

## Ready, Steady, Go

### Lessons from the Book of Numbers

#### Introduction

The Book of Numbers is a companion volume to the Book of Leviticus. Both follow Exodus in demonstrating what God had rescued the people for. There on Mount Sinai, having brought them out by the Passover and the wilderness provision, God made known to them his vision and requirements.

The Law declared God's parameters and his directions. It was his and only his: no one else had any part in its composition or delivery. The Tabernacle, on the other hand was different. The concept was God's but the production and manufacture was the responsibility of the people, in response to the revelation, to see it realised by contributing resources and endeavouring to see it come into being. Then, having been realised, it was to be used as the place of worship and the vehicle for progression on their journey to the Promised Land.

In Leviticus, the Tabernacle was the place where the people came to worship according to the prescribed order and procedures on different occasions, devoting themselves to God and obtaining his pardon and strength. The by-product of that was practical living and service to others encapsulating the summary command of "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself*".

Numbers complements that with an emphasis on mobilisation as they journeyed towards the Promised Land. The Tabernacle was to be a vehicle by which the people could progress through the wilderness until they reached the permanence of Canaan. The tent was portable, the people were arranged for mobilisation. Indeed Numbers can be summed up as: Ready, Steady, Go!

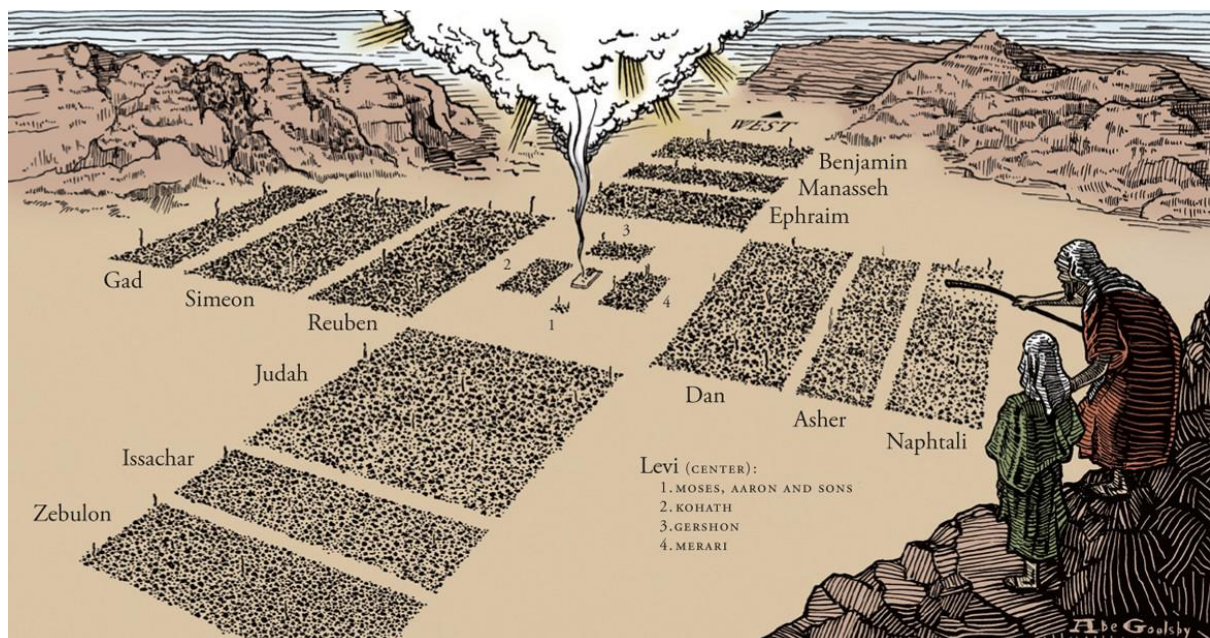
#### Availability    Chapters 1 – 4

Taking separate sections, we notice that the first (chapters 1 – 4) begins with a census. While David's counting was disapproved (was it motivated by pride?) this one was divinely commissioned. It was a measure to identify who – and how many – was / were available and registered. It was achieved in a process that included representatives from each tribe. And, though varying in numbers, each tribe was included. None was left out.

Perhaps that is not strictly true, for the tribe of Levi was separated from the others as a strategy for providing God with a cohort of dedicated people in lieu of the offering of each firstborn from each single family. This was in order that they could be devoted to the service of God (and the Tabernacle) without having to face other demands on their time and energies. They were not perceived as better, only devoted. Their place was taken by dividing the tribe of Joseph in two, producing Ephraim and Manasseh.

