

A full-page background image of a vast desert landscape with rolling sand dunes. A lone figure is walking away from the viewer, leaving a trail of footprints in the sand. The sky is a clear, bright blue, and the lighting suggests a warm, sunny day.

Today

July/Aug 2020

refresh, refocus, renew

**WITH US IN THE
WILDERNESS**

ALSO: JESUS IN JOHN: WHO GOD IS

Dear Friends:

Where I live in Michigan, we occasionally have summer dry spells. For the most part, though, we have plenty of water. So maybe, like me, you have a hard time truly imagining the harshness of the desert, let alone living there.



In July, focusing on the book of Numbers, Pastor Tom Groelsema helps us picture the desert and Israel's life there for forty years. Israel's time in the desert had some harsh realities and grim moments, but it was also a time of intimacy with God. The Lord was with them every moment and provided for all their needs. Their experience in the wilderness with God can help us when we face "wilderness" times in our lives, especially when we recognize God's presence with us through his Son, Jesus.

In August, Pastor A.J. Gretz picks up the theme of Jesus' teachings and ministry in the book of John. As fully God and fully human, Jesus was able to show us who God is, and the good news is that he was able to reconcile us with God. Through Jesus we are freely forgiven and given new life. Now that really is good news!

As you reflect on Israel's time in the desert and on Jesus' life and ministry for us, may you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

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**"With Us in the
Wilderness"**
Tom Groelsema



**"Jesus in John:
Who God Is"**
A.J. Gretz

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ReFrame
Media

With Us in the Wilderness

Tom Groelsema

july

Life is wonderful, and it can be filled with excitement and new possibilities. But, as many of us know, life can also have setbacks and struggles. Sometimes it can even feel more like a desert than a place of abundant living.

The book of Numbers can help us with that. Did you know that the original Hebrew name for this book is “In the Desert”? Numbers tells the story of Israel’s time in the desert wilderness, as they wandered for forty years before entering the land God had promised them. That period in their lives was often difficult, but it supplied many lessons for building up their faith. And the biggest lesson was that God was with them all along the way.

Tom Groelsema and his wife, Sheri, have served churches in Minnesota, Michigan, and North Carolina. They have four children and three granddaughters.

Jesus in John: Who God Is

A.J. Gretz

august

In the book of John we learn a lot about Jesus and why he came. Jesus is more than a teacher and more than a prophet. In fact, Jesus is God himself, and he came to show us what God is like.

Many of the stories about Jesus in John help us better understand who God is and how he feels about us. The main thing is that full life with God is not about something we do to try to earn God’s favor or make up for our sin. It is about *receiving* the gifts of forgiveness and new life, made possible in Jesus.

Anthony Joseph (A.J.) Gretz is a pastor in Grandville, Michigan. He has also served churches in Ohio and in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He and his wife, Anna, have three children.

BELONGING TO GOD

The LORD spoke to Moses . . . in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.
—Numbers 1:1

The book of Numbers begins with a reference to the Israelites' coming out of Egypt, where they had been slaves for many years (see Exodus 1-14). Thirteen months had passed since then, and many miles of wilderness lay ahead before they would enter the land God had promised to their ancestor Abraham (Genesis 13:14-18).

The people had been camped at Sinai for more than a year. And soon God would get them moving again toward the promised land. How would they survive in the wilderness journey ahead? They needed to remember that God had delivered them out of slavery, and that they were God's people. God had rescued them, and he would not abandon them in the wilderness. God had delivered them and would bring them to the land he had promised.

When life is difficult, we must remember that God has delivered us too. By sending his Son, Jesus Christ, God has freed us from our slavery to sin and death. Jesus died to pay the price for our sin. Through him, we are saved and given new life to enjoy with God forever.

We may experience troubles in life. At times, life can even seem like a desert, but God reminds us that we belong to him because of his salvation in Christ. He has delivered us from sin and death; he will not abandon us in the wilderness. If you find yourself in the wilderness, put your hope in God, who will carry you through.

Lord God, walk with us in the wilderness experiences of life and remind us that because of Jesus we are yours. Amen.

THE GOOD FIGHT OF FAITH

“Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans . . . listing every man by name, one by one.” —Numbers 1:2

Before leading Israel into the wilderness, God told them to count every man 20 years old or older and able to serve in the army. And “the total number was 603,550.”

A census may seem boring, but we can learn some things from it. First, it reminds us that God is faithful. God had promised that Abraham’s descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore (Genesis 22:17). And here a census of the men able to serve in Israel’s army numbers in the *hundreds of thousands*—and that doesn’t include women, children, the Levites, and many others who made up the people of Israel. God had kept his promise.

The census also shows that at that time in history, God’s people needed an army to defend themselves, and when God called them to battle against his and their enemies, they need-

ed to be prepared. God would fight for his people and protect them, but they also needed to stand firm and show other nations that they were God’s faithful people. The battles they fought were rooted in spiritual war between the one true God and the false gods of other nations, led by the great deceiver of all peoples—Satan, who wants to destroy us all.

