites were now learning to move in step with Yahweh their God, as He led them toward the next phase in the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham: The Great Land!

Just as the Israelites were called to follow God in their journey, so we are called to follow Christ in our journey. They were to fix their eyes, daily, on His presence over the Tabernacle and to move in sync with His movements. Only in this way could their journey to God’s promised destination be successful. We, likewise, are to keep our eyes “fixed on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1,2) who is our constant leader, protector, provider and counselor. This is why it is critical that we develop the daily habit of spending time with Jesus, in reading His Word, listening to His voice, praying to Him and reflection upon our lives. Only as we do so can we remain under the umbrella of His guiding presence, living out His plan A for our lives.

Disasters in the desert: 11:1-20:29

The heart of the book of Numbers chronicles a series of disasters resulting from *ongoing disobedience, rebellion and lack of faith*. It was this string of incidents that caused all but two people (Joshua and Caleb) to forfeit the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. *Even Moses* was eventually taken down because of weariness trying to lead the obstinate nation. Herein lies the greatest lesson of the book of Numbers: *Either we walk in submission to God and live in the space created by His presence and blessing; or we stubbornly walk in our own ways and live with the consequences of disobedience – the desert life*. The New Testament book of Hebrews spends significant time explaining how this time period in Israel’s journey provides valuable lessons for us as Christ-followers (Hebrews chs.3,4).

- **Rebellion of the people: 11:1-35.** The people began to grumble (again) about conditions in the wilderness (11:1-9). Moses was growing weary of his leadership burden (11:10-15). His complaint to God reveals the human side of his struggle as a leader.

Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent; and the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have You been so hard on Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me? Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers'? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat!' I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me. So if

You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness" (11:10-15).

The Lord decided *not* to end Moses' life; rather, seventy elders were appointed to share the leadership load. God placed His Spirit (a unique leadership gifting) upon these men to help Moses lead the people. In judgment, God sent quail to fall upon the camp for a full month, until the people had quail coming out their noses!

During the initial months after the plagues and the Exodus, the people of Israel obeyed Yahweh out of fear. They saw His power and majesty and trembled in fear at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20:20). This was a 'childlike' obedience to God. Yet, as the first year of their relationship with Yahweh unfolded at Mt. Sinai, there should have been some progression in emotional/spiritual maturity and their understanding of other aspects of God's character: His grace, His love, His provision, His wisdom, His compassion. They did not mature and, as a result, they never truly grew to trust the CHARACTER of God, which stood behind His WORD. The "laws" never became deep, internal convictions; rather, just rules to resent and rebel against. The bottom line is: If you never grow to trust God, you will never grow to obey God.

- **Rebellion of Miriam and Aaron: 12:1-16.** If the peoples' rebellion was not enough, Moses also had to face Miriam and Aaron (his brother and sister) mounting a rebellion against him. Their stated reason was Moses' marriage to a Cushite (Egyptian)

woman. It seems likely that Moses' first wife, Zipporah, had died and this remarriage caused the objection. Yet, there was more discontent underlying this frontal assault on the leadership of Moses. *Was Moses the only authorized spokesperson for God (12:2)?* God intervened to vindicate Moses, judging Miriam with 7 days of leprosy. She was confined outside the camp until her period of divinely imposed discipline was over.

- **Rebellion at Kadesh Barnea: 13:1-14:45.** Numbers 13,14 marks a turning point in the journey of the Exodus generation. They had rebelled against the Lord numerous times; but this incident was the final straw. Once the nation arrived at the southern border of the Promised Land, twelve spies were sent in to spy out the land. Ten came back saying that, while the land was wonderful, the enemies were so strong that they could never be overthrown. Joshua and Caleb were the two spies who believed God's promises *and* that God was big enough to deliver on His promises. The negative report of the ten spies was as follows:

"We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us." So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size . . . and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight" (13:27-33).

Finally, the people concurred with the negative report of the ten spies and demanded a new leader to take them back to Egypt (14:1-4). God then pronounced judgment on the entire Exodus generation: they would all die in the wilderness and *never* enter the Promised Land. Moses interceded for the people, that God might again forgive their rebellion. While forgiveness was granted, the hope of entering the Promised Land was forever lost:

So the Lord said, "I have pardoned them according to your word; but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord. Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it. But My servant Caleb, because he has had a different spirit and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it" (14:20-24).