There are lessons for us from these two features. It is important that we are counted in. Availability is central to any meaningful part in the kingdom of God. It is echoed in the NT when they *'gave themselves to the Lord'* and is expressed in the hymn: *Who is on the Lord's side?* And, to use NT terminology, being *"set aside"* to attend to the requirements of Christian ministry is important. It does not, again, mean that one is better than the other - for it is complementary and collaborative. Like equivalent NT roles, it is functional rather than positional: it denotes task not status.

The next stage is placement. Each tribe had an allocated place around the Tabernacle decided on largely by the logistical requirement. Each tribe was equidistant from the 'dwelling place', but in a location convenient for the transportation process. Within this outer circle of the twelve tribes, the Levites – in their three constituent subsections under Kohath, Gershon and Merari, were placed with Aaron and Eleazar at the head. (See diagram)



Each of the Levite tribes had specific duties (on behalf of all the tribes) in relation to the Tabernacle and its transportation.

The tribes of Gershon and Merari were responsible for all the coverings and the framework structure of the edifice, respectively, while the sons of Kohath had the special duty of carrying the sacred objects which had been packaged carefully by Aaron and his sons.

When it was time to move (as indicated by the pillar of fire or the cloud) then Aaron and his sons would enter the holy places, cover the items with the curtains and coverings so that they were not visible to any unauthorised person and ready for Kohath and sons to carry. Meanwhile the sons of Gershon and Merari dismantled the framework and the curtains and coverings belonging to them.

Once on the move, led by Aaron and the ark, the three tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun would start followed by Gershon and Merari (and their cargo) sandwiched between the front-line tribes and those of Reuben, Simeon and Gad, who formed the protective guard, not only for the materials in front of them but also for the sacred artefacts carried by Kohath. They, in turn, were protected by Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin and by Dan, Asher and Naphtali. A holy pilgrimage indeed.

On arrival, the Tabernacle and its coverings was erected and Kohath's precious load placed appropriately by Aaron ready for full functioning with the minimum of disturbance. A wonderful example of divine logistics.

That is how the Lord's people – the church – should operate. Each has a role to play and directions to follow. Obeying these leads to a silent but effective carrying out of the testimony in practical terms demonstrating that God "*doeth all things well*". In that way, the Body functions with "*each part doing its work*" and enabled by the Holy Spirit to present a performance that God would deem "*very good*."

Condition                      Chapters 5 - 9

It is significant that God is concerned not only with the material but with spirit also. Availability in a physical, material, sense is necessary but integrity in a spiritual sense is essential. In that sense this section of the READY - STEADY - GO of Numbers stresses this.

Chapters 1 – 4 describe that mustering of the available 'conscripts' for the work of God. Then, chapters' 5 – 9 focus on their condition and suitability as servants of God for what lay ahead. They were to be the people of God (*a kingdom of priests, a holy nation*) who epitomised the very presence, character and values of God.

In chapter 5 any defect, such as leprosy, debarred someone from engaging as the people of God. Enough has been said already in Leviticus about the importance of undefiled sacrifices. Acts of sinfulness can be forgiven on confession but restitution has to be made. Immorality – represented here by adultery and jealousy – has to be tested and dealt with.

In contrast, positive action, such as taking the Nazirite vows in order to separate from the world and be dedicated to God is to be commended for the time it allows to be free from distracting influences and wholly given over to God.

Again in contrast to the 'cost' of any privation arising from such vows Numbers highlights the benevolence of God as expressed in the Aaronic blessing invoking God's favour on his people.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,
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The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Numbers 6: 21 - 23

Dedication is also represented by a freewill offering to God of the materials required for the services of the Tabernacle. From its origin it was made clear that responsibility for resourcing the Tabernacle lay with the people and their willingness to give freely. In this more organised instance, 12 carts drawn by 6 oxen are required to convey all that is given in equal measure by each tribe.

Chapter 8 highlights the importance of the lamp in the Tabernacle and of the role of the Levites as those who minister in relation to it. They, too, need cleansing and are led through set procedures identifying with the people on whose behalf they serve at the holy things.

That preparation completed, the people engage in celebrating the Passover, remembering what they were brought out of, and how; and anticipating moving forward. That is facilitated by the promised cloud by day and fire by night of the “*fiery, cloudy, pillar*” which would lead them on their pilgrimage at a rate and in stages that corresponded with their condition and response to the call and commands of God.

With being available and in condition they were ‘ready’. But did they go? We’ll see next week.

Moving On                      Chapters 10 - 17

Summons                      Chapter 10

With the “fiery, cloudy, pillar” leading them we left Chapter 9 with the cohort moving on. That start is enlarged on in Chapter 10 and further detail given.