Today we are still involved in spiritual war for God’s kingdom. The Christian life is a fight of faith. The devil wants us to lose hope and abandon God. But Jesus, our Savior, has defeated all our spiritual enemies. Are you fighting the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12)?

God, you are faithful.
Help us to be faithful to
you, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

GOD AT THE CENTER

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: "The Israelites are to camp around the tent of meeting. . . ."
—Numbers 2:1-2

For many people, summertime is camping season. It's a great time to go camping and enjoy the outdoors.

For 40 years in the wilderness, Israel camped. They didn't have permanent homes; they lived in tents.

Their camping arrangement was set by God. Each tribe had its assigned place. What was most notable about the arrangement is that all the tribes camped around the tent of meeting. The tabernacle, or tent of meeting, was the place where God was present and lived among his people, and it was the center of the camp. God was in the midst of his people. The Lord was at the heart of Israel's life and wilderness journey.

The truth that God is with us is one of the most repeated promises in the Bible. God

tells us that he will be with us wherever we go. God, who is faithful, will never leave us or forsake us.

Today we know that God came to live among us in the person of his Son, Jesus. At his birth, Jesus was called Immanuel, which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). This is a promise that should encourage us through the wilderness of life.

But there's also a challenge to respond to. Are we living with God in the center of our lives?

Lord, you have promised to be with us always. Help us also to live with you at the center of our lives each day. Amen.

STANDING OUT FOR GOD

"This is the law of the Nazirite. . . . They must fulfill the vows they have made. . . ."
—Numbers 6:21

The Nazirite vow was a voluntary and temporary vow that any man or woman in Israel could take. During the period of the vow, a Nazirite could not eat or drink anything from the grapevine, cut their hair, or be in the presence of a dead body. Because of these unusual restrictions, Nazirites stuck out. Some Nazirites were dedicated for life. Probably the most famous Nazirite was Samson (Judges 13).

Why would anyone make a Nazirite vow? It was a way to consecrate yourself fully to God. By taking the Nazirite vow, you were saying, "I'm stepping away from the normal routines of life to give myself to God." Today we might do something similar by giving up food or technology to devote ourselves more fully to prayer.

What can we learn from the Nazirite? They provide an ex-

ample of a kingdom-minded, God-treasuring disciple, dedicated to the Lord. Our devotion to God should be sacrificial, total, and public. God must come first in our lives, meaning that we are willing to give up things to follow him. God must come before food, drink, family, and friends. Even more important, our love for God should be obvious to others. We live this way because we have a Savior who gave himself up for us. As in the words of a hymn, we declare that "love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Jesus, we are often afraid to stick out for our faith. May we completely live for you, remembering that you first loved us. In your name, Amen.

THE BLESSING OF GOD

The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites.'"
—Numbers 6:22-23

Today Christians all over the world will gather to worship God. Many will receive a closing blessing in worship through the words that Aaron and his sons spoke over Israel: "The LORD bless you and keep you. . . ."

What is this blessing that God puts on us? First, we receive the blessing of God's protection and keeping. This is something we need in the wilderness of life. Life is full of trials, heat, hunger, and death. How good it is to hear God say that he will keep us! Second, we receive the blessing of God's pardon. Another way of saying that God's face shines on us is to say that his face lights up with delight. This is true because of Jesus. His face shines on us in grace. Third, we receive the blessing of God's peace. When our face is turned away from someone else, it is often a sign

of tension. But when our face is turned toward another, it is a sign of peace. God's blessing on us is that his face will be turned in our direction so that we will know peace with him.

We must remember that these are not wishes but *blessings*. In other words, they are true for us because of Christ. In Jesus Christ, we are kept, forgiven, and restored to peace with God.

Receive and believe his blessings today!

Dear Father, we thank you that as we make our way through life's ups and downs, we have your blessings through Christ. Help us to believe it. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

JOYFUL GIVING

When the altar was anointed, the leaders brought their offerings for its dedication and presented them before the altar.

—Numbers 7:10

What kind of giving pleases God? In this passage, the Israelites brought offerings to the Lord as the tabernacle was dedicated. How did they give, and what do we learn about giving that honors God?

First, everyone gave. This is a long passage that describes what each tribe brought to the tabernacle, and you might notice that each tribe brought the same gifts. Each tribe shared in kingdom giving. That's important. Whether we have much or little, God wants all of us to give. Second, we are to give generously. The gifts from each tribe were lavish and large. What we give may not be the same from person to person, but is it generous? Are we sacrificial in our giving?

Generous giving flows from the heart dedicated to God. Israel's giving was joyful. It

flowed from their appreciation of God's goodness to them. Their offerings came after the announcement of God's gracious blessings in Numbers 6.

In the same way, our giving flows from our appreciation for the grace of God shown to us through Jesus Christ, who has saved us from sin and gives us new, abundant life with God. Grace creates givers.

