

Introduction:

- A. **Illus.:** **Cal Thomas** is now a well-known newspaper columnist but he was fired from his first job at a NBC in Washington D.C., as he put it, *"because of my ego, big mouth, and jealousy of now-dead people."* He and his wife had started attending church a couple of years earlier but he had been more focused on his work than his faith. When he was fired, his wife said, *"You will never be free of the burden of success if you don't thank God for losing your job."* What did he do? He writes, *"In tears I recommitted my life to Christ that night. And that led to 11 years in the wilderness."* Isn't that just the way! Salvation joy, and then comes the wilderness. That is just what happened to Israel.
- B. **Everyone ends up in the wilderness sooner or later.** Even Jesus. And it isn't easy. Not everyone makes it out of the wilderness in one piece. It takes a toll on a person. And that is why we are going to study the Old Testament book of Numbers. First, a little background.
- C. **Numbers is the fourth book of the Bible.** It is part of the Torah, the Law, the five books of Moses, the author. The title comes from the fact that this book records the census of Israel as they came out of Egypt, and another census 40 years later, when they are on the verge of entering the Promised Land. But the ancient Jews didn't call it Numbers. They took the fifth word of the book for its name, *"In the wilderness."* Moses had already spent 40 years himself in the wilderness, before God summoned him to lead Israel out of Egypt, and that led to another 40 wilderness years. So you might well say, he wrote the book on it.

For those who are new to the Bible, Genesis is the story of creation, the fall of mankind into sin, and God's choice of Abraham to father a great nation to be God's light in the world. Genesis tells us about the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Exodus picks up the story 400 years later, when the Israelites are suffering miserably as slaves of Egypt. God sends Moses saying, *"Let my people go,"* and under the pressure of 10 crushing plagues, the Pharaoh finally does. God delivers his people, who begin complaining almost immediately, through the parted waters of the Red Sea and on to Mt. Sinai in the wilderness where he meets with them in a breathtaking display of his holiness, and gives them his laws. The next book, Leviticus, is primarily that law book.

That brings us to Numbers. As Israel leaves Mt. Sinai and begins the journey to the land God had promised to Abraham, and to them, things are going swimmingly! In the first 10 chapters, the Israelites for once are getting A+s in deportment, and everything is looking good. Then, things really go south! Listen carefully as I read **Num. 11...**

- D. **Illus.:** When Cal Thomas got fired from the TV station where he worked in Washington, D.C., he ended up in Houston. He wrote, *"It was like a tailspin into the wilderness."* Then he added, *"But God had a plan."* That is always true when God takes his people into the wilderness. What's it been for you? Depression? A long spell of unemployment? Chronic ill health? A seemingly endless crisis? The worst job ever? The divorce? Whatever it is...

I. THE WILDERNESS WILL LAY BARE YOUR HEART (11:1-10)

Ps. 78 was a national hymn recounting this period in Israel's history with spiritual insight. Listen to a few of these verses:

*"²² they **did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance....** ³² In spite of all [saving miracles], they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, **they did not believe.**"* The problem in these stories is not that these Israelites were weak, nor that they found their circumstances to be hard. The wilderness *is always hard*. It was that *"they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance."* They questioned whether God loved them and if he was good; whether he could actually finish what he started; whether he knew what he was doing.

- A. **V.1** says, *"the people complained about their hardships."* Well, of course, the wilderness is a hard place. You've been there in your own wilderness times. You've felt the heat and the barrenness. You've yearned for better times. The danger is this: In the wilderness, the faithless heart sees only the

hardship and not the hope. It was only about 13 months since they'd come out of Egypt, and the Promised Land was not that far away. Didn't anyone say, "I just can't get over the way God delivered us from Egypt! And remember when we walked through the Red Sea on dry land?! It won't be long till we're home in the wonderful land God has promised us."

The faithful, in wilderness times, think about heaven. They talk about God's faithfulness and salvation in the past and his sure promises for the future. They talk about how even in this hard thing, God is surely working out good.

- B. **V.4**, "The rabble with them began to crave other food." The Hebrew here emphasizes: *craved other food cravingly*. They were consumed—eaten up—with their craving for the food they'd left behind. Almost anyone, far from home, misses the food. It is part of being homesick. But I'm sure you caught the irony here. **They remembered the free fish that they had in Egypt, but they seem to have forgotten that they had been slaves, for crying out loud!** They'd made millions of bricks under the Egyptian sun and cried under the whip of taskmasters. Pharaoh had killed their baby sons. They had cried out to God for relief. And that was only a little over a year before. And now they want to go back?? Because they miss the cucumbers and garlic!?! Aren't you forgetting something?