What features first in this progression are the two trumpets given to Moses and Aaron as leaders which they were to be used to warn the people, to summon them to gather together (two for the congregation and one for tribal leaders) to herald feasts or mobilise for war. It was human initiative in response to the revelation of God’s prompting.

So much of Christian history and the achievements of the people of God, whatever the vehicle, can be traced back to: the ‘blowing of the trumpet’; the ‘call to arms’; and the prompt to go or do. So much of the initiative of the Early Church in Acts was the sequel to ‘trumpet blowing’ and the taking of initiative informed – indeed governed – by the understanding of God’s will.

But blowing trumpets and moving on is linked with cloud movement. Any progression has to be in tune with divine purpose. So, the cloud (and pillar) guided the movement as much as

individual initiative. And, its progress was dependent on the extent to which the people complied with and learned from the experience of trusting in their God.

Yet, there is one other touch in that Moses invites Hobab, his brother in law, to go with them, recognising his gifts.

So, by the end of Chapter 10 they are “all present and correct”, assembled, enrolled, prepared and ‘on the move’. How did they get on? Not so good, if Chapter 11 is anything to go by.

#### Apprehension                      Chapter 11

The initial reaction was to complain, followed by a craving, indicating dissatisfaction with the resources of the new life and the apparent superiority of the old. That indicates a failure to appreciate and to explore the potential of the new life. How many believers are content with an ‘insurance policy’ salvation? Basking in the security but making little effort to discover all the riches there are in the Christian life. Bible reading – and its inward absorption – is seen as a chore, prayer as a duty, meetings as necessary obligations. Yet Scripture is full of exhortation to ‘plunge right in’ and to taste that which is excellent: for *“eye has not seen nor ear heard the things that God has prepared for those who love Him”*. It is a tragedy that we, as Christians, with all the riches of the new life at our disposal, paddle in the shallows and ‘make do’ with plastic measures.

While God’s response was to punish and destroy such faithless behaviour it was Moses’ concern that almost ‘turned’ him to relent and provide significant help by raising seventy elders – men of proven worth, not necessarily of any professional or social standing. They, along with Moses, witnessed the surfeit of meat that they had to endure proving again that *“God granted their request but sent leanness to their souls”*. It is a salutary lesson that we can determine by our attitudes the limits (or parameters) of our experience of God. Disappointing though that may be God will always bless, but it means missing out on so much.

#### Jealousy                      Chapter 12

While Chapter 11 is full of discontent the next chapter – 12 – is full of jealousy. Finding fault with Moses (reason or just an excuse?) Miriam and Aaron disputed his uniqueness as a leader. For that, God punished her with leprosy but not before bearing testimony to the fact that Moses held a unique position in terms of relationship and intimacy with God. They spoke ‘face-to-face’, sharing innermost secrets of God’s ways and purpose. That uniqueness was evidenced in Moses’ concern for Miriam’s restoration and continuance.

#### Prospect and pessimism                      Chapters 13 and 14

So far, not so good. Discontent and dissatisfaction seem to dominate: pessimism is overshadowing positive thinking. Nowhere is that more evident than in chapter 13, yet it

has lessons for us in that it is not time to dwell on the past but to investigate the future and its potential. Consequently, 12 spies were sent out to scout the land and find out what it was like. Theirs was a factual mission but they clouded their report with biased interpretation.

Yet, the response was dominated by fear. Although the land was good and fruitful, its inhabitants were frightening and formidable. The ten spies let their emotions overtake what they knew (God had proved himself powerful so far and would continue to do so). Like Peter walking on water they "*looked down*" rather than look at Jesus.

The effect was disastrous with grown men weeping and wanting to return to Egypt. When Joshua and Caleb suggested a positive response the rebels wanted to kill them so much so that even God became angry and declared that he would destroy them and start again with Moses. It was then that Moses interceded, not on behalf of the rebels, but motivated by the thought that God's 'reputation' would suffer. It was widely known what He had done to bring his people so far, the miracles, the provision, the guidance. Would it appear that He could not complete what he had started?

In sharp contrast, Joshua and Caleb pleaded for advance, a practical trust in the God they had benefitted from until now. Theirs was a report that highlighted the positive and possible.

As a result of Moses' intercession, God forgave the rebels but decreed that none of them would enter the Promised Land. Even a gracious God does not lower His standards. Although unworthy of him - so often because of our unsatisfactory attitudes - we still encounter his blessings but miss the best he has to offer because our aspirations are governed by our concerns rather than be wholly devoted to His purposes.

In a totally misguided attempt to rectify things they set out in their own strength to do what they were intended to do but to no avail. It was carnal and led to doom. We must be sensitive to God's promptings and his leading.