What can you give to God and his kingdom? Whatever it is, do it with joy.

O God, you have given us full life in Christ. May our giving flow from a heart of faith and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

The LORD said . . . “ . . . ‘When you set up the lamps, see that all seven light the area in front of the lampstand.’”

—Numbers 8:1-2

The tabernacle in the wilderness was a unique place with interesting furniture. One piece of furniture was the lampstand described in our passage. It was made of hammered gold, with seven branches for its lamps, shaped like almond buds and blossoms. The lampstand stood in the Holy Place and lit up the space in front of it, especially the table that had twelve loaves of bread on it, which represented the twelve tribes of Israel (see Exodus 25:23-40; Leviticus 24:1-9).

Why does the book of Numbers single out this piece of furniture in the tabernacle? It reminded Israel that God's favor was shining on them, even though they were in a wilderness. God was giving them his light. The people needed this reminder in the deadly, dark wilderness—and so do we.

When we find ourselves in what feels like a wilderness, it's easy to lose hope. But then God says, "My light is on you." For us today, that light is Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12). In Christ, God reminds us that he has not abandoned us and that his love is for us.

We are also called to shine the light of Christ into the wilderness experiences of others. We need to do this individually and as churches. Jesus' light shining through us gives hope to others.

Whose life do *you* need to shine into?

Jesus, you are the light of the world, and you call us to shine your light everywhere. May we bring hope to others through your gospel of grace and forgiveness. Amen.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped.

—Numbers 9:17

A popular children's game is "Follow the Leader." In this game you only have one job: do whatever the leader does. If the leader walks up a hill, you follow up the hill. If the leader jumps, you jump. When the leader stops, you stop.

In the wilderness, Israel followed the Lord, their leader. A cloud that represented God's presence settled on the tabernacle. God came in this cloud to be with his people. By day it looked like a cloud, probably like thick fog or smoke. And at night it looked like fire. When the cloud moved, Israel moved. When the cloud settled, Israel camped. The Israelites were not supposed to go in front of the cloud. They were not to move on when the cloud stood still. All they needed to do was follow. This passage shows that they learned to do that.

Following God through the wilderness of life is our task too. It takes faith and trust. Often we'd like to run ahead of God into our future. Sometimes we might not like where the Lord is leading, so following him can be frightening. But the God who leads us is the God who is with us and for us. "He is the faithful God" (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Will you follow him?

Jesus, you called your disciples to leave their old lives behind and follow you. May we be your faithful followers too. For your sake, Amen.

SHARING THE GOOD THINGS OF GOD

"If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the LORD gives us."
—Numbers 10:32

After a long period of camping at Sinai, Israel was finally ready to head into the wilderness. Each family group marched in line, with the cloud of the Lord leading them. As they set out, Moses asked his brother-in-law Hobab to come with them. Hobab was familiar with the desert, and the Israelites would benefit from his skills as a guide.

Moses' invitation wasn't made just for what Hobab could do, but also for what Israel could share with him. Moses said, "Come along, 'for the LORD has promised good things to Israel.'" Moses knew that God would bless Israel, and he wanted Hobab to experience that. In this way Moses was inviting Hobab to join in the spiritual inheritance of Israel.

Sometimes we resist sharing our faith because we feel like we're pushing something on

someone else. But when we share the good news of Jesus Christ, we are calling others to come along and experience God's grace and love. God calls us to keep sharing his good news and love with others always. Moses promised Hobab, "We will share with you whatever good things the LORD gives us." Sharing the good things of God is always a part of our living with God.

Whom could you invite to come along on the journey of grace and faith? A friend or relative? God's grace is too good to keep to ourselves. Let's share it.

Lord God, may we be faithful to share your good gifts—your love, peace, forgiveness, and joy. Give us courage to invite others into life with you. Amen.

COMPLAIN, COMPLAIN

Now the people complained. . . .

—Numbers 11:1

Complaining can seem like a favorite pastime for many of us. We complain about the weather and what we have to wear. We complain about food and finding nothing to do. We complain about traffic and technology.

Complaining was second nature for Israel during the wilderness years. In our passage, Israel was only three days into their wilderness journey when they started to complain. They complained about their hardships and the wilderness food. They wanted something different from the manna they had to eat, day in and day out. The food they had eaten in Egypt seemed so much better.

Life, like the wilderness, can be hard, but when we complain, we fall into the devil's trap. When we complain, we tend to glamorize what we don't have. Did they really have it

better in Egypt? Somehow the people completely forgot the hardships they had endured there as slaves. When we complain, we tend to see life in a distorted way. Grumbling flows from people who think they deserve something better.

Paul calls us to do everything without grumbling (Philippians 2:14). Is this possible? Yes, when we learn to concentrate on God's grace in Christ. How can we complain so often when we know we are loved by God? His grace can move us from grumbling to gratitude.

