

Teachings in the Book of Numbers (II)

Passages: Num 1:1–36:13

Memory Verse

“Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe His word, but complained in their tents, and did not heed the voice of the LORD.” (Psalm 106:24–25)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Works [Behavior]
1. While in the wilderness, the Israelites rebelled in their discontent and lost faith in God. 2. Of the thousands who originally left Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb entered the promised land.	1. God is steadfast. 2. God is judge.	1. Learn to serve God with zeal for His will. 2. Learn to have a steadfast faith. 3. Adopt a heart of contentment by focusing on what we have received from God.

Overview

Spiritual Teachings

- A. Korah and Phinehas
 - **Life Application:** A Heart to Serve God
- B. The Israelites Refuse to Enter Canaan
 - **Life Application:** A Steadfast Faith
- C. True Faith in God
 - **Life Application:** A Heart of Contentment

Memory Verse

Conclusion: The Israelites’ journey to the promised land serves as an example for our own journey of faith. We must have a heart that is zealous for God’s will instead of our own, a steadfast faith, and a heart of contentment. In this way, we can inherit God’s promise of eternal life in His kingdom (1 Pet 1:3–9).

Spiritual Teachings

Introduction

The Israelites' journey from bondage and slavery in Egypt into God's promised land of Canaan is a prefiguration of our own spiritual journey to heaven. Unfortunately, many Israelites fell to their destruction because they were unable to remain steadfast in their faith in God's promises, and they were unable to remain holy and separate from the world. Although their story is very unfortunate and bleak in many ways, if we examine their journey, we can learn several important characteristics needed to complete our journey of faith.

A. Korah and Phinehas

Numbers records the story of two very different men: Korah, a Levite, and Phinehas, a priest and grandson of Aaron. They were both separated to serve God, but their actions drastically differed from one another. Let's first read about Korah in Numbers 16:1–3.

1. Korah

The Levites were a precious tribe to the Lord because of their refusal to worship the golden calf. Because of this, the Lord set them apart to serve Him in a special way. The Levites' duty was to help the priests manage the tabernacle. The sons of Kohath, Korah included, were even above other families within the Levites, as they had been given the "service of the holy things" (Num 7:9). But Korah was not content with this special duty. He had already received so much from the Lord, but what he had wasn't enough for him. What was the source of this discontent?

a. They were full of pride

The rebels told Moses and Aaron, "You take too much upon yourselves, for all the congregation is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" (Num 16:3). Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, also refused to obey Moses, saying, "Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you should keep acting like a prince over us?" (vv. 12–13).

The rebels' reasoning was dressed up as concern for God's people, but Moses understood the truth. Their words revealed hearts that were focused not on their service to God, but on their "status" within the congregation (v. 10). They did not see Moses' close relationship with God, but a person with a coveted position of "leader." As a result, they were discontent with what they had, were tired of being "lesser," and rebelled against God.

b. They didn't treasure their status

Clearly, the rebels didn't value what God had already given to them. Korah had a special status even within the special tribe of Levi, but it was not enough for him. He and his followers still wanted more because they failed to recognize the significant position that God had already given to them. Let's read what Moses said in Numbers 16:9–10. Moses was trying to point out that what they had was already a blessing of God's grace. What He had given to them was no small thing but a treasure that they should have valued.

2. Phinehas

Because of the Israelites' sexual immorality with the women of Moab and Midian, a plague broke out among them and killed around 24,000 people (Num 25:9; cf. 1 Cor 10:8). Seeing this, Phinehas speared through a couple who had committed sexual immorality. Let's read the details in Numbers 25:8–13. How did God describe Phinehas' actions?

a. "He was zealous with My zeal" (v. 11)

It is clear that Phinehas' concern was for God's glory and holiness. He did not worry about the repercussions, or how the Israelites may have perceived him afterwards. His heart was entirely dedicated to God's holiness and to his concern that the Israelite camp was not defiled with immorality or idolatry.

b. "[He] made atonement for the children of Israel" (v. 13)

While Korah did not serve the people as was his duty, Phinehas acted in the best interests of the Israelites, with the intent of cutting off any sin from their midst. The man that he killed was a leader of a Simeonite family (Num 25:14), but Phinehas disregarded the possible consequences and chose to do the right thing. Because of his actions, he turned away the wrath of God and made atonement for the sin that they had committed.