## Visions of the future Chapter 15

Chapter 15 seems misplaced. It appears oblivious to the stramash of chapter 14. It echoes the words of the Lord Jesus that "*I must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day*" It is as if God ignores the conflicts of 14 by focusing on the pressing-on depicted in chapter 15. He talks about "*when you enter the land*" Paul echoed similar sentiments when he said, "*forgetting those things which are behind, I press on ...*".

The focus in God's mind is on worship, expressing thanks and offering tangible expressions of that to God himself and to finance his work. Recognising human weakness sins are to be forgiven but rebellion dealt with severely. They are to "*remember the Lord their God*" by

placing tassels to bring to mind that they belong and owe allegiance, to God and his purposes.

## Disillusion and Disaster      Chapters 16 and 17

Chapter 16 and 17 introduce another source of dissatisfaction linked with personal position. Korah was a cousin of Moses and grandson of Kohath (of sacred furnishings responsibility).

The tragic events of 16 and the telling events of 17 confirm holy anointing and appointment and leave no room for ambition and self-aggrandisement.

One of the participants in the studies, Margaret Stewart, summarised the lessons learned in these chapters in this way:

Faced with the prospect of Canaan

- **Not** to 'quail' with fear; but,
- **to** allow the Holy Spirit to quicken our spirits;
- **Not** to question God's ways; but
- **to** do quests for him with his strength.

Another, Margaret Baird, provided a detailed reflection:

These chapters show Israel's lack of awareness of God's sovereignty which led to a lack of trust, to wrong thinking, then to rebellion and its serious consequences. For example:

In chapter 10 they started to complain about the hardship they were suffering and wished they were back in Egypt where they had plenty of fish, fruit and vegetables. They forgot about the slavery they had suffered and that it was God who had rescued them.

(Chapter 12) Aaron and Miriam focussed on the fact that Moses hadn't married an Israelite woman - so why should their younger brother have a greater position than them. They forgot how God had protected Moses as a baby and brought him to the place where he was called to lead Israel out of Egypt. Moses was God's choice as leader.

In chapter 13 twelve scouts were sent to see what Canaan was like. It was a wonderful place but ten of them said that the people were too strong for them to conquer. They forgot how God had dealt with Pharaoh and the Egyptians to bring them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, destroying Pharaoh's troops in the process.

As a result of the people's rebellion, their refusal to go up to the Promised Land, Moses had to plead with God to preserve them for the honour of his name. Read Numbers 14 v 17-23.

Sin always has consequences, those who rebelled would die in the wilderness and their children would have to wander there for 40 years.

Ch16: Korah, Dathan and Abiram incited a rebellion that included 250 others. Again it seemed to be about position – they resented the position Moses and Aaron had. Korah was a Levite, he seemed to forget that God had given him and his fellow Levites an important position in the worship of God. They wanted more. Moses got it right when he said they were really rebelling against God.

Sin and pride made them forget that God is sovereign and history had failed to impress on them the dangers of opposing God. Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their families were

swallowed up by the ground and the 250 men with the incense burners were destroyed by fire. It seems amazing that the people dared to grumble the next day, blaming Moses and Aaron for the deaths. In the end it was only Moses and Aaron's intervention that stopped the Lord destroying them all.

Over the period of Covid, John has often focussed on God's sovereignty. A modern hymn has the line, "He still reigns and He is God". The lesson I felt came from these chapters is that if we forget that God is sovereign our focus moves to ourselves, we can be overwhelmed by all that is going on and fail to trust God as we should.

Or it can cause all sorts of problems for God's people. As Aaron and Miriam focussed on Moses' marriage, we can focus on minor details which become giant problems and can destroy our witness.

As we put God first, recognise His sovereignty and trust Him to lead and guide us we will be united and better able to reflect His love to others.

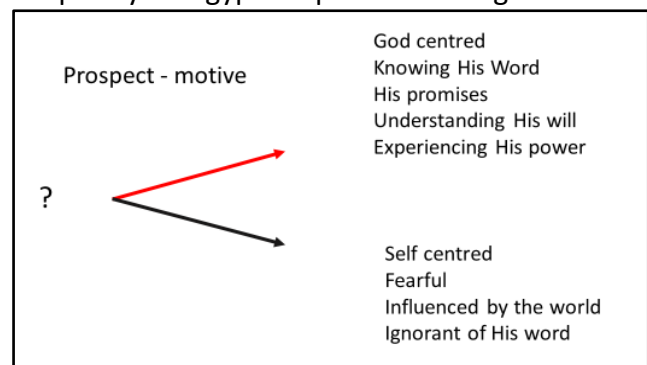
I feel that over Covid we have seen this happening and this can only be to God's glory.

