

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

**Message 11 – A New Generation prepares  
to enter the Promised Land**  
**Numbers 21-36**

**Introduction**

The second half of the book of Numbers jumps forward to the end of the 40-year wilderness period. The 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Israelites was encamped in Moab, just across the Jordan River on the east side of the Promised Land. They were now poised to enter and take possession of the great land promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). Yet, in the events recorded here we learn that the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation, like the first, had wayward hearts and continued the pattern of disobeying God. Only the *faithfulness of God* would carry these people over the border into the Land of Promise.

**The bronze serpent: 21:1-9**

Picking up a familiar theme, the new generation grumbled against God and Moses because of conditions in the wilderness. In response, God allowed venomous snakes to invade the camp of Israel, leading to many deaths. The people cried out to Moses, and God gave these instructions:

*The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived (21:8,9).*

This incident gave birth to a very famous passage in the New Testament, as Jesus spoke about how He would be lifted up on pole to save us from death:

*“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:14-16).*

Jesus was lifted up on the cross to defeat, for us, the ‘snake-bite of

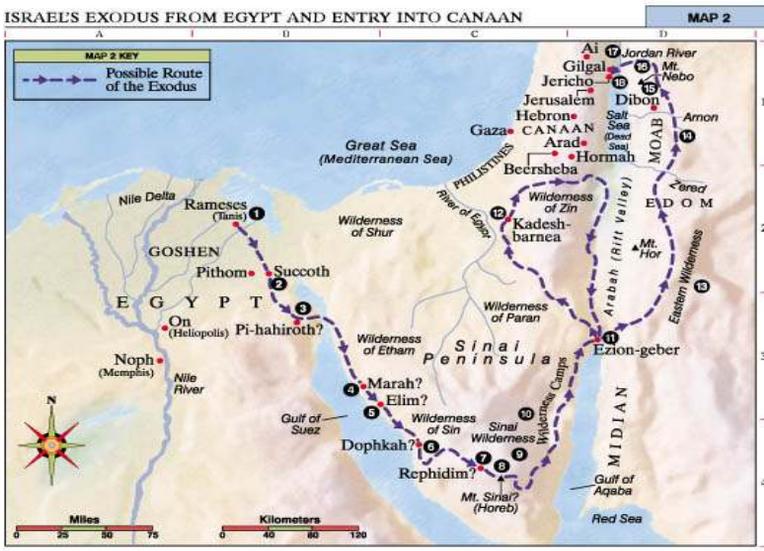
sin.’ When we look to Savior on the cross, with eyes of faith, we are saved from sin and death, and given the gift of eternal life. Have you turned your eyes to the One who was lifted up on the pole, to save you from the Serpent’s deadly bite?

*The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you” (21:7). True confession is admitting that what I have done is wrong, and being specific: “We sinned when we ...” Confession is agreeing with God, since He already knows what we have done. Just saying, “I am sorry that I ...” is NOT true confession. Sadness is a feeling of remorse; but admitting a specific sin does not wait for feelings. True sorrow will be reflected by my repentance and change of behavior.*

### Defeat of the outlying kingdoms: 21:1—35

As Israel moved from Mt. Hor through Edom and Moab, along the eastern edge of the Promised Land, outlying kingdoms rose up to repel their advance. This resulted in initial battles with Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan. In both cases, God gave Israel victory over these outlying kingdoms.

The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the brother of the patriarch Jacob. Moses appealed to this brotherly heritage (20:14-17) hoping that Israel (“your brother Israel”) might be granted safe passage through Edomite territory. Edom, however, refused to acknowledge their shared ancestry. While Jacob and Esau had reconciled with one another (Genesis 32,33), Israel and Edom would go to war.



*“Do not be afraid, for I have handed him over to you ...” (21:34). When we are assured that God has given the green light to move forward, then He expects us to trust Him to be part of the equation of victory and success. Faith involves moving forward in the face of fear. It was fear that had kept the previous generation from moving with confidence into the Promised Land. What area of life is God inviting you to move forward in, trusting Him for victory?*

### **Balaam hired to curse Israel: 22:1-24:25**

Balak, king of Moab, saw Israel’s defeat of the neighboring kingdoms. Feeling greatly threatened, he hired the services of a pagan prophet named Balaam, who had a reputation for being able to effectively invoke spiritual powers to place curses over people and nations. Balak’s urgent message to Balaam was as follows:

***“A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed” (22:5,6).***

The wording is significant, for God had used similar wording in His promise to Abraham long ago. ***“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse” (Genesis 12:3a).*** Thus, the stage is set for a showdown. Will Balaam’s power to curse Israel prevail over Yahweh’s promise to bless Israel and protect His people, and in turn to curse those who try to curse Israel?