In the wilderness the faithless heart sees only our sacrifice and not our salvation. Here's the guy that misses the parties and forgets what they did to his heart. Here's woman who just wants to sleep in on Sundays and then sit with her paper and coffee, who forgets what life is like with no God to love and adore?

- C. The wail of the people in **v.6** could be translated something, "We're drying up out here without the fish and vegetables from Egypt. We never see anything but this manna." The impression I get from them is that manna was about as tasty as rice cakes. So in vv.7-9 we have a little rejoinder that says, basically, manna really was wonderful stuff—a versatile, nourishing and tasty food. But this is typical. In the wilderness the faithless heart disdains the sustaining gifts of God. **Ps. 78:24-25** called manna "the grain of heaven" and "the bread of angels."

In our wilderness times, there will surely be good things we miss, but there will also be God's manna. Illus.: My niece is teaching English in Korea. Recently she was hospitalized for a week. Her stomach was already weak, and then she had to cope with food that she wasn't used to, like kimshi for breakfast. But she couldn't communicate why she wasn't eating. Finally, on her last day there, the one nurse on the whole floor who understood English, brought her a pocket snack from MacDonalds, and Paige wept in gratitude. It is like that when we're in the wilderness. It *is* hard. We *do* miss familiar blessings. But God will provide the most sustaining blessings we need. Those faithful to him will recognize and prize them as miracles of grace.

- D. God takes us into wilderness times because they show us the condition of our hearts. Much later, when the forty years of wilderness wandering was about to end, Moses reminded Israel why God had taken them into the wilderness. **Deut. 8:2-5** says, "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, **to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.** He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. **Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.**"

Sometimes, when a wilderness time reveals just how weak we are, we feel guilty. "I shouldn't be this weak, this anxious, this sad," we think. But it is exactly because the wilderness humbles us so, revealing our weaknesses so clearly, that God takes us there. **The Israelites didn't get in trouble with God because they were weak. They got in trouble because they were faithless.** After a wilderness time in his life, the Apostle Paul wrote in **2 Cor. 1:8-9**, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, **far beyond our**

ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

Now let us think about God's response to this faithlessness.

II. GOD MEETS FAITHLESSNESS WITH STERN DISCIPLINE

Remember what we just read from Deut. 8:5, *"Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you."* That is what we see in this chapter in God's response to faithlessness.

He does two things:

- A. **V.1a...** God let them see his anger in that fire. It isn't clear here that anyone was hurt in this fire, but imagine the terror on the outskirts of the camp when you have no water to douse the flames. Nothing would stop it. **V.10** says that when the whole camp wailed about food, *"the LORD became exceedingly angry,"* and **v.33** says, *"the anger of the LORD burned against the people."* Both the fire and the plague that killed some of the complainers were intended to *put the fear of God into them*. Faithless people need a sobering reminder of just who they are dealing with in God! They don't just have bad theology, they have a view of God that insults him, and that poisons everyone else. Remember how the complaining started with the rabble and then spread to every family? It wasn't really the food they were wailing about; it was God's faithfulness that they doubted. And God had to stop that!
- B. Then in **vv.18-20** God says, in effect, *"You want meat? I'll give you meat! "Until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you" [v.20]. God makes faithless people gag on their cravings.* Has God ever let you gag on your sin? Have you ever known the nausea of your faithlessness? According to **v.34**, they called that place Kibroth Hattaavah, which means *"graves of craving."* There is a cemetery in the wilderness for those whose cravings stifled all faith.
- C. Remember, for those of us who belong to God, who are his people, these stern measures are God's discipline of us as his sons and daughters. Hell awaits those who never repent of their faithlessness, but for those who feel the sting of God's discipline, remember what it says Heb 12: *"Do not lose heart when [the Lord] rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."*

Moses' role in these stories is critical. What does he do when the people complain and wail? He doesn't scold. He doesn't try to cheer everyone up or fix things. **He intercedes for them.** **V.2...** In **v.10**, where everyone is wailing, when God is *"exceedingly angry"* and Moses is *"troubled,"* Moses goes to God. No other person in the entire OT has a role quite like Moses did. He knew God, the Bible says, *"face to face,"* and again and again, we find him crying out to God on behalf of those sinful, faithless people.