From the above we can conclude that they were anything but steady: if anything they were wavering. Any foretaste of the excellence of what lay ahead was tempered by fear and internal strife and jealousy. They recognised that God had brought them "*safe this far*" but were very fearful of what lay ahead. More than once (and in the next section) they requested a return to the security and so-called 'plenty' of Egypt despite its bondage. It can be summed up in this diagram.

Challenge                      Chapters 17 - 21

These chapters take up the challenge with two main themes.

The first concerns leadership, its acknowledgement and recognition. God put an end to any dispute about who or what should be leaders in the incident of the representative rods placed in the Tabernacle overnight. In the morning, one – the rod of Aron (the appointed leader) flourished, not only with buds but with ripe almonds. This was divine endorsement.



But. It also had a functional aspect in that Moses, Aaron and his sons had a responsibility they were to carry out faithful as custodians of the sacred furnishings of the Tabernacle – the sacred things. To help them, the Levites were appointed as workers with strict parameters as to what they should, or could not, do. In carrying out these duties they were entitled to be materially resourced by the people through being given portions of the sacrifices. They had no territory of their own but were amply supported by the people – an important lesson for us in that the work of God has to be supported and resourced by His people.



Just as in the earlier chapters of being 'correct' as well as 'present', cleansing was considered important. And that cleansing applied not only to sins but to ongoing happenings, like defilement, be it accidental or deliberate.

With these provisos they wandered around the wilderness for over 30 years not really getting anywhere. Yet, that apparently aimless movement was a test for them. Not surprisingly, the dissatisfaction with current experience and the desire to return to Egypt led then to grumble. Sadly, in responding to them Moses seems to have lost his cool, struck the rock (rather than speak to it in an act of faith) and although ensuring an adequate water supply, grieved his God through disobedience and lack of trust thus forfeiting the privilege of leading the people into the Promised Land.

The second theme in this section is concerned with advance and the hindrances to going forward. While they could have gone to the Promised Land by a 12 – day route, their intransigence meant a period of wandering. With 40 years having passed, they now were on the move forward only to find the territory occupied by other rulers. At first a request for permission to pass through quietly was rejected and repeated several times again. In response they took up arms and conquered this external opposition. That provides a salutary lesson for us: victory and overcoming; not by our own strength but in the good of the victory over 'principalities' emphasised in the New Testament based on the resurrection of Jesus triumphant over '*sin and death and hell*'. It is an advanced experience for the believer to move forward in faith believing to see the victory of Calvary and the open tomb secure ground for God in our day.

And with that triumphal experience there was rejoicing, as witnessed by the singing that takes place when these incidents are recalled.

But, Satan is not finished. And, if a frontal attack did not work there were more subtle manifestations of 'the wiles of the devil' as we shall see next week.

#### Subtle Deception

#### Chapters 22 - 25

Balak, one of the remaining kings, presumably having heard of the devastating progress of the Israelites, decided on a different ploy: he engaged a diviner named Balaam to "*come and curse Israel for me*". It was a 'sneaky' move, made more sinister by the fact that Balaam entertained the idea at all. The fact that rewards were at stake further clouds the whole episode.

If he was true to his calling (and we know little of Balaam's credentials or his standing among the 'prophets') then he would not have allowed these messengers over the door with their abhorrent request, leave alone stay in his house overnight while he sanctimoniously 'prayed about it'. God rebuked him but also, strangely, sanctioned his going with them. In so many instances in Scripture and in life God condescends to our level of

things and will 'bless' the process. So, Balaam goes, with God's blessing but with definite constraints to say only what God told him.

Balaam's journey to Balak for this unholy assignment is interesting. Although going with God's permission he was not going with God's approval – a significant feature in itself. On the way he encountered hindrances or, in more spiritual language, 'checks'. The donkey, which had served him all his life, now stopped, seeing what Balaam could not perceive. However, instead of recognising it as a divine constraint, Balaam struck the donkey and was prepared to kill her. Pursuing God's way should never entail abandoning or negating the ways of God that have been our faithful guides throughout life. As Balaam was to later say: God does not change. Many a believer has gone astray when abandoning the proven ways of God while God, in his merciful sovereignty, like a shepherd comforts us with his supporting rod and corrective staff.

Balaam delivered his mission in the form of four oracles after he had observed the appropriate ritual procedures. In the first, Balaam stated quite clearly that he could not counter or negate what God had decreed; but then added that he could see the contingent as *"a people set apart not one of the nations"* - a distinctive people as Moses had prayed on the earlier part of the journey. Dissatisfied with this, Balak sought another 'cursing' in which Balaam said that God cannot change his mind nor revoke his blessing. He had already done good things for them. In a third oracle, the beauty of Israel is mentioned and the fact that they are a mighty people who will destroy all in their way. The fourth oracle promises a deliverer – surely a reference to the Messiah – who will lead them in triumph.