Father, every good and perfect gift comes from you (James 1:17). Help us to be content and thankful. Forgive us when we grumble, and help us to be content in you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

PROPHETS OF GOD

"I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" —Numbers 11:29

It was clear to Israel that Moses spoke for God. God would meet with Moses in the tent of meeting and give him words to say to the people.

So when Joshua heard about two men who had prophesied in the camp, it made sense that he would want to protect Moses' unique role as God's prophet. But Moses responded, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" Moses was not threatened; instead, he saw what a *blessing* it would be if all God's people would speak for and from God.

Moses' desire was fulfilled centuries later when the Spirit of God came to God's people on Pentecost (Acts 2). The prophet Joel had proclaimed that a day was coming when God's Spirit would be poured out on

all people. And on Pentecost the crowds of visitors from all nations heard the followers of Jesus declaring the wonders of God in their own languages. The age of the Spirit had come because our chief prophet, Jesus, had provided us salvation and given his followers new life in the Spirit.

If you are a Christian, the Spirit of God is living in you. You have been anointed by the Spirit to declare the praises of God. The world needs bold prophets who speak God's truth, hope, love, and grace. With whom will you share the truth of Jesus today?

Lord, as your prophets, may we share your message of grace and truth with the people around us. May others hear and see Christ in us. Amen.

SERVANT LEADERS

"Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?"
—Numbers 12:2

As we saw yesterday in Numbers 11, even though Moses was a unique prophet of God, God's Spirit was poured out on other leaders in Israel. This was apparently the context for Miriam and Aaron saying, "Hasn't the LORD also spoken through us?" They may have longed for the gift of the Spirit so that they too could prophesy, but they also envied Moses' unique relationship with God. God spoke face to face only with Moses. Miriam and Aaron wanted what Moses had. They grumbled against the Lord and faced the Lord's anger.

Today is a day of gathered worship among God's people. We will meet to praise God, listen, pray, give, and sing. Pastors will preach. Every Christian is called to be a prophet, priest, and king in the name of Jesus. Yet we recognize that some

have been uniquely called to speak for God as preachers and leaders. God's Spirit is poured out on all Christians, yet his Spirit rests in a unique way on the leaders who open God's Word for us.

How can you support your pastors today? How can you personally encourage them? Make sure you pray for those who are called to preach. Give them a note of encouragement. Listen and apply what they have taught. Remember that they are God's servants to you.

On this Lord's Day, we thank you, Lord, for pastors and preachers who proclaim your Word. May we honor and support them in Jesus' name. Amen.

GRASSHOPPERS OR GOD'S PEOPLE?

"We saw the Nephilim there. . . . We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."

—Numbers 13:33

Moses sent twelve men of Israel, one from each tribe, to explore the land of Canaan. Only two of the explorers, Joshua and Caleb, came back with a good report (see Numbers 14:6-9). They said, "The land is good, and God will lead us into it." They trusted God to give Israel the land he had promised. The other ten explorers were gripped with fear because the people of the land seemed too big. They said, "We seemed like grasshoppers to ourselves and to them."

When fear takes over, our perspectives on many things can get distorted. For example, our view of God may become skewed. God may seem small in light of our problems, or God's Word may seem empty in the face of our difficulties. Even our view of ourselves may get cloudy when our faith

is weak. Israel said they felt like grasshoppers when in fact they were the chosen and cherished people of God.

It's important to remember who we are in Christ. We are the body of Christ. We are sons and daughters of the King. We are called "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" (1 Peter 2:9).

When fear creeps in, remember the God you serve. Remember who you are and whose you are. Then step forward in faith, leaning on God's promises and power.

Lord, when my trials are great, help me to remember that you are much greater. You are the God who calls me his child, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

A WARNING FROM THE WILDERNESS

"For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you."
—Numbers 14:34

We have reached a low point in the book of Numbers. The failure to trust God's promise about the land of Canaan was an epic act of unbelief. And the consequences were terrible. For forty years Israel would have to wander in the wilderness even though they had reached the doorstep of Canaan. Even worse, an entire generation would die in the desert. They would fall short of the inheritance God had promised. Only Joshua and Caleb, the two explorers who trusted God, would survive and eventually live in the promised land.

The book of Hebrews takes up this story as a warning for us still today. We are warned not to turn away from God by having a sinful, unbelieving heart. The generation that died in the desert saw God's deliverance from Egypt but lost faith

in God. We are called to hold firmly to Christ to the end.

How can we do this? We must remember that God still has a promise of rest for us today. This promise is about eternal, salvation rest in Christ—as well as life together with God in the new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1-7). We also must encourage one another daily to resist sin. We need to help each other see sin's deceptions and then walk with each other to remain firm. Finally, we must listen to the Spirit, who says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Learn from Israel's failures and ask God to help you persevere in faith.

It's so easy, Lord, to fail to trust in you. Strengthen our faith so that our hope always rests in you. Amen.

ONE PATH TO GOD

Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them. He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped.