Phinehas' action may seem extreme and violent until we realize how seriously God regards the holiness of His people. God praised Phinehas because he had protected the Israelites from sin and had "made atonement for the children of Israel."

Life Application: A Heart to Serve God

God often set His people apart for special purposes at various times and places. He considered His people a holy nation, a special treasure, and a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:3–6; Lev 11:44). However, the Israelites often failed to live up to their high status. Both Korah and Phinehas were servants of God, but we can see that their attitudes towards their duties were incredibly different. Korah may have been separated to serve God, but his desire was for his satisfaction and self-glory. Meanwhile, Phinehas acted on behalf of God's glory, not his own, and was "zealous for his God" (Num 25:13).

1. Serving out of self-satisfaction

Korah's rebellion was born out of discontent with what God had already given to him. He failed to treasure God's blessings and set his eyes only on what he did not have, rather than what he already had. It is easy to want more recognition for abilities or talents that we forget are from God. It is also human nature to want more than we have, and to receive praise from those around us. But we need to learn to treasure our status as God's precious children, instead of treasuring our material and social riches.

2. Serving to seek out God's will

Serving God is not about our own ego. Like Korah, we may be tempted to think, "Why does this person have a higher status? I am better and deserve more recognition!" But servitude is not about being "special," or believing that we are better than others. It is about seeking God's glory above all else as Phinehas did.

We are God's holy nation, a kingdom of priests separated for His purpose. We are a special people who have been charged with the duty of serving God and those around us. But we are

not special because of anything that we did. We are only different because the Lord especially loved us, chose us, and redeemed us with His life (Jn 15:16, 19; Eph 1:4). God only desires that we love Him in return by seeking out His will above our own.

Remembering this is the first step to serving God with a correct heart. When we have this understanding, we can separate our hearts from the world and focus on God instead of our own worldly desires. God has already given us the blessing of being His chosen people! With this in mind, as God's children, we should not seek to fulfill our own desires, but be zealous for God's will above all else (cf. Eph 4:7–13; 1 Pet 4:10). When we do, just as Phinehas was granted a "covenant of peace" (Num 25:12), we can inherit the many blessings that God has promised.

Discussion

- Have you ever done something for someone else as a form of self-satisfaction, such as pride, in order to "look good" in front of someone, or perhaps to receive something like a material prize or a higher social status?
- How can we train ourselves to change our way of thinking and serve God with a correct heart?

Consider the following scenario and consider how you should react.

When a brother encouraged you to join your local church choir, you happily agreed. Being part of the All-State Choir, you had more experience with singing and music, so you felt that this was a good opportunity to help your brothers and sisters praise God. After a few months, however, you began to feel frustrated. Your fellow choir members weren't as quick to pick up music, and the conductor picked simple, unexciting songs. Eventually, you paid less attention, skipped sessions, and only showed up on time for performances. You were asked to join because you sing better than everyone else, and you don't need as much practice, so you figure there's no harm in being a bit more casual about church choir practice. What is wrong with this attitude, and how can you change yourself in such a situation?

B. The Israelites Refuse to Enter Canaan¹

Despite the wonders that God showed the Israelites every day, they often failed to uphold their faith in Him. Let's read Numbers 13:26–14:10. Instead of being excited about the abundant land that the Lord was prepared to give them, almost all the Israelites were so fearful that they were willing to return to slavery in Egypt! Why were they so afraid?

1. They lacked faith

Inheriting God's promises can be likened to a battle. It can be a physical or a spiritual battle, but it is still a fight in many ways. The spies' report was a spiritual battle, and the Israelites lost. They allowed themselves to be spiritually and mentally defeated even before the physical battle had begun. This is because when faced with the prospect of such danger, they forgot about God's power. They lost faith in His omnipotence. Psalm 78:37 says, "For their heart was not steadfast with Him, nor were they faithful in His covenant." They did not truly believe that God would give what He had promised.