In this instance we see the sovereignty of God working despite a compromising servant as part of a 'sneaky' devil's strategy.

Looking back on this incident, and the one which followed involving succumbing to the seduction of the Peor women in immorality and Baal worship. It was condemned by God and punished with death and plague as well as divesting Aaron of his priestly garments and bestowing them on the faithful Phinehas. Balaam is cited in the NT as the epitome of unfaithfulness. Paradoxically, what he said was good; but what he did – collaborating in an unholy way with a satanic strategy – was condemned and considered disastrous.

Strange though this incident might be, there are many lessons that emerge from it. Balaam's initial behaviour shows that it is unwise to respond to any request that simply regards our relationship with God as a 'magic charm' for unholy purposes. He should not have entertained the request. Nor should he, when he ventured out in response, disregard the faithful ways he had come to rely on and only change because there might be reward and gain in this venture.

It is disturbing to think that God may bow down to our level, granting our desires but sending leanness into our souls. God's help does not always imply approval if all else suggests being contrary to his will.

More seriously, such actions can have adverse effects on other people and lead them astray or give confidence in disregarding God's purpose and ways. The Balaam episode – and its Baal Peor sequel - is frequently used in Scripture as a warning against apostasy.

Being steady and ready to go means not only adopting the right attitude and trust in God but being diligent in our commitment to Him to see us through the task of seeing His kingdom come and His will being done on earth.

That will involve a fresh start as we shall see next week.

### New Beginning                      Chapters 26 - 31

The outcome from all that has gone before is that, although they were a privileged people, the children of Israel had disobeyed God, had compromised in their behaviour and incurred God's displeasure. Because of that they were forbidden to enter the Promised Land and even destroyed –all except Joshua and Caleb who were of a different spirit.

But, it did include Moses and Aaron. They were forbidden because of signal disobedience and lack of trust. Their achievements were not discounted – indeed Moses appears at the Transfiguration - but they had fallen short of the criteria in this context. For us it means that our 'work' will be rewarded but with a danger of losing out on God's best and ultimate purpose.

There are three distinct sub-sections to consider:

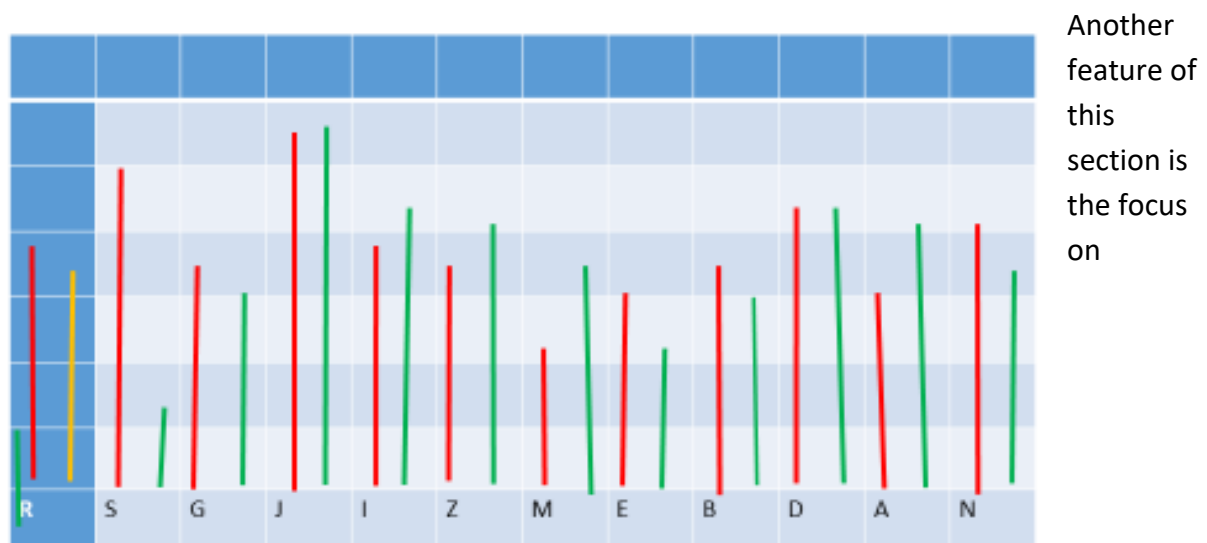
Chapter 26 begins with a new census, the recruiting of a fresh cohort untainted by – but not exempt from - the perils of the past. The focus now is on the future: *"seeking those things which are above"* and *"doing the will of him who sent me"*.