—Numbers 16:47-48

It was a shocking display of God's justice. Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and all their families were swallowed alive by the earth. In this way God showed that Moses and Aaron were his appointed leaders.

But that terrible event didn't keep the people from grumbling. They continued to oppose Moses and Aaron. So God sent a plague on the camp.

Then, as Moses directed him to, Aaron ran into the midst of the people with his holy censer to offer atonement for the people's sins. It was a bold move. Because of the plague, many people were already diseased, and some had already died. For Aaron to touch anyone who had the plague or died from it would have made him unclean and unable to minister as a priest. But he did his priestly duty. In the words

of our passage, he "stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped." He prevented those who were alive from joining the dead.

This scene points to what Jesus has done for us. When Jesus, the holy Son of God, became human like us, he entered a world filled with sin and death. He even took on death for our sake, to pay the price for our sins. And now he lives to intercede for us. So our salvation is secure. He stands between the living and the dead, keeping us in the salvation he has won for us. If you are in Christ, hell cannot touch you. Praise God that Jesus bars the way!

Jesus, thank you for saving us. Help us to live faithfully for you. Amen.

THE STAFF THAT BUDDERD

Aaron's staff . . . had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds.
—Numbers 17:8

It was a miraculous, incredible sign. God said, "The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout." A dead stick would come to life!

One staff from each tribe, including Aaron's staff for the tribe of Levi, was placed before the Lord in the tabernacle. And by the next day, Aaron's staff had not only sprouted, but it had also budded, blossomed, and grown almonds. It had gone through all the stages of fruitfulness.

Aaron's staff was a sign that his family was chosen by God to do the work of priests—offering sacrifices and prayers to God for the people. Aaron's staff also pointed ahead to the coming of our great High Priest, Jesus. Aaron's staff not only sprouted but also grew almonds. It looked a lot like the lampstand in the tabernacle with its leaves and blossoms

(Exodus 25:31-36), and the lampstand was a sign pointing to Jesus as the light of the world (John 8:12). Aaron's staff was a gracious sign that God was with his people to give them life and life.

Like Aaron's staff, Jesus grew up "like a tender shoot, like a root out of dry ground" (Isaiah 53:2). He was the ultimate Servant of the Lord, and he became our ultimate High Priest (Hebrews 9-10). Praise God that in Christ our God is with us to save.

Heavenly Father, just as you gave Israel a sign of your saving presence, you have shown us that Jesus saves. Thank you for your grace. Amen.

LISTENING TO GOD'S WORD

"Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy . . . you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

—Numbers 20:12

One of the greatest threats in the wilderness is to run out of water. In the Desert of Zin there was no water for Israel to drink, and it seemed as if God was leaving them to die in the desert. But God came to the rescue.

This was not the first time God provided water in the desert. Earlier in Israel's journey God had commanded Moses to strike a rock. Moses obeyed, and water gushed out (Exodus 17:1-7). But now God told Moses only to *speak* to the rock. But Moses, angry with the people's complaints, *hit* the rock, and the Lord later said, "Because you did not honor me as holy, you will not bring Israel into the land."

Obeying what God says can be difficult. It can be challenging to believe that God's commands are for our good.

But disobeying God leads to trouble. Our lives can't flourish when we rebel against what God says.

God was gracious to give his people water in spite of Moses' disobedience. And God is gracious to us in spite of our sin. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:4 that Jesus was the spiritual rock that accompanied Israel and from which they drank in the wilderness. He took the blows for us so that we might have the living water that our souls need.

Jesus, thank you for taking the punishment for us and giving us your life-giving water. Help us always to obey you. Amen.

DEATH IN THE DESERT

"Aaron will be gathered to his people."

—Numbers 20:24

People often say there are two things that are certain in life: death and taxes. This passage doesn't say anything about taxes, but it talks a lot about death. Sometimes that may seem morbid, but all of us need to recognize the reality of death.

Death confronted three people in this passage. Moses' sister Miriam and his brother Aaron both died. And Moses' death was announced. Miriam's death was ordinary, while Aaron and Moses' deaths were connected to their failure to listen to God's commands.

Death is a common yet painful part of life in the wilderness. Before any of us reach heaven, we are going to die—unless Jesus returns first. Death kills, and for those of us who lose a loved one to death it stings painfully; it's not something we get over in a short time. We were created to live, not die.

When we are faced with death, though, we must not grieve as people without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We are reminded here that death does not have the last word. God said that Aaron would be gathered to his people. This is not just a way of making death sound nice; it's a statement that Aaron *still belonged* to God's people.

So it is with us. We have a resurrected Savior. If we are in Christ, we know that death cannot separate us from his love, and our souls will go to be with him.

Lord Jesus, you have defeated death for us. Comfort all who are hurting and grieving today, and help us to trust in you. Amen.

LOOK AND LIVE

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."

—Numbers 21:8

Some people like snakes, but a lot of us don't. We see them as dangerous and even sneaky and suspicious.