III. EVEN THE PEOPLE WHOM GOD LOVES NEED SOMEONE TO INTERCEDE FOR THEM (11:10-35)

- A. God loved these infuriating people. The benediction we so often pronounce, *"The Lord bless you and keep you..."* is from **Num. 6**. God was determined to get his people to the land he'd promised them. But his people would need to learn about two things—their need for a sacrifice for sin (so God gave them detailed instructions about sacrificing to him), and their need for a **mediator**—someone to step into that great gap between them and God.
- B. We need someone to bear the heavy burden of reconciling the faithless to God. (vv.10-17, 24-30). Look at Moses' prayer to God in **vv.11-15**. I think every book I read about this passage faulted Moses for complaining to God, and pointed out that Israel wasn't really his burden, but God's. You can see why they'd say that. But in **v.11** Moses says to God, *"you put the burden of all these people on me."* And in **v.12**, he asks God, *"Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers?"*—well, I don't think Moses would say that if that isn't what God had told him, even though, in a much greater way, God also carried Israel. Again let me take you to Deuteronomy, written nearly 40 years later. In **Deut. 9:18-29** Moses reminds Israel of what he had to do when their chronic unbelief angered God again and again... **vv.18-19, 22-26...** *Forty days and*

forty nights of interceding... on at least two occasions. That kind of interceding will take it out of a person! It wasn't mainly the burden of leadership that was crushing Moses, it was the burden of interceding for God's faithless people. That's why God gave him the 70 elders, who shared in God's Spirit with Moses—to help him bear the burden of intercession, of standing between God's just anger and the wailing people.

- C. The other issue in this story is their craving for meat. This had happened once before and God had sent quail. I don't think the problem was that the people yearned for meat. It was, as parents often say, *"they way they asked."* Or rather, demanded. Moses had this difficult situation—asking for meat was understandable, and God had done it before, but what to do about the faithless way the people went about it. Sorting that out was Moses' other burden. We, too, need someone to bear the burden of our wants and ways. Who can go to God to say, *"What they want is understandable, but their hearts are so wrong. Oh God, what is to be done with this heavy burden of ungrateful demands?"*

Moses, for all his extraordinary strengths, had trouble believing God could solve the meat problem. But then God replies in **v.23**... When God first sent Moses to promise Israel deliverance from slavery, the message had been, *"I will redeem you with **an outstretched arm** and with mighty acts of judgment."* So now, God is saying, *do you think I could stretch my arm far enough to save you from slavery, but it is too short to give you meat for everyone?"* We need someone to stand between our foolish cravings and God, and *trust God completely to do what is both loving and wise for us.*

Two things happen in quick succession in vv.24ff.—the Spirit coming on the 70 elders, and the wind blowing in vast flocks of quail. In **v.25** God's Spirit is mentioned three times. The Hebrew word is *ruach*, and it can mean spirit, breath and wind. The same word is used in **v.31a**, *"Now a wind **went out from the Lord** and drove quail in from the sea."* God's breath giving holy words to the elders and driving food to the people.

- D. God's people need a mediator who not only pleads for God's mercy for us, but also who brings God's Spirit to us. Moses gave God's people an experience of that, but there was a better Mediator coming. Hebrews 3:1-6 draws the line from Moses to Jesus. It says that both Moses and Jesus were faithful to God, but Moses was faithful as a *servant* while Jesus was faithful as God's son. Jesus did what Moses could not do. He carried the burden of our faithlessness and sin by dying for us and he gave us God's own Spirit. What was it Moses said, *"I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"* Well, that has happened!

We are all too weak to pass through the wilderness times without a mediator—someone to draw God's mercy and Spirit to us. When, in wilderness times, we feel our hearts growing hard, run to Jesus. When it is hard to trust God's goodness and timing, turn to Jesus. When you want to live, not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, run to Jesus.

Illus.: Dave Dravecky was an All-Star pitcher in the 1980s. He had come to faith in Christ through a roommate in the minor leagues. He enjoyed phenomenal success, and then, disaster. He developed cancer in his pitching arm. After a miraculous comeback, the cancer returned and his arm was amputated. On top of that, his wife, Jan, experienced a crippling depression.

Later he wrote, *"Looking back, Jan and I have learned that the wilderness is part of the landscape of faith, and every bit as essential as the mountaintop. On the mountaintop we are overwhelmed by God's presence. In the wilderness we are overwhelmed by his absence. Both places should bring us to our knees; the one, in utter awe; the other, in utter dependence."* [PT.com]