The chapter is characterised by several features. All the tribes were both represented and involved. None of the redeemed is outside a significant place in God's economy. All are important. Yet, not all are the same. There are numerical differences and also historical ones in that the degree of loss or gain between the two censuses varies for whatever reason. No two Christian experiences or journeys are the same; circumstances vary; but the evidence of God working in each is important. And through it all God maintains an adequate witness to and for himself.

#### Ready for off

- Fresh start
  - Census
  - Inheritance
- Practice
  - What – when – where –
  - Who - why – how
- Commitment
  - Vows
  - Vengeance

The following diagram shows some of those quantitative differences



inheritance. Zelophehad’s daughters realised that, without male heirs, their clan would disappear without trace. So, they pleaded with Moses to allow transference of heredity through their line to ensure the clan’s future and integrity. Similarly, Moses, concerned about the future welfare and efficiency of the cohort “*marching to Zion*” recommended (to God) that Joshua be appointed leader for the people as they were poised to enter Canaan.

Anticipating life in Canaan and their predominant behaviour as God’s people the next two chapters – 28 and 29 – feature the Offerings and their corporate use in the various feasts. While blessings are what God bestows on his people, offerings are the response when people give to God from their substance in gratitude; (popular misperception often thinks the reverse is true: offering to seek appeasement in the hope of receiving blessings.) These offerings are incorporated into set practices, many of them deriving from incidents in their previous experience and prescribed in Exodus and Leviticus. They are many, frequent and comprehensive. Each day there were regular offerings morning and evening. Sabbath offerings applied to the seventh day and there were offerings each month. In addition there were occasional offerings, such as Passover, Feast of Weeks, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and the major Feast of tabernacles which lasted a week celebrating the wilderness provision they had received. Each of these set offerings had a special significance and, in timing, were evenly spread throughout the year. Clearly, from their abundance they were regarded as a major feature of the new life.

Interestingly enough, along with the celebratory offerings of food, animals or grain there was to be a goat specifically for atonement for committed sins, reminiscent of 1 John’s reminder of the need for current daily confession and cleansing.

The final two chapters of this sub-section focus on obligation and responsibility for personal execution of understood practice.

Vows were to be fulfilled without question except where there was evidence of pre-existing external constraint: then that obligation was eased. The Midianite vengeance action is less straightforward to understand. Hard though it is to accept, divine decree declares that anything that savours of the opposing old life must be destroyed. The NT speaks of “*put to death*” and “*crucify the flesh*”. Total annihilation; which is what Jesus accomplished on Calvary when “*he nailed them to his cross, triumphing over them*”. Not doing so leads to damaging compromise and its devastating effects. However, the situation can be redeemed and the resources salvaged to provide substance for God and his work but not without allocating a proportion as a tribute to God.

Putting all that into practice takes us into the realm of possession and realisation which is next week’s section: 32 – 36.

#### Final Instructions      Chapters 32 – 36

These final chapters take place at the last stage of the journey with the Promised Land in sight; yet there are more lessons to learn and aspects to consider before entry. The next book – Deuteronomy represents a pause before the Joshua crusade ensured entry but even before that there are aspects that still need attention, with each chapter making a significant contribution.

#### Chapter 32      Advanced reservation

Two and a half tribes became enamoured with the land east of Jordan and laid claim to it. Alarmed that they might be reneging, Moses rebuked them but later accepted their commitment to continue active service until their fellow tribes gained possession of their territories. Not all are engaged in full time service as far as time and energy goes but all are essential and should be committed servants of the Lord, regardless. There are no first- and second- class Christians in God’s army.

#### Chapter 33      Stages in the Journey

Moses recorded the 40 stages of the journey from Egypt to the Plains of Moab. On it they experienced the leading of the “fiery cloudy pillar” and also the constant provision of manna and water. At first it was straightforward moving through the desert until they reached Sinai where God gave them the 10 Commandments and the pattern for the Tabernacle. Not long after they proceeded to Kadesh and spied out the land. That took two years. However, that is where the trouble started. There were grumblings, fear, reluctance, even rebellion so that they both lost the way and incurred God’s displeasure to such an extent that they forfeited the privilege of entering the Promised Land. It was a period of 38 wasted years going round in circles until a new generation made a fresh start and contemplated the prospect of the new life.

