

BIBLE BRIEFING

“Generation W” NUMBERS 18-20

Introduction

An entire generation of sons and daughters – all those twenty years and below – would camp in the wilderness for the next thirty-eight years. They would watch their fathers and mothers die as a result of the nation’s unbelief and refusal to enter the Promised Land.

How would those events, and those experiences, affect *Generation W* (*W* for wanderers)? We’ll see in these next chapters of Numbers.

1. The instructions in Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen were probably given while Israel was still at Kadesh-Barnea, right after their disobedient refusal to enter the Promised Land.
2. In Chapter Twenty, Generation W has completed thirty-eight years of wandering in the wilderness. They are back at Kadesh-Barnea – forty years after the nation left Egypt!

Very little is recorded about the years of wandering. A list of camping spots occurs in Chapter Thirty-three. According to verse one of Chapter Twenty, Miriam, Moses’ sister, died in the first month of the fortieth year; according to Numbers 33:8, Aaron, Moses brother and the High Priest, died in the fifth month of that year. Moses died at the end of the fortieth year (Deuteronomy 1:3) – marking the end of all that generation, except for Caleb and Joshua.

We pick-up the story in Chapter Eighteen. At the end of Chapter Seventeen, there had been a challenge against Aaron by others who wanted also to be priests. God had sent a plague that killed over 14,000 campers. The people were understandably afraid! The Lord reiterated His plan for Aaron’s family and the Levites – their roles and responsibilities – in verses one through seven.

Numbers 18:1 Then the Lord said to Aaron: “You and your sons and your father’s house with you shall bear the iniquity *related to* the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity *associated with* your priesthood.

Numbers 18:2 Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness.

Numbers 18:3 They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die - they and you also.

Numbers 18:4 They shall be joined with you and attend to the needs of the tabernacle of meeting, for all the work of the tabernacle; but an outsider shall not come near you.

Numbers 18:5 And you shall attend to the duties of the sanctuary and the duties of the altar, that there *may* be no more wrath on the children of Israel.

Numbers 18:6 Behold, I Myself have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; *they are* a gift to you, given by the Lord, to do the work of the tabernacle of meeting.

Numbers 18:7 Therefore you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything at the altar and behind the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood *to you* as a gift for service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

God is the creator of heaven and earth. He has the right to order His creation as He sees fit. Within His creation, He established a new nation – the nation of Israel. He had the right to put them in order, too. Aaron and his sons were priests; the Levites were to serve them. No other order was possible without serious consequences.

God has the right to order every aspect of the things He has established – like the Church... Marriages... Parenting. His order is never arbitrary; it's not cultural; it's not evolving. We are to discover His order by studying Scripture – not disorder it with our own desires and opinions. Serious consequences still attend whenever we overthrow God's proper order. It leads to a kind of death.

The priests and Levites ministered to the spiritual needs of the people. The people, in turn, ministered to the material needs of the priests and Levites. None of those guys had any inheritance in the Promised Land, so they were cared for by the sacrifices, offerings, and tithes of the people.

Numbers 18:18 And their flesh shall be yours, just as the wave breast and the right thigh are yours.

Numbers 18:19 “All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer to the Lord, I have given to you and your sons and daughters with you

as an ordinance forever; it *is* a covenant of salt forever before the Lord with you and your descendants with you.”

Numbers 18:20 Then the Lord said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I *am* your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel.

Numbers 18:21 “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.

Numbers 18:22 Hereafter the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die.

Numbers 18:23 But the Levites shall perform the work of the tabernacle of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; *it shall be* a statute forever, throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.

Numbers 18:24 For the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the Lord, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, ‘Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.’”

Numbers 18:25 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

Numbers 18:26 “Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: ‘When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to the Lord, a tenth of the tithe.

Numbers 18:27 And your heave offering shall be reckoned to you as though *it were* the grain of the threshing floor and as the fullness of the winepress.

Numbers 18:28 Thus you shall also offer a heave offering to the Lord from all your tithes which you receive from the children of Israel, and you shall give the Lord’S heave offering from it to Aaron the priest.

Numbers 18:29 Of all your gifts you shall offer up every heave offering due to the Lord, from all the best of them, the consecrated part of them.’

Numbers 18:30 Therefore you shall say to them: ‘When you have lifted up the best of it, then *the rest* shall be accounted to the Levites as the produce of the threshing floor and as the produce of the winepress.

Numbers 18:31 You may eat it in any place, you and your households, for it *is* your reward for your work in the tabernacle of meeting.

Numbers 18:32 And you shall bear no sin because of it, when you have lifted up the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy gifts of the children of Israel, lest you die.’”

The children of Israel paid at least three different tithes – one to the Levites, one to the Lord (Deuteronomy 14:22-27), and one to the poor, taken every three years (Leviticus 27:28-29). About 23% of their goods and income were given as tithes; *then they gave freewill offerings above that!* The Levites took a tithe of what they received and gave it to the priests.

It's a blessing to support Christian workers. It's not more spiritual to refuse support, although it may be required at times depending on your calling.

You've heard of Dolly the sheep... But did you hear about Melody the heifer? You will in a minute!