Israel didn't like snakes either. Poisonous snakes caused many of the Israelites to die after grumbling against God. Snakes commonly live in the wilderness, but they can also be seen as a symbol of power. Perhaps because Israel complained that they were better off in Egypt, some people have noted that snakes were a symbol of the power of Egypt, for they were often displayed on the crowns of Egypt's kings. So people have suggested that in sending venomous snakes, maybe God was saying, "Do you *really* want to go back to Pharaoh's stinging, deadly power? Is Egypt better?" Of course, snakes can also remind us of the deceiving serpent in Eden (Genesis 3).

What's surprising is that God's cure for Israel was to look at a bronze snake lifted up on a pole. By doing that, Israel was looking in faith to the Lord's power to heal. Only God could cure, and the people needed to look to him with eyes of faith.

In John 3:14-15, Jesus said that "just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up," that whoever believes in him "may have eternal life." Jesus was lifted up on the cross so that we can be forgiven and healed. Are you trusting in him so that you can be saved?

Jesus, we worship you as the crucified Christ. As we worship today, may we look to you with eyes of faith. In your name, Amen.

GOD'S BLESSED PEOPLE

God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."

—Numbers 22:12

It's not unusual to hear Christians say "I am blessed" when someone asks how they are doing.

Israel was indeed blessed. When God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, he said, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you" (Genesis 12:2). God promised Israel the blessing of his presence. He promised them the blessing of prosperity. Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore. God also promised the blessing of a land for his descendants to live in.

Because Israel had these promises in their past and future, God would not allow Balaam to curse his people. King Balak of Moab thought that the only way he could weaken Israel and keep them from taking his land was to get Balaam to

put a curse on Israel. But that would not and could not work.

We too are blessed people. Because of Jesus, the blessings given to Abraham and Israel are ours. God also promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). That promise was fulfilled in Abraham's descendant, Jesus. In Christ, God is for us; and if God is for us, no one can stand against us. No one can separate us from God's love or keep us from receiving the eternal inheritance he has promised (Romans 8:31-39). In Christ each of us can truly say, "I am blessed."

Father, we thank you for all the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ. May we see that we are secure in you. Amen.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel.

—Numbers 24:1

The king of Moab wanted Balaam to curse Israel, but he couldn't. Balaam could only speak blessings as the Lord gave him words to say. In this passage we find that he blessed Israel by saying that they would flourish like a well-watered garden.

It's important to occasionally think about all the ways God has blessed us. Even when life hurts, we have many blessings to thank God for. Here's a way to use the word *BLESS* to count our blessings (adapted from Alvin Vander Griend, HarvestPrayer.com):

B is for *body*. Thank God for physical health and the ability to walk, run, play, breathe, and think. Pray for people who can't enjoy these things.

L is for *labor*. Praise God for jobs and income that help to meet your needs. Thank God

for your employer and the people you work with.

E is for *emotions*. Thank God for joy, peace, contentment, and more.

S is for *social*. We are blessed with relationships. Thank God for parents, grandparents, siblings, children, friends, and all relationships in the church.

S is for *spiritual*. Thank God for all the gifts of salvation in Christ. Praise God for forgiveness, prayer, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the hope of eternal life.

May each of us learn to say, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow."

Lord, what a great God you are! Your blessings overflow to us. May we be a blessing to others. Amen.

SIN'S RELENTLESS ATTACK

So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.
—Numbers 25:3

In this story we see that Israel brings a curse and plague on itself. And in Numbers 31:16, we learn that it was Balaam (see also Numbers 22-24) who advised their enemies to seduce the Israelites in this way. So the men of Israel fell into sexual relationships with the women of Moab and bowed down to their gods. "And the LORD's anger burned against them."

This story reminds us that if sin is not able to get a foothold in one area of our life, it will try to lodge itself in another. We have enemies that relentlessly attack us, such as the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature. They will not stop. When we're spiritually strong in one area, they look for a weakness in another area.

To resist these attacks, we need to be vigilant and humble. We need to be alert to sin's

power and the devil's schemes. We need to know our weaknesses. And we need to cry out to God for help. For Israel, the action of Phinehas the priest brought atonement for the people's sin. For us, Jesus has become our faithful High Priest. His blood atones for our failures, and his intercession secures our Father's favor.

Where do *you* feel vulnerable? Where are you tempted? "Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Ephesians 6:10). Go to Jesus for help.

Heavenly Father, protect us from the schemes of our enemies. Help us to stand firm and to be faithful to you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

MORE NUMBERS?

"Take a census of the whole Israelite community by families—all those twenty years old or more. . . ." —Numbers 26:2

I'm not a numbers person. Maybe you're not either. For some of us it can be hard to read a chapter full of numbers like the one in our reading for today. But God has some important lessons here for us.