That journey experience provides a series of lessons for us as we contemplate the privilege of “marching to Zion” today. It starts with rescue from the bondage of Egypt through the work of “Christ our Passover”. Supported by the benevolent acts of a redeeming God that should take us along the route until we realise that *“love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all”*. So, on Sinai God gave them the 10 Commandments – his parameters for holy living – and the pattern for the tabernacle – his template for a dwelling place. That realisation and fresh commitment is often a key point in Christian experience and embodies the teaching of Romans 12: 1, 2 (*Present you bodies a living sacrifice be not conformed to this world but, be transformed by the renewing of your mind*). That should lead us straight on to our inheritance but reluctance and rebellion (*prone to wander, Lord I feel it*) can lead to aimless wandering and getting nowhere. It calls for a fresh start and deliberate embracing of our inheritance in Christ.

The remaining three chapters then outline the boundaries of the new territory, its special provision for the Levites and the intriguing incident of Zelophehad’s insistence that their inheritance is not lost.

That is a fitting climax to this book. While it outlines the strategic purpose of God it also brings to light the critical role of human behaviour – the believing or the rebellion – on which the fulfilment of that great purpose depends. If the negative prevails then God is not defeated for *“He finds a way”*. And, just as Joshua and Caleb, each of whom *“wholly followed the Lord”* exemplify it is a lesson for us to be individually and corporately diligent in our obedience and following, not only asking, *“Guide me o Thou great Jehovah”* but also praying, *“Pass me not, o Gentle Saviour”*.

Taking chapter 33 before 32 we are told the stages of the journey from Rameses to the plains of the Jordan – 40 in all. Each is recorded by Moses as a sequence of movements. Breaking them down they cover significant events in turn.

The first shows the escape from Egypt to the Red Sea and the final crossing breaking ties with Egypt irrevocably. From there they proceed along the Sinai Peninsula to Mount Sinai itself, led all the way by the “cloudy, fiery, pillar” and provided for by God’s benevolent supply of mana and water until they are confronted by this saving God’s legitimate demands in the form of the 10 Commandments and the pattern of the Tabernacle.

From there they proceed in Canaan’s direction and send out spies to scout out the land. Two conflicting reports are given. The one – by Joshua and Caleb – see wonderful prospects

while the other, by the majority, show great fear and severe reluctance to move on. It was a critical moment and resulted in a further 30 odd years of wandering in circles in that wilderness, compromising with its peoples, incurring the wrath and displeasure of God and forfeiting the chance to enter the land: they all dies in the wilderness, even Moses and

## Numbers 33 Itinerary

- Egypt to Red Sea
- Red Sea to Sinai
- Sinai to Kadesh Barnea
- Prospecting the land and sequel
- Wilderness wanderings
- Second census
- Final instructions

Aaron.

A fresh start was made with a new census and, with a focus on inheritance, worship and practical behaviour they proceeded to the edge of the Promised Land.

What lessons can we learn from these vents?

In the first place, we are reminded that is a journey; a journey that began with the Redeemer's hearing the cry of a people in

bondage; a people slaves in a land because of its change of regime. That illustrates our condition of being sinners in a sinful world, slaves to sin and under an evil despot. Yet, God in His mercy intervenes and by the blood of Christ (our Passover) makes a way of escape. Without that release there can be no journey.

The journey leads through a receptive stage of experiencing the goodness of God until we come to the point of willingly submitting too His rightful demands to be our Lord whose word and the fulfilment of His purposes are paramount. Romans 12: 1, 2 spell that out clearly.

The next key stage is the decision whether to follow fully or to shrink back. The latter leads to a fruitless period of meaningless life "*having tasted the good things*" but not realising maturity, as the Epistles so forcibly warn us. It needs a fresh start – a recommitment – to move on.

In terms of time, the journey from Egypt to Kadesh and the prospect of entry took two years but the rest took 38 years of wasted living. It also meant contamination and absence of holiness or dedication. We should measure our journey and its stages and achievements in the light of what happened to them.

What could have been a disaster in 32 turned out to be a blessing. Desiring to possess a portion of the land east of Jordan the two and a half tribes reserved it as a location but pledged themselves to continue being involved with possession of the whole territory. Every Christian

must be fully committed to the whole purpose of God regardless of personal circumstances.

The new land was to be clearly defined with boundaries north, south east and west. The kingdom of God is similarly defined as being his territory where his people not only provide him with a presence but also manifest his whole nature and regime.

Chapter 35 speaks of God's gracious provision both for the Levites who had no other earthly possession but were amply provided for by the corporate contribution of the whole nation. And the cities of refuge demonstrate God's concern for the innocent and their welfare.

The book finishes with a re-emergence of Zelophehad's daughters' concern for a continuation of their tribe's inheritance. Transfer of inheritance is disallowed focusing on the importance of the whole body being built up by the timely and relevant contribution of each constituent part.