God first prevented Balaam from going. Then, he permitted him to go, instructing him to “say only what I tell you to say.” Then, God was angry that Balaam was going. What was happening here? The issues in the *heart of Balaam* become clear as we look closer.

On the way, Balaam’s donkey turned aside from the road, fearing an angel that was blocking forward progress. The donkey, not Balaam, was given eyes to perceive the angelic STOP sign. Thus, a confrontation occurred between Balaam and his donkey, for the prophet did not understand the donkey’s stubborn unwillingness to move. Finally, the angel became apparent to Balaam as well, and the message became clear:

***The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you.” So Balaam went with Balak’s officials (22:35).***

God, who knows our hearts, saw that Balaam was secretly contemplating the use of *his own words*, rather than staying with God's words. He was planning on cursing Israel for the sake of monetary gain (see 2Peter 2:15,16). The donkey (usually a symbol of stubbornness) showed more submission to God and His message than the stubborn prophet! Now, however, Balaam was reminded that he *must* speak *only* the words given to him by God.

Moses, the author of Numbers, knew something about being opposed by God on the way to do God's work. Recall Exodus 4:24 where God sought to put Moses to death as he journeyed back to Egypt to oppose Pharaoh with God's words. Moses was outwardly obeying, but inwardly he had compromised God's will in the matter of circumcising his son. God sees not only our outward movements, but also the inward movements of our hearts!

- **The first oracle:** King Balak took Balaam out to a place where he could see the camp of Israel, hoping he would curse them from that spot. Instead, Balaam blessed Israel with words given by God:

***"How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced? From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them. I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number even a fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my final end be like theirs!" (23:8-10).***

- **The second oracle:** Balak, angered that Balaam had not cursed Israel, took him to another vantage point from which he could only see a portion of the camp of Israel. Perhaps a less impressive view of the camp would allow Balaam to effectively curse them. This time, Balaam came back with a stronger blessing from God:

***"God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it. No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The Lord their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them. God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. There is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'See what God has done!' The people rise like a lioness; they rouse themselves like a lion that does not rest till it devours its prey and drinks the blood of its victims" (23:19-24).***

- **The third oracle:** One final time Balak tried to *help* Balaam utter a curse over Israel. He took him to a desolate place overlooking only the wilderness. Yet, even at this spot overlooking *only desolation*, Balaam was able to speak *only blessing* over Israel:

***“How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters. Water will flow from their buckets; their seed will have abundant water . . . God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. They devour hostile nations and break their bones in pieces; with their arrows they pierce them. Like a lion they crouch and lie down, like a lioness - who dares to rouse them? May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!” (24:5-9).***

The final words of Balaam’s blessing are a repeat of words spoken to Abraham, by God, hundreds of years before: ***“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse” (Gen. 12:3).*** Thus, God’s promise to bless and protect the descendants of Abraham was still in effect, as this new generation stood on the threshold of entering the Promised Land!

*“King Balak flew into a rage against Balaam” (24:10). When we courageously trust God and stand strong in Him, we may expect anger or rage from those who are opposing God’s will. It is important that we ask for God’s strength so that we are not intimidated into buckling under their ‘power-over’ strategies. Fearing God (trusting Him) more than we fear man is one very important step in our Christian walk.*

- **Four oracles of judgment:** Ironically, the prophet who was hired to curse Israel ended up speaking 4 more oracles of *judgment upon Balak and the nations that were standing in Israel’s way* (24:15-25)! Thus, God’s promise to “curse the one who curses Israel” came true for King Balak. He tried to buy a curse on Israel and ended up buying a curse *on his own head and his own kingdom*.

### **Israel seduced into immorality: 25:1-18**

While Balaam could not utter a curse, he must have known enough about Israel’s covenant with Yahweh to know that *Israel could bring divine judgment upon itself* by being disobedient to their God, particularly in the realm of idolatry (the first 4 commandments of the Law). This is exactly what occurred next, as the men of Israel began to engage in pagan worship feasts with Moabite and Midianite women, which involved sexual immorality.

***While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them" (1-3).***

Later Scripture reveals to us that *it was Balaam who came up with the idea of seducing the Israelites into sin so as to bring about God's judgment upon them* (see Revelation 2:14). If you can't get God to break His deal with Israel (curse them) . . . then get Israel to break *their part* of the bargain, thus inviting divine discipline.

Israel's real battle (and ours) was against Satan's desire to destroy them, thus ending God's plan to bring a blessing to the world through them. Satan prowls about like a roaring lion (1Peter 5:8), seeking to devour God's people. If one strategy doesn't work, he tries to find another that will draw people away from God. Those same hostile spiritual forces are active today, seeking to draw God's people away from the path of faith/obedience, onto the path of unbelief/sin (Ephesians 6:12). Thus, the need to put on "the armor of God" daily.