First, God teaches about our need for his grace. This is the second census in Numbers because a new generation was on the scene. One generation had died in the desert because the people had not trusted God to take them into the promised land. And many from this new generation had also died recently because of Israel's sin with Moab (Numbers 25). If you compare the numbers from one census to the other, you will see that some tribes increased and some decreased. The tribe of Simeon lost over 37,000 men—perhaps they took the brunt of God's wrath for Israel's adultery with Moab.

Like them, we all have sinned and need God's grace.

Second, this census shows that God is faithful. Even though one whole generation died, the total number of those counted was only about 1,800 less than in the first census. God was faithful to his promise to give Abraham numerous descendants. When we fail, we need to remember that God doesn't. The Lord is rich in grace to all who call on him.

When it comes to numbers, a Scottish pastor, Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-43), had this advice: "For every look at [your]self, take ten looks at Christ." What a great encouragement!

Lord, thank you for your mercy in spite of our failures. May our sins drive us to your grace. Amen.

A FRESH START

The line of Korah, however, did not die out.

—Numbers 26:11

Back in Numbers 16 (July 15) we looked at the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who rebelled against God's appointed leaders. The consequence of their sin was that the earth swallowed up these men and their families.

But there were some in the family of Korah who did not follow his rebellion. Our passage today says that Korah's line did not die out. So not all of his family died with him. Some must have remained faithful to the Lord. And God was gracious to them. In fact, some of Korah's line went on to write a number of psalms (see Psalms 42-49; 84-85; and more).

Some of us may have grown up in a family in which our parents did not follow the Lord. Perhaps we did not have many good examples or wise teachers to follow as we grew

up. This passage in the Bible reminds us that the unbelief of one generation does not need to be followed by the next one. Today God calls every generation anew to put their hope in him and to follow Christ. In his grace, God doesn't hold the sins of one generation against the next. We have opportunities for a fresh start.

What legacy are you hoping to leave for your children and grandchildren? If there's been no history of faith before you, you can begin a new legacy today by trusting in Christ.

Precious Savior, thank you that your mercies are new for each generation. Help each of us to live for you and your glory. Amen.

THE FAITH OF YOUTH

Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son?
—Numbers 27:4

The way inheritances worked in ancient Israel was that your name, heritage, and place among God's people passed down through your sons. As long as you had a son, your name would carry on to the next generation. Your place or property in the land would also be secure.

The daughters of Zelophehad approached Moses and said, "Our father died in the wilderness . . . and left no sons. Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son?" It was a courageous request by these young women. What they were asking for was property in the promised land as an inheritance so that their father's name would be maintained and they would be counted among God's people. It was a request made from bold faith. They believed that God would

give them the promised land, and they wanted their place in it.

The faith of Zelophehad's daughter stands out against the doubts and unbelief that were so much a part of Israel. We need our young people today to set a similar example of faith. Paul urged young Timothy to set an example to others in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity (1 Timothy 4:12).

Thank God for the faith of our young people. Let's follow their example.

Lord, thank you for working in the lives of our young people. May they be shining examples of love for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ORDERING SACRED TIME

"Make sure that you present to me at the appointed time my food offerings. . . ."
—Numbers 28:2

Today is a special day. It's a day of worship and rest. We call it the Lord's Day (based on Revelation 1:10) to celebrate that Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. This day is set apart from the other days of the week to gather with God's people, to thank God for the new life and rest we have in Christ, to pray and give, and to hear God's Word to us. This gives order to our week.

Numbers 28 shows that Israel was commanded to bring a series of offerings to God. There were daily offerings. There were weekly offerings to be given on the Sabbath. Then there were monthly and yearly offerings associated with festivals. Israel's calendar was full. The people's life was ordered by these worship activities so that fellowship with God would be at the center of their

living. This didn't mean God's people could just quit ordinary life, but the ordinary was not to drown out worship.

Is worship a priority for you and your family? It can be challenging not to let the activities of life crowd out the worship of God. And it is hard to thrive spiritually when we neglect the sacred time God calls us to build into our lives. In general, our lives will get disordered when we neglect God's design.

So worship with God's people today! Sing, praise, and pray to the Lord. And celebrate your rest in Christ Jesus.

Lord Jesus, thank you for securing our rest on this day through your resurrection. May our worship today be joyful and bring glory to you. Amen.

KEEPING OUR WORD

"When a man makes a vow to the LORD . . . he must not break his word. . . ."
—Numbers 30:2

When a witness is ready to testify in court, they raise their hand and say, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help me God." The witness is calling God to be a witness to the truth of the testimony.

The basic principle taught in Numbers 30 is that vows must be kept. Our word must stand. Truth telling is an essential characteristic of Christians. Twisting the truth or telling lies has no place among us. The reason for this is that we're called to reflect God. "God is not human, that he should lie, nor a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23:19). When our word can't be trusted, we look like the devil, the father of lies (John 8:44).

Jesus asserted the importance of truth telling when he said, "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37). He was saying that we should be so marked by the truth that we should not need a vow to back up our word. Sometimes a vow will be required of us. But let's have our word be enough. May our word be consistent with our actions.