2. They lacked determination

Other than a lack of faith, the Israelites lacked the determination to receive what He

¹ Note that this passage is covered in greater detail in J2 Year 3 Book 2 Lesson 4: *The People Complain and Moses' Prayer*

was offering. They had already received so much from Him and had doggedly followed God's commands so far, but at the slightest sign of resistance, their determination crumbled once more. They didn't want to fight for their blessings. Instead, when faced with the prospect of battle, they longed for their old way of life. They did not want to put any effort into receiving the new life God had promised (Num 14:3–4).

Life Application: A Steadfast Faith

In the very beginning of the Book of Numbers, the children of Israel are counted, and Numbers 1:45–46 states that “from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war in Israel—all who were numbered were six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty.” Yet of these hundreds of thousands of Israelites who left Egypt, only two, Joshua and Caleb, eventually made it into the promised land!

If we examine the book, we can see that the primary reason for this is because the Israelites did not maintain a steadfast faith in the Lord. When we face a difficult situation or challenge that requires faith, we will know if we truly have faith or not. It is through such hardships that we discover whether our faith in God is genuine.

Paul wrote, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58). Being steadfast in our faith means having a faith that is “immovable.” It means that no challenge, hardship, or obstacle will ever interfere with our purpose towards God, or with our determination to receive His promises.

Consider the following scenario:

You and your school friends have been quite close since middle school and have stuck together right into high school. But you have noticed that they are slowly starting to change. Lately, they've been going to more and more parties where you know they are drinking alcohol, and one of them has even begun to smoke or vape on occasion. You feel obligated to remain their friend since you have been so close for so long, but then they begin to pressure you into coming with them to parties, especially on the weekends. How can you remain steadfast in your faith?

Have you thought about why you might lose faith? Think about a situation where you faced hardships or obstacles. For example, have you ever been attracted to someone at school, or perhaps been tempted to cheat because of pressure to increase your grades? In these two cases, you might have lost faith in His promise of salvation if we remain holy, or His promise to help us when we are in need. There is no single formula to overcoming the challenges to our faith, but one thing is certain: we must have a determination to keep an immovable faith.

C. True Faith in God

Throughout the Book of Numbers, we can see that the Israelites often complained or rebelled against God because they felt like they were lacking. They were not content with what God had given them, despite having experienced the pain of slavery and the joy of freedom through God's power. One of the things they complained about the most was food and water. Let's read Numbers 11:4–6.

We can see that the Israelites were incredibly shortsighted. They had rejoiced so much after

being freed from slavery, but the moment things did not go their way, or they lacked the things they desired, they complained to God. In this case, they even chose to remember only the good things of Egypt while completely forgetting the hardships they endured and the blessing of freedom that God gave them! Food and water were the Israelites' most common complaint (Num 11:4–6; 20:2–5; 21:4–5). But they also complained about their position (Num 12:1–2); the challenge of enemies occupying the promised land (Num 13:27–14:9); their duties of service (Num 16:1–14); being punished for their sins (Num 16:41); the holy priesthood (Num 17:2–10).

The Israelites were greatly dissatisfied about many things. With such endless complaints, it is truly a miracle that God did not simply abandon the Israelites. Out of His love and compassion, He continued to provide for them. But their discontent led to a significant loss: none who wanted to return to Egypt were permitted entry into the promised land.

Life Application: A Heart of Contentment

If discontent was the root of the Israelites' rebellion, then we must learn to do the opposite: we must learn to have a heart that is content. It's easy to feel content when life is good, but what about in times of tribulation? Going through a "wilderness" can be very challenging to our faith. Imagine wandering in a desert without food and water. We normally complain when unhappy or in trouble (Jas 5:9), but complaints reflect a heart of discontent, such as when the Israelites craved meat instead of being thankful for the manna they freely received each and every day.

When we allow discontent to affect our relationship with God, we are venturing towards a very dangerous point in our faith. It means that we are dissatisfied with everything that He has given us and forgotten His grace of salvation, earned only through the blood, suffering, and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So, we must learn how to be content. This means focusing on the things we have received instead of what we don't have (Phil 4:11–12).