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron the High Priest, displayed God's righteous anger against this incursion of immorality (25:6-13). God rewarded Phinehas and his descendants with a perpetual priestly role in Israel:

***The Lord said to Moses, "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal. Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites" (25:10-13).***

Phinehas was passionate about protecting the honor of God within Israel. He stood against anything that compromised God's name and God's glory. It is a mark of spiritual and emotional maturity to have the courage to take a bold stand for the honor of God, in the face of a culture that is willing to either compromise God's glory or to remain silent when such compromise occurs. Phinehas' reward was great, outliving him for many generations (see Ps.106:28-31).

### **The Second Census: 26:1-65**

The people of Israel were numbered a second time, while they were camped in Moab. The purpose of this census was not just to

number the people; rather, to make sure that none of the first generation of Israelites was still alive:

***Not one of them was among those counted by Moses and Aaron the priest when they counted the Israelites in the Desert of Sinai. For the Lord had told those Israelites they would surely die in the wilderness, and not one of them was left except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun (26:64,65).***

Only Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies, had survived and would be permitted to enter the Land of Promise.

### **A land inheritance for the daughters of Zelophehad: 27:1-11**

Zelophehad was one of the first generation of Israelites who died off in the desert. His five surviving daughters wondered what would become of them once they entered the Promised Land. Would they, like all of the men, receive some sort of land inheritance where they could continue the family line? What were the inheritance rights of daughters when there were no sons to carry on the family line?

The answer from God, to Moses, was that these five women should receive their father's inheritance in Canaan. Further instructions are included as to the transfer of inheritance in Israel, in other atypical cases.

*The daughters of Zelophehad were direct descendants of Joseph. They did not want their father's name to disappear. They had the courage to come forward and claim what was rightfully theirs. With that same confident spirit, we as believers are told to "come boldly before the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Nothing should keep us from claiming our full inheritance!*

### **Joshua appointed as Moses' successor: 27:12-23**

God had made it clear to Moses that he would not lead the people into the Promised Land (recall the incident of Numbers 20). Now, Moses prays that God would raise up his successor:

***Moses said to the Lord, "May the Lord, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (27:15-17).***

In response to this prayer, God instructed Moses to commission **Joshua** as the next leader of Israel. Joshua was, of course, one of

the two faithful spies that had encouraged the people to believe God in the face of ‘giants in the land’ (Numbers 13,14). Beyond that, he was a close companion of Moses throughout the entire time of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness, often appearing with Moses in key contexts (eg. on Mt. Sinai to receive the Law, Exodus 24:13). It was clear from a young age that Joshua had a Moses-like spirit within him, as may be seen from this note about him in the tent of meeting with God and Moses:

***“The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent” (Exodus 33:11).***

Moses obeyed God’s directive, commissioning Joshua as Israel’s next leader before the entire assembly.

***“Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly. Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the Lord instructed through Moses (27:22,23).***

#### **Daily, weekly, monthly and annual sacrifices: 28:1-29:40**

This material is a review of previously stated laws concerning ‘regular’ offerings at the Tabernacle and the observance of the key annual religious feasts (Passover, Day of Atonement, etc.).

#### **Laws concerning vows made by daughters and wives: 30:1-16**

To make a vow before the Lord was a serious matter. Here, instructions were given in cases where vows were made by wives or daughters without consultation with the husband/father. Authority was given to the husband or father to nullify or affirm such vows. This law was designed to protect family inheritances and integrity. The husband/father, acting as ‘head’ of the family, had the right to decide whether the vow was the right thing to do for the whole clan. This ‘buck-stops-with-the-man’ arrangement is paralleled in the New Testament teaching that the husband/father is the ‘head’ of the household, the one who will ultimately answer to God for the decisions and direction of the family.

As Warren Wiersbe points out, this passage contains two elements critical to the health of any society: 1) The keeping of contracts, promises, or vows, and 2) submission to clearly defined authority structures. A society where people do not keep their word and disregard their leaders is one of complete anarchy.

## **Defeat of the Midianites: 31:1-54**

At God's command, war was initiated against the Midianites, the people (particularly the women) who, along with their Moabite neighbors, had earlier seduced Israel into immorality and idolatry, (25:1-3). Phinehas the priest led the warriors into battle, carrying with him "holy objects" from the Tabernacle of God. The holiness of God had been violated in the idolatrous incident earlier. Now, the holiness of God would be vindicated in the battle. Not ONE Israelite died in this battle (31:48)!

God does not deal lightly with those who entice His children into sin. Among those killed in this battle was Balaam, the prophet who had helped to seduce Israel into immorality. The righteous anger of God against such tempters is echoed in Jesus' warning to those who would cause any child of God to stumble:

***"If anyone causes one of these little ones - those who believe in me - to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come (Mathew 18:6,7).***

Moses' last work for God was to display God's glory before the very people who had given him refuge for 40 years. Recall that when Moses first fled from Pharaoh at age 40, he fled to the land of Midian, and took a Midianite wife, Zipporah. Moses showed that he loved God more than people. This reminds us of Jesus' challenging words to Peter after His resurrection: "Simon Peter, do you love Me more than these (fish, friends)?" John 21:15.