Father, the temptation to lie or twist the truth is strong. Help us to be people of our word so that we reflect you. Amen.

HOLY DISCONTENT

"We will arm ourselves for battle and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place." —Numbers 32:17

The promised land was just across the Jordan River, but the land on the near side of the river looked good for grazing. So the tribes of Reuben and Gad petitioned Moses to let them settle in that area. In doing so, they faced the temptation of settling in a place determined by their possessions rather than by the Lord's promise. When Moses challenged them, the tribes of Reuben and Gad agreed to go with the others across the Jordan to conquer the land.

Settling down and being fulfilled merely with the things around us is so tempting. The more we have, the easier it is to focus solely on this life. Rather than keeping our eyes on the promises of God, we tend to see the things around us and be satisfied with them.

Christian faith is marked by a holy discontent with earthly

treasures. That's easy when things are difficult. But as Christians, we need to long for Christ and his kingdom even when things are good, because we know Jesus is the greatest treasure.

Can we be thankful for what we have while also longing for Christ? Yes, by remembering that Jesus had all the glories of heaven—and yet he emptied himself for us. He gave up the riches of heaven and became poor so that we might be rich in him (Philippians 2:1-11). Praise God!

Father, help me not to love earthly treasures more than you. We worship you for giving us the gift of your Son (John 3:16). In Jesus' name, Amen.

A PILGRIM PEOPLE

They left the mountains of Abarim and camped on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho. —Numbers 33:48

I've always loved maps. Put a map in my hand, and I'll be busy for an hour. Numbers 33 is like a map. It traces the 40-year wilderness journey of Israel from Egypt to the plains of Moab.

What can we learn from a chapter like this? It reminds us that Israel *never settled* during the 40 years. They were always on the move. They went from one place to another. They lived in tents that could be set up and taken down. Only one place was home: Canaan, the land God had promised them.

In some ways this is what life is to be like for God's people today. This world, as it is now, is not our home. As Christians, we know that when we die, our souls will live with the Lord in heaven—and then, when he returns, we will live with him in the new heaven and earth. So while we care for the earth

God has given us to live on, we do not hold tightly to the things of this world. We don't have to look far to see that this world and its ways are broken. Many good things remain, but this is not our permanent home. That can only be with God, the Lord of our lives.

Have you become comfortable with this world's pleasures, pursuits, and passions? Are you living as if life here is permanent? Remember, a home with the Lord is prepared for us (Hebrews 11:16). Jesus is there. So let's keep our eyes fixed on him.

Lord Jesus, may the joys of life in your presence be our joy. Help us to share our hope with others around us. Amen.

AN OASIS OF GRACE

"Select some towns to be your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee."

—Numbers 35:11

An oasis is a place in the desert where water is found. It's like an island in a barren wilderness where people can find refreshment and rest.

Six of the forty-eight cities that were given to the Levites were to be cities of refuge—like an oasis in the desert. These cities were sprinkled throughout Israel, and they served as a refuge for anyone who accidentally took the life of another person. The one accused of murder still faced a trial, but a city of refuge protected that person from vigilante justice.

Cities of refuge were a place of safety, hospitality, rest, justice, and grace. They were like home base in a game of tag. The accused murderer was *safe* in the city of refuge. The refugee could be assured of being treated fairly and justly.

As recipients of God's grace, we must be an oasis of grace to others. We need to make our homes and churches a refuge for others by sharing the same grace that we have received.

Many people in our world need a place to settle and find rest. Is your home open to people who are hurting? Are our churches welcoming to people who need forgiveness and healing?

Reach out to refresh others with God's love.

Father, help us to provide oases of grace to others. May we share the same mercy that we have received in Christ. In his name, Amen.

A SECURE INHERITANCE

"No inheritance may pass from tribe to tribe, for each Israelite tribe is to keep the land it inherits."
—Numbers 36:9

The book of Numbers ends with what Israel had hoped for when the Lord brought them out of Egypt: gaining an inheritance. The daughters of Zelophehad were graciously given the inheritance of their father (Numbers 27). And then a new question arose: What would happen to their property if they should marry a man from another tribe? Which tribe would inherit the land?

The Lord's solution was that no inheritance should pass from one tribe to another. Each tribe was to retain the land that God had given. In this way, no family or tribe would lose their inheritance.

As we make our way through the wilderness of life, we have to remember that our inheritance is waiting for us. Eternal life with Christ is coming. Some of us will receive that sooner,

and others will receive it later. But no matter how long we have to wait, our inheritance in Christ is sure. Jesus promises that no one can snatch us out of his hand (John 10:28). Paul tells us that the one who began a good work in us "will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

Like Israel, we find ourselves between deliverance and our final inheritance—between the cross and full life forever with God. But God is with us in the wilderness—now and always.

Dear Lord, we thank you that you are with us always. May our hope always be in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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