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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

THE NEED FOR THE RIGHT LEADER (11–12)

The Place of the Passage

The journey finally begins. This passage reports the people's travel from Sinai all the way to the edge of the Promised Land. But on this journey, problems emerge. It is not the terrain or a lack of food that proves problematic but the people's stubbornness toward Moses. Three instances of complaining are reported, each of which highlights the same basic issue: the people need a good shepherd in order to make it through the wilderness.

The Big Picture

God's people need the shepherding care he has appointed.

Gospel Glimpses

GRACE. These stories of intercession capture an intriguing irony. On the one hand, it is God who is filled with wrath against the people, and it is Moses who intercedes to pacify that wrath. On the other hand, Moses is frustrated with the people and wants to give up. It is God who insists that Moses continue for the sake of the congregation. This irony captures beautifully the reality of the gospel. God's wrath is the danger from which we need salvation. But it is also God's grace that provides what is needed for our deliverance.

Whole Bible Connections

FAITHFUL SERVANT. The New Testament book of Hebrews quotes from this passage, saying, "Consider Jesus . . . who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house" (Hebrews 3:1–2). The description "faithful in all God's house" identifies Moses as more than a prophet—he is also a steward in God's house. But "Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses" (Hebrews 3:3). Moses was an exalted steward in God's house, "but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son" (Hebrews 3:6).

KENITES. Moses invites his brother-in-law Hobab to join Israel, promising him a share in the goodness of God to Israel if he does so (10:29–32). The next time we encounter the descendants of Moses' in-laws is in Judges, where Hobab's descendants are known as Kenites: "The descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah . . . and settled with the people" (Judges 1:16). At that time, "Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite" (Judges 4:17) saved Israel from the Canaanites by slaying Sisera (Judges 4:12–24; 5:24–27). So we see the family of Hobab going

from complete outsiders in Numbers to those who provide a savior for God's people in Judges. This is a glorious picture of the richness and width of God's saving purposes for the world.

Theological Soundings

MEEKNESS. In traditional honor–shame societies, meekness is regarded as a sign of weakness. According to customary principles of honor and shame, when a leader's honor is challenged, he must defend his honor or risk losing it to the challenger. Honor is viewed as a commodity to be either defended or lost. However, Moses embodies a different model of leadership that establishes a different standard for God's people: "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3). Moses does not seek to preserve his own glory but humbly leaves his reputation in God's hands. Thus the trait of meekness is esteemed as a virtue among the people of God.

ELDERS. The tribes of Israel had elders long before their ordination by Moses. Moses' ordination of the elders (Numbers 11:16–30) is not the beginning of elders in Israel but is the beginning of their organization as undershepherds teaching God's Word as revealed through Moses. The elders had previously served as community heads, each representing his own clan. God tells Moses to gather the 70 elders from all of Israel's clans, "whom you know to be the elders of the people," and "I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you" (11:16–17). The key feature of that announcement is the phrase "with you." Henceforward, the elders will serve no longer merely as community leaders but as undershepherds extending the spiritual leadership of Moses. It is this vocation of spiritual eldership that continues to be the backbone of the shepherding of Jesus through his church (I Timothy 3:1–7; I Peter 5:1–5).

SONG. Two short statements are repeated by Moses each time the ark moves or comes to a point of rest (Numbers 10:35–36). These may be songs that are sung. Every time the ark is lifted to begin a new leg of their journey, Moses says (or sings), "Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you." Whenever the ark is placed at a new stopping point, Moses says (or sings), "Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel." These are probably the first lines of songs that Moses sings on these occasions. Throughout the Bible, singing is an important tool of faith both in worship and within the various life events of God's people. Song is not simply a means for entertainment; in fact, it is probably only in recent centuries that music has become regarded as primarily an entertainment art. Historically, music has served as a tool of social unity as well as of sharing and shaping beliefs. The songs of the ark contribute to the biblical theology of song and our understanding of the ark's role and significance.

Glossary of Terms

ELDER: A recognized leader charged with oversight of a community or organized body. In the NT, an officer in the local church (Acts 14:23; I Timothy 3:1–7) charged primarily with spiritual oversight.

INTERCESSION: Appealing to one person on behalf of another. Often used with reference to prayer.

Please answer the following questions:

Chapter 11

1. What did the Lord send when the people complained about their hardships? (1-3)
2. What did the people desire rather than manna? (4-6)
3. What did Moses desire rather than carry all the people himself? (10-15)
4. Who did God put His Spirit on to help Moses carry the burden of the people? (16-17)
5. How much meat did the Lord say He would provide? (18-20)
6. What question did the Lord ask Moses when he doubted God's ability to provide so much meat? (23)
7. How deep was the pile of quail that the Lord provided? (31)
8. What did the Lord send while the meat was still between their teeth? (33)

Chapter 12

9. Why did Miriam and Moses speak against Moses? (1-2)

10. How meek was Moses? (3)

11. How did the Lord speak to Moses? (8)

12. What judgment fell on Miriam? (9-14)

Personal Application

13. In this passage, we have been reminded of our need for a Good Shepherd to lead the people through the wilderness. How has this image help you in your wilderness moments?