

## **NUMBERS 11–14; 20–24**

### **Introduction**

The following “Witnessing Christ from the Old Testament” study covers Numbers 11–14; 20–24.

[You can find the LDS outline of study and resources here.](#)

### **LDS Study Focus**

LDS study material will focus on:

*Even on foot, it wouldn’t normally take 40 years to travel from the wilderness of Sinai to the promised land in Canaan. But that’s how long the children of Israel needed, not to cover the geographical distance but to cover the spiritual distance: the distance between who they were and who the Lord needed them to become as His covenant people.*

*The book of Numbers describes some of what happened during those 40 years, including lessons the children of Israel needed to learn before entering the promised land. They learned about being faithful to the Lord’s chosen servants (see [Numbers 12](#)). They learned about trusting the Lord’s power, even when the future seems hopeless (see [Numbers 13–14](#)). And they learned that being faithless or untrusting brings spiritual harm, but they could repent and look to the Savior for healing (see [Numbers 21:4–9](#)).*

*We’re all like the Israelites in some ways. We all know what it’s like to be in a spiritual wilderness, and the same lessons they learned can help us prepare to enter our own promised land: eternal life with our Heavenly Father.*

### **Biblical Focus**

In the book of Numbers, the cycle of complaining, God’s judgment, Moses’ intercession, and God’s undeserved forgiveness continued. As you read through these chapters, do you get the impression that the people earned their forgiveness? Why did God keep forgiving them?

It is hard to read these stories without cringing at Israel’s shocking and continual unbelief. How could they possibly doubt God after all they had seen him do? Pride tempts us to separate ourselves from these people believing that we would never struggle with unbelief like theirs.

After months in the wilderness, Israel has finally arrived at the promised land. God had delivered them from slavery, brought them through the waters of the Red Sea, miraculously fed them and gave them water, set up a system of worship and law, disciplined them, and forgave their rebellion and doubt many times over.

A few more details are added to this story in [Deuteronomy 1](#), as Moses reflects on this account just before they finally enter the promised land. In [Deuteronomy 1:21,22](#), God commanded the Israelites to take the land, not be afraid, and not be discouraged. God and Moses also condoned the sending of the spies. This moment was an excellent opportunity to see the gift they were about to receive and develop a plan of attack. As far as we know, God just said to *take* the land. He did not tell them *how*.

## **NUMBERS 11–14**

As we have seen in many stories before, God loves to act in hopeless situations. Hopelessness drives believers to look away from themselves and to him. The spies certainly noticed how weak Israel looked compared to the mighty inhabitants of the promised land. Unfortunately, ten of the spies forgot that God was on their side. They believed they were only relying on their power and might. As a result, the ten spies became victims of despair and spread their fear throughout Israel as fast as any plague. Only two spies (Joshua and Caleb) looked up to God in faith, anticipating **his** next move.

We have heard Israel say, “Let’s go back to Egypt,” before. Fear distorted their memories of the past and prompted irrational solutions. How could they possibly think going back to Egypt was a good solution? In Egypt, they were tormented slaves subject to Pharaoh’s population control. How would they survive the trip back to Egypt? Would God provide manna and water for that trip too?

This incident was not the first time (or the last time) that God threatened to destroy the people. Utter destruction is, after all, what sin deserves. But, again, Moses interceded for them, and God forgave. This pattern points us forward to Christ, who intercedes before God on our behalf and incites his forgiveness.

Yet, God issued a consequence for their unbelief. Just as unbelievers will not enter the promised land of heaven, so this unbelieving generation would not enter the promised land of Canaan. Only the next generation (and Joshua and Caleb) would receive the gift. As we will see in the next chapter for study, Numbers 20, even Moses and Aaron will lose out on entering the physical promised land.

### **Conversation Starter:**

- **How does Satan use fear to control us?**
- **What is your first reaction to problems you cannot solve? Do children and adults react differently?** Hang on to that thought. **How do children and adults respond differently to fear?** (It’s a repetitive question, but hang in there.)
- **Read [Luke 18:15–17](#). How does this passage connect to this story? What does “receiving the kingdom of God like a child” look like?**

### **Sharing Personally:**

*In the book of Numbers, when I read about the complaining of the Israelites as they wander in the wilderness, pride keeps me from admitting how similar I am. They saw great miracles (the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the daily manna), yet they continued to doubt God.*

*While I haven’t seen such amazing miracles with my own eyes, God has shown me his miracles in the Bible. He filled his Word with the works and promises of my Creator and my Savior.*

*Yet still, I doubt. I don’t even face trials like thirst, famine, and warfare. Comparatively, my life is comfortable and safe. Yet still, I doubt.*

*Shockingly, God forgave the Israelites over and over again. Perhaps even more shocking is God’s continued forgiveness of me.*

## **NUMBERS 20**

### **Water from a Rock**

At this point, Israel has been wandering in the desert for nearly forty years. By now, most of the adults who had left Egypt were dead. The majority of the remaining people knew nothing but the wilderness as home. They had only heard stories about the “good old days” of slavery in Egypt.

Once again, the Israelites needed water. Early in their journey out of Egypt, they had a similar problem with a similar solution; however, the event now resulted in devastating consequences for Moses and Aaron. Moses and Aaron committed a grave sin against the Lord and were denied entrance into the promised land.

Moses’ and Aaron’s actual sin is a bit unclear. With Aaron by his side, Moses performed the miracle in a state of rage and entitlement. Who could blame them? The trip out of Egypt should have taken less than a year, but here they were trapped in the wilderness because of the people’s persistent unbelief. Why haven’t the people learned to trust God yet?

It might be helpful to compare Moses to a parent. As a parent, *I* am frustrated that my children continually fight and whine. *I* have worked so hard to teach them and sacrificed so much to be a good parent. *I* am tired. *I* need progress! *I* feel impatience and rage too.

Being a sinner, living with sinners, and leading sinners is an impossible job. Not even the man who wrote five books of the Bible could do it without a heart of entitlement. Unending patience and continual self-sacrifice are unnatural.

God’s consequences for Moses and Aaron were severe. After years of faithful service, God denied them entry into the promised land. Why did God punish them so severely?

Think of it this way. Imagine the consequences of drawing a mustache on a lady in a makeup poster in the drugstore. Now imagine you drew the same mustache on the Mona Lisa. The consequences would be vastly different for sinning against the makeup lady (drug store) and the Mona Lisa (the Louvre and Leonardo DaVinci’s