In Israel certain experiences or contacts rendered a person ceremonially unclean. This was because all of life was regarded as essentially religious or as having spiritual significance. Moreover, life was inextricably bound up with symbolism. For example, skin diseases implied uncleanness because they typified or symbolized sin.

Contact with the dead was an especially contaminating experience because of the obvious association of physical death with spiritual death

Therefore some means of purification must be provided for those who came into contact with dead bodies so they might be able to associate freely and without hindrance with the Lord's living community. The purpose of Chapter Nineteen was to explain how contamination could occur and what must be done in each case to effect ceremonial cleansing. It involved the ashes of a red heifer.

Numbers 19:1 Now the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,
Numbers 19:2 "This *is* the ordinance of the law which the Lord has commanded, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer without blemish, in which there *is* no defect *and* on which a yoke has never come.

The purpose was not to remove sin itself, but to remove the contamination of sin which death represented. A red animal perhaps symbolized the blood.

Numbers 19:3 You shall give it to Eleazar the priest, that he may take it outside the camp, and it shall be slaughtered before him;

Numbers 19:4 and Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood seven times directly in front of the tabernacle of meeting.

Numbers 19:5 Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight: its hide, its flesh, its blood, and its offal shall be burned.

Numbers 19:6 And the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet, and cast *them* into the midst of the fire burning the heifer.

Numbers 19:7 Then the priest shall wash his clothes, he shall bathe in water, and afterward he shall come into the camp; the priest shall be unclean until evening.

Numbers 19:8 And the one who burns it shall wash his clothes in water, bathe in water, and shall be unclean until evening.

Numbers 19:9 Then a man *who is* clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and store *them* outside the camp in a clean place; and they shall be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for the water of purification; it *is* for purifying from sin.

Numbers 19:10 And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until evening. It shall be a statute forever to the children of Israel and to the stranger who dwells among them.

A red heifer was to be the means for the congregation of Israel to purify themselves. The red heifer must meet certain physical criteria and must be sacrificed in a certain way. Once sacrificed, the ashes are to be mixed with "clean" water and it is this mixture which is sprinkled over the "unclean."

Numbers 19:11 'He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days.

Numbers 19:12 He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; *then* he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean.

Numbers 19:13 Whoever touches the body of anyone who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the Lord. That person shall be cut off from Israel. He shall be unclean, because the water of purification was not sprinkled on him; his uncleanness *is* still on him.

Numbers 19:14 'This *is* the law when a man dies in a tent: All who come into the tent and all who *are* in the tent shall be unclean seven days;

Numbers 19:15 and every open vessel, which has no cover fastened on it, *is* unclean.

Numbers 19:16 Whoever in the open field touches one who is slain by a sword or who has died, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.

Numbers 19:17 'And for an unclean *person* they shall take some of the ashes of the heifer burnt for purification from sin, and running water shall be put on them in a vessel.

Numbers 19:18 A clean person shall take hyssop and dip *it* in the water, sprinkle *it* on the tent, on all the vessels, on the persons who were there, or on the one who touched a bone, the slain, the dead, or a grave.

Numbers 19:19 The clean *person* shall sprinkle the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, wash his clothes, and bathe in water; and at evening he shall be clean.

Numbers 19:20 'But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself, that person shall be cut off from among the assembly, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the Lord. The water of purification has not been sprinkled on him; he is unclean.

Numbers 19:21 It shall be a perpetual statute for them. He who sprinkles the water of purification shall wash his clothes; and he who touches the water of purification shall be unclean until evening.

Numbers 19:22 Whatever the unclean *person* touches shall be unclean; and the person who touches *it* shall be unclean until evening.”

The red heifer must be without blemish, must be without defect, and must never have worn a yoke. The sacrifice must be performed outside the camp; the blood must be sprinkled seven times in front of the tabernacle; the entire heifer must be burned before the priest; cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet are added to the fire. While the primary purpose was for ritual cleansing, some believe it may have had medical implications as well.

The Water of Purification is then prepared by a priest, who is clean, who gathers the ashes, adds water to the ashes and then stores it outside the camp in a clean place.

Red heifers are rare! In April of 2002, a red heifer was born in Israel, and people were going nuts over it. Her name was Melody. It is this water, the Water of Purification, which is required by the Israelites today. It is needed to "purify" today's Levitical priesthood and to "purify" the temple mount in preparation for the building of the Third Temple.

Melody was ultimately disqualified when a few white hairs were found on her.

There are some well placed and respected experts who believe they know where the ashes of the last red heifer are presently hidden.

The red heifer was an allusion which ultimately pointed to Jesus Christ, as Paul points out in Hebrews 9:13-14,

For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

The priest would be "unclean until evening." This unusual sacrifice symbolically pointed to Jesus Christ and His sacrifice because our Lord, who was perfectly sinless, judicially took upon Himself the sins of the world so that we who are sinful could become righteous before God.

Just as the red heifer was sacrificed "outside the camp," in contrast to all other sacrifices that took place in the Tabernacle or Temple, Jesus was sacrificed outside the city of Jerusalem, on the very spot, we believe, on which Abraham offered Isaac two thousand years earlier.