The ten spies had what some have called grasshopper mentality – Their enemies seemed to be giants while “we became like grasshoppers in our own sight.” Grasshopper mentality is the inevitable result of measuring our own size against the size of our obstacles, trials and enemies. On the other hand, Joshua and Caleb had a very different mentality, because they measured the size of their enemies against the size of their God. The Lord is looking for those who cultivate a BIG view of Him, and “follow Him fully” (14:24), as these two men did. How big are your enemies? Or, perhaps we should ask: How big is your God?

- **Laws to be followed after entering Canaan: 15:1-41.** Numbers 15 repeats certain laws from Leviticus, to be followed when the

people entered the land of Canaan. Aside from the laws themselves, this section provided *encouragement* that, even after God’s judgment upon the Exodus generation, *He still intended to keep His promise to give the Israelites their own Promised Land.* One very interesting law had to do with the clothing the Israelites were to wear, and the *reminder* this was to be:

The Lord also spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel, and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue. It shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot, so that you may remember to do all My commandments and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the Lord your God” (15:37-41).

What sorts of little God-reminders have you incorporated into your life? Is it a plaque that sits on your desk? A cross that you wear around your neck? A ring on your finger? Years ago, I had an old car with a broken radio. Since I couldn’t listen to music, I taped a Bible verse over it, which I read hundreds of times as I drove all over Portland, Oregon: “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all who seek Him; but His power and His anger are against all who forsake Him” (Ezra 8:22). To this day, that verse, and the message it contains, is locked firmly in my memory. Maybe you should bring a few little ‘God-reminders’ into your everyday life.

- **Korah's rebellion: 16:1-50.** Trouble was coming at Moses from every angle. Korah the priest, along with 250 respected leaders, accused both Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves above everyone else and leading the nation into such trouble. Why should not everyone be allowed to offer sacrifices before the Lord?

They assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" (16:3).

Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the 250 rebels! God commanded that their bronze firepans be taken up and hammered into a plating for the altar at the Tabernacle . . . a permanent reminder to the people that they must never rebel against God's authorized leaders and system of worship.

In spite of this visible judgment against the rebels, on the following day the people rose up and rebelled against Moses again, claiming that it was his fault that so many people had died the previous day! At this point, God's wrath broke out against the congregation in the form of a plague. The dead numbered 14,700 . . . only to be checked by the intercession of Moses (God's authorized leader) on their behalf (16:41-50).

God listens to the intercession of those who faithfully walk with Him. To "intercede" means to "stand between" God and people, to seek His favor on their behalf. Intercession is one of the major aspects of our prayer lives. Who have you been called to make regular intercession for?

- **Aaron's rod buds: 17:1-13.** Numbers 17 continues the theme of *divinely authorized leadership*. God affirmed the unique priestly role assigned to Aaron and his descendants. A test was given by God, in which twelve rods were chosen, one from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. These were deposited in the Tabernacle overnight. On the next day, when the twelve rods were brought forth, Aaron's rod had blossoms and fully ripe almonds on it, signifying God's choice of him for the priestly duties. Aaron's rod was placed in the sacred box containing the tablets with the Ten Commandments. This, again, was to be for Israel a perpetual reminder as to the sin of rebelling against God's duly appointed spiritual leaders.

- **The Levites as assistants: 18:1-32.** Chapter 18 contains more instructions to Aaron and the Levites as priests in Israel. The

Levites were given to the High Priests as assistants in the work surrounding the Tabernacle. Portions of the people's sacrificial and monetary offerings were designated for the support of the priests. They had no material inheritance as the other Israelites did; rather, the Lord and His work were their inheritance.

- **The Law of the Red Heifer: 19:1-22.** The sacrifice of a special (and rare) red heifer is described here. The animal was sacrificed outside the camp, after which the ashes were combined with water to form a 'water of purification.' This water was used in cases of ritual defilement resulting from contact with dead persons or dead bodies. One who had touched a dead body was not permitted to enter into the Tabernacle area for normal religious ceremonies *until* he/she was purified by this water.

- **Moses disqualified from entering Canaan: 20:1-29.** Perhaps the saddest of all the disasters in the desert is the fall of Moses the leader. There are 3 'deaths' recorded in Numbers 20 (which I refer to as the 'Obituary Column' of the Bible). Miriam and Aaron died in the wilderness as recorded at the beginning and end of this chapter. Tucked in the middle is the 'death of a dream' for Moses, who was disqualified by his own sin in the presence of the nation.