Discussion

- Is there anything that you have complained about repeatedly in your life? Let's read 1 Timothy 6:6–8. What is your attitude towards your possessions? Towards things that your friends have but that you do not? Do you complain when you don't have something, or do you stop to give thanks for what you already have?

Consider the following scenario and consider how you should react.

You have a friend at school who always has the latest electronics, from the newest console to the latest phone or laptop. Your own family isn't exactly poor, but you often have difficulty convincing your parents to buy you such expensive devices without a valid reason. As a result, you often spend time at your friend's house playing the latest games or watch with envy whenever they are using their better, faster phone. It has gotten to the point where you have even begun to resent your parents and have frequently gotten into arguments with them while trying to convince them to buy what you want. How can you adopt a heart of contentment in this situation? What kind of steps can you take?

The Bible says, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Jesus even warned us, "In the world you will have tribulation" (Jn 16:33). It is inevitable that we will face hardships. But what will our spiritual attitude be when we do? Instead of hoping that we never encounter challenges, we should learn from the Israelites' mistakes by having a heart

that is zealous for God's will, keeping a steadfast faith, and learning to be content with what God has already given to us. That way, when we traverse the wilderness, we know that at the end we will enter the promised land that is God's heavenly kingdom.

Check for Understanding

- 1. What important characteristics do we need to complete our journey of faith?** A heart to serve God for His will instead of our own, a steadfast faith, and a heart of contentment.
- 2. What are the key differences between Korah and Phinehas?** Korah was discontent with his position, did not treasure his status, and served only out of self-satisfaction. But Phinehas was zealous for God and acted on behalf of God's glory.
- 3. Why did the Israelites fear entering into Canaan?** They lacked faith and the determination to receive God's promises.
- 4. What does it mean to have a steadfast faith?** It means having a faith that is "immovable." No challenge, hardship, or obstacle will ever interfere with our purpose towards God, or with our determination to receive His promises.
- 5. Why is it important to learn to be content?** When we allow discontent to affect our relationship with God, we are venturing towards a very dangerous point in our faith. Complaints reflect a dissatisfaction with God's promises, and a heart that has forgotten the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Memory Verse

"Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe His word, but complained in their tents, and did not heed the voice of the LORD." (Psalm 106:24–25)

Meaning

While traveling in the wilderness, the Israelites repeatedly expressed their discontent and dissatisfaction, constantly desiring what they did not have. They failed to treasure what God gave to them and were unable to appreciate the love and care that He offered to His chosen people. As a result of their constant complaints, they were unable to experience God's promises. We must be careful to avoid making the same mistakes, and instead learn to open our eyes to what God has given us!

Conclusion

The Israelites' journey to the promised land serves as an example for our own journey of faith. We must have a heart that is zealous for God's will instead of our own, a steadfast faith, and a heart of contentment. In this way, we can inherit God's promise of eternal life in His kingdom (1 Pet 1:3–9).

Lesson 2 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. Why did the Israelites repeatedly express their discontent? What was the result?
They constantly desired what they did not have. They failed to treasure what God gave to them and were unable to appreciate the love and care that He offered to His chosen people. As a result, they were unable to experience God's promises.
2. "Now _____ with _____ is great _____. For we brought _____ into this _____, and it is certain we can carry _____ out." (1 Timothy 6:6-7)
godliness, contentment, gain, nothing, world, nothing
3. What is the key difference between Korah and Phinehas' actions?
Korah was discontent with his position, did not treasure his status, and served only out of self-satisfaction. But Phinehas was zealous for God and acted on behalf of God's glory.
4. Why did the Israelites refuse to enter Canaan?
They lacked faith, and they lacked determination.
5. What is a steadfast faith? What in your life has caused your faith to shake in the past?
*Being steadfast in our faith means having a faith that is "immovable."
Personal answers.*
6. Is your heart discontent? How can you learn to be content with what you have?
Personal answers.
7. Think of the blessings that God has given you and write down as many as you can. In your prayers this week, give thanks for each blessing that you write.
Personal answers.