In Chapter Twenty, almost everyone from the previous generation is dead. Sadly, the next generation is going to follow in their parents' spiritual steps by grumbling and complaining. Like fathers, like sons!

Miriam's death is recorded:

Numbers 20:1 Then the children of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the Wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh; and Miriam died there and was buried there.

Miriam dies a complex character; great for her courage in assisting Moses and his parents (Exodus 2:4-8), and great for her leading Israel in praise (Exodus 15:20-21). But she was also disgraced for her rebellion against Moses (Numbers 12).

Numbers 20:2 Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron.

Numbers 20:3 And the people contended with Moses and spoke, saying: "If only we had died when our brethren died before the Lord!

Numbers 20:4 Why have you brought up the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here?

Numbers 20:5 And why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It *is* not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates; nor *is* there any water to drink."

Numbers 20:6 So Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and they fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

God's promise to lead them into the land was thirty-eight years old. It had been a severe trial – not just the wandering, but watching their parents and extended family members die. It seemed, too, that they

had made no real progress – here they were right back at Kadesh-Barnea!

Real progress is *inward*, not outward or even forward. God was preparing them for the land. The Promised Land wasn't going anywhere; but neither were they **getting anywhere** spiritually.

They were headed into battle – first, with nations on the wilderness side of the Jordan; then, in the Promised Land itself. God had designed a training program that would perfectly fit them for the fray... But they wanted only the spoils, not the battles or the discipline required to win them.

Numbers 20:7 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,
Numbers 20:8 “Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.”

Back at Mount Sinai, God had told Moses to strike the rock, and water would come forth (Exodus 17:6), but now he is merely to speak to the rock - with the rod (a symbol of his authority from God) in his hand. It was important Moses follow God's Word to the letter; there was no room for him to improvise.

Numbers 20:9 So Moses took the rod from before the Lord as He commanded him.

Numbers 20:10 And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?”

Numbers 20:11 Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank.

Before, Moses' had fallen on his face before God when the people had rebelled (Numbers 16:4). At Meribah, when the people contended with Moses because there was no water, Moses cried out to the LORD, not against the people (Exodus 15:22-25). When the people did need to be boldly confronted, Moses did it, but without the edge of anger, contempt, and bitterness we see here (as in Exodus 17:1-7). There are a hundred explanations for Moses' frustration

here (Psalm 106:32-33 describes how the people provoked Moses here), but not a single excuse.

Not only did he strike it, but he struck it *twice*; when he struck the rock at the beginning of the Exodus journey, he only had to strike it once, but now, out of anger and frustration, he does it twice.

God's love for His people is so great, He will use very imperfect instruments. The fact God uses someone is no evidence - to themselves or to the people - that they themselves are really right with God or ministering according to God's heart.

The people needed water - and so it is provided. Moses might have come away thinking he did right, and the people probably thought so as well - because what Moses did seemed to *work*. But what *works* is not the best measure of what is right before God.

Numbers 20:12 Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

Numbers 20:13 This was the water of Meribah, because the children of Israel contended with the Lord, and He was hallowed among them.

What Moses did was make God look no different than an angry man or one of the temperamental pagan gods. He did not reflect the heart and character of God before the people.

God's correction of Moses is hard; he will not lead Israel into the Promised Land. That which he had dreamed of, and felt called to, as a child in the palaces of Egypt - to deliver God's people - will not be completed. Another will finish the job.

Moses defaced a beautiful picture of Jesus' redemptive work through the rock which provided water in the wilderness. The New Testament makes it clear this water-providing, life-giving rock was a picture of Jesus (First Corinthians 10:4). Jesus, being struck once, provided life for all who would drink of Him (John 7:37). But it was unnecessary - and unrighteous - that Jesus would be struck again, much less again twice, because the Son of God needed only to suffer once (Hebrews 10:10-12). Jesus can now be approached with words of faith

(Romans 10:8-10), and Moses should have only used words of faith to bring lifegiving water to the nation of Israel. Moses ruined this picture of the work of Jesus God intended.

God hallowed Himself through the correction of Moses. God will get His glory, God will be hallowed - but will it come through our obedience or our correction?

Israel is now at Kadesh, and looking to go through the land of Edom - taking them closer to the Promised Land than they had ever been before, beyond where they failed to go in because of unbelief. This is the fifth stage of the Exodus.

1. First, from Egypt to Mount Sinai (Exodus 12:31 to 18:27).
2. Second, the sojourn at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1 to Numbers 10:10).
3. Third, the first approach to the Promised Land, beginning at Mount Sinai, but being halted at Kadesh-Barnea with the refusal to enter the Promised Land in faith (Numbers 10:11 to 14:45).
4. Fourth, the thirty-eight years of wandering in the wilderness until the generation of unbelief had died (Numbers 15:1 to Numbers 20:13).
5. Now, fifth, the second and final approach to the Promised Land (Numbers 20:14 to Joshua 2:24).

Conclusion

Generation W learned from the example of their parents to grumble and complain at the plan of God; they learned to treat the promises of God with contempt.

May **our** children fair better! May they truly be the *Worship Generation* – and the last before the trumpet sounds to gather us home.