Having experienced tremendous frustration in leading the obstinate nation over several years, Moses finally broke under pressure, disobeying a clear command of God while the entire nation was looking on:

"Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink" (20:8).

So Moses took the rod from before the Lord, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (20:9-12).

Moses' sin, as a leader, was magnified in that 2 million sets of eyes were watching in the moment that he angrily 'struck' the rock that

he was commanded to ‘speak’ to. Thus, he lost the dream of leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land. Toward the end of Numbers, God will allow Moses to *see* the land of promise from a distance; but not to enter it:

“Go up to this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the sons of Israel. And when you have seen it you too shall be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was; for in the wilderness of Zin, during the strife of the congregation, you rebelled against My command to treat Me as holy before their eyes at the water” (Numbers 27:12-14).

How much did this dream of leading the people into the Promised Land mean to Moses? Listen to his own words, recorded in his farewell speech to the nation Israel, at the end of Deuteronomy:

I also pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, “O Lord God, Thou has begun to show Thy servant Thy greatness and Thy strong hand; for what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as Thine? Let me, I pray, cross over and see the fair land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.” But the Lord was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me; and the Lord said to me, “Enough! Speak to Me no more of this matter. Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes to the west and north and south and east, and see it with your eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan” (Deuteronomy 3:23-27).

<p>Reflections from the New Testament upon the story of Israel in the Book of Numbers</p>
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Many New Testament lessons are founded upon Old Testament stories. The apostle Paul wrote: *“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).* The sad story of Israel’s disaster in the desert formed the basis for two strong admonitions written to the early Christians: 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 3-4. Consider the key lessons that the writer of Hebrews pressed upon the first Christians, based on the tragic events recorded in Numbers.

Hebrews 3-4: Do not harden your hearts to God’s voice.

The anonymous writer of the Book of Hebrews was addressing a

group of *professing* Christians that had stopped heeding God's voice and, instead, were giving heed to the voice of their own desires. As Israel repeatedly grumbled against God and wanted to turn back to Egypt, so these professing Christians were about to turn back to their old ways. Three times, this writer repeats the phrase: "*Today, when you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled*" (3:7; 3:15; 4:7). The force of the application is contained in these lines:

"Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. You must warn each other every day, while it is still 'today,' so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ. Remember what it says: 'Today when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as Israel did when they rebelled'" (Hebrews 3:12-15).

This passage tells us that hardness of heart is a spiritual condition that happens over time . . . as we stop hearing and heeding God's voice. How can we prevent this from happening?

1. When you hear HIS VOICE, do not harden your hearts (3:15).

I recently had a kidney stone removed. No fun! I'm finally ready to acknowledge the simple truth that, if I drink sufficient amounts of water and make some dietary changes, *I can keep stones from hardening in my kidneys.* Similarly, I can keep my heart from hardening into a spiritual stone by continuing to *hear and heed God's voice.* God speaks to us through His written Word; through the "still small voice" of His Spirit, as He brings things to light in our hearts; through the loving voice of those who admonish and encourage us, the 'voice of community.' I need to make sure I am spending sufficient time "being still" and "listening to God" so that I can hear and heed His voice.

"Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything" (Psalm 46:10, The Message).

Are you taking sufficient time to hear and heed God's voice? It is God's voice, and His voice alone, that cuts through the chatter to the deepest recesses and needs of our hearts.

"For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit,

between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires” (Hebrews 4:12).

2. You must warn each other every day (3:13). True spiritual community is essential to prevent hardness of heart. We need strong people around us to keep ourselves strong! In fact, it is often through spiritual community that *the voice of God comes to us*. A fellow believer might exhort you, or encourage you, or teach you, or correct you, or counsel you, or pray over you, or weep with you, or rejoice with you. We all need spiritual community in order to stay attuned to God’s voice. *Do not allow yourself to become isolated*. Knit yourself tightly into an environment of true spiritual community.

“Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24,25).

The Book of Hebrews uses the example of Numbers to warn us that Israel failed to enter God’s place of rest because they stopped listening to God’s voice. So, we also, may miss God’s ‘rest’ (the joy, peace and contentment that come from living in close relationship with Him) IF we fail to hear and heed the voice of God in our lives, today.