

# God's People in the Wilderness: Lessons from the Book of Numbers

## "Having Nothing, But Lacking Nothing" [Walter Brueggemann]

### Introductory Questions

- Why is the book called "Numbers"? And why should we study it?
- How does Numbers fit into the Five Books of Moses?
- What do you think of when you hear the word "wilderness"?
- What are the implications of "God's people" in the wilderness?

### First, the Book Title

- "Numbers" comes from the Greek translation of the book
- "Numbering" was important for these people – why?
- The Hebrew title is "in the wilderness" (*BaMidbar*); that aptly describes the narrative portions

### Place in the Pentateuch

- Genesis – the covenant people (children of Abraham) and covenant promises
- Exodus ("these are the names") – deliverance from bondage in Egypt, journey to Sinai, declaration of the covenant, preparation of place and personnel for worship
- Leviticus ("and He called") – approach to and living in the presence of our holy God: sacrifices and instructions for holy living
- Numbers ("in the wilderness") – preparations to leave Sinai; journey to the promised Land
- Deuteronomy ("these are the words") – re-articulating the covenant as a new generation prepared to enter the Land

### Introduction to the Wilderness(es)

- Three Hebrew words translated "wilderness" and "desert"
  - Midbar
  - Aravah
  - Yeshimon (Jeshimon)
- A transitional and ambiguous place
  - Between slavery and the Promised Land
  - A place of purification but also a haunt for wild animals and demons; a symbol of desolation and punishment

### Israel Delivered into the Wilderness (patterns for us)

- God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt and brought them through the fearsome Sea into the wilderness
- God was their visible Guide and Protector (cloud and fire)
- God tested and provided for Israel in the wilderness
- Later, God tested and punished Israel's outright rebellion (Num 11-21)

- The wilderness is where God transformed them into a worshipping nation
- The fundamental question that shapes Israel’s wilderness experiences—and ours—is this: “Is God with us or not?”

#### Locations: on the Margins

- Wilderness of Sinai
- Wilderness of Paran
- Wilderness of Zin
- Is there anything “good” about the wilderness?

#### Sanctuary in the Wilderness

- Moses at Horeb – standing on holy ground (Exod 3)
- God called Israel to worship in the wilderness (Exod 3:18; 5:1; 7:16; 8:27) where they would be keenly aware of His presence, dependent on Him, and away from distractions
- “Have them make a sanctuary for Me, and I shall dwell among them” (Exod 25:8)
- Lessons in purity and approach to God
- The Day of Atonement - the goat for Azazel was sent to a land “cut off”

#### Recap: What Lessons Can We Learn?

- The wilderness is a place of testing
- It is a place for worship and awareness of the presence of God
- It is a dangerous place; we learn dependence on God
- The wilderness is a place of refuge and restoration

“[God] led you through the vast and dreadful desert with its venomous snakes and scorpions....that thirsty and waterless land...” (Deut 8:15)

“Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”