## **Trans-Jordan lands given to Reuben and Gad: 32:1-42**

The tribes of Reuben and Gad approached Moses asking for land inheritances in their current location, east of the Jordan River in the "trans-Jordan" territory. Their reason was the simple fact that they were primarily shepherders and they saw that this land was ideal for their livelihood. Moses and the other leaders were concerned that this was an attempt on the part of these tribes to avoid the necessary warfare that would be involved by those tribes crossing over the Jordan into the Land of Canaan. Thus, the leaders of Reuben and Gad were made to swear an oath that they would accompany their brothers into the occupation warfare on the other side of the Jordan. Only after they had fulfilled this oath would they be permitted to inherit and occupy the trans-Jordan spaces.

***Then Moses said to them, “If you will do this - if you will arm yourselves before the Lord for battle and if all of you who are armed cross over the Jordan before the Lord until he has driven his enemies out before him - then when the land is subdued before the Lord, you may return and be free from your obligation to the Lord and to Israel. And this land will be your possession before the Lord. But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out” (32:20-23).***

Whether examining the Old Testament mission of Israel, or the New Testament mission of the Church, there appears to be little room given to ‘spectators.’ Everyone is called to be engaged in the battle, whether the battle to claim the Promised Land, or the battle to claim lost souls for the eternal kingdom. Are you involved in the battle, or are you sitting in the stands watching???

### **Stages in Israel’s wilderness journey: 33:1-56**

This chapter provides a detailed account of Israel’s **42 stops** on the long, 40-year journey, from the time they left Egypt to the present encampment on the eastern border of the Promised Land (see map on p.139). What should have been a journey of 11-15 days (Deuteronomy 1:1,2) turned out to be roughly 14,600 days . . . because of Israel’s stubborn unwillingness to ‘follow the cloud’ and heed the voice of God.

### **The Boundaries of the Promised Land: 34:1-29**

The actual geographical boundaries of the Promised Land are given here (see map below). The individual tribes were allotted specific territories within the land (much like they were earlier assigned specific locations within the camp). Leaders from each tribe were appointed to manage the process of allocating the land.

### **Cities for the Levites and for refuge: 35:1-34**

Earlier we learned that the Levites (priestly tribe) were to receive no land inheritance; rather, *the Lord Himself and His work* was their portion. The Levites were, however, given 48 cities throughout the land that they could live in and where they could pasture their flocks (35:1-5). Six of these Levitical cities were designated as “cities of refuge” (35:6-34). These were cities where someone could find refuge when involved in the *unintended death* of another person (ie., the modern category of “involuntary manslaughter”). Intentional murder was punishable by death.



The “avenger of blood” (usually a relative of the deceased) had the right to put the murderer to death. In unintentional cases of death, however, the person involved in the death of another could flee to one of these six cities of refuge in order to be protected from the avenger of blood. This protection would continue until the death of the current High Priest. After that time, the person could leave the city of refuge without fear of being killed by the avenger of blood. If, however, the individual went outside the gate of the city before the time, his life was at risk at the hand of the blood avenger! Amidst such legal detail, we must not miss the underlying principle involved here – the sacred nature of blood in the religious life of Israel:

***“Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the***

***land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites” (35:33,34).***

**No transfer of land-inheritance from tribe to tribe: 36:1-13**

One final legal matter was addressed as the book of Numbers concluded and the people stood poised to enter the land: the possible transfer of land inheritances from one tribe to another. The situation involving the five daughters of Zelophehad came up again as the test case. What would happen to their father’s inheritance IF the daughters married men from outside of their father’s tribe? Would the land remain in the father’s tribe, or be transferred over to the new husband’s tribe? The answer came from the Lord: Land *could not* be transferred from one tribe to the next by means of marriage. This law was designed to preserve the land inheritance of each individual tribe, and to prevent any one tribe from amassing wealth, over against the other tribes.

Conclusion to Numbers: In the book of Numbers, Moses has chronicled both the tragedy involving the first generation of Israelites, and the hope of the second generation. The first generation failed to heed God’s voice and follow the cloud of God’s presence. Thus, they were laid low in the wilderness and failed to inherit God’s promises. The second generation must learn from the failure of the first, and enter the Promised Land with faith and obedience in the God of the Covenant. This new generation must learn that God has no “grandchildren.” Each new generation must cultivate its own confidence in the God of promise, and walk with eyes fixed on Him into the future. In every generation, the same truth holds:

***“For we walk by faith . . . not by sight” (2Corinthians 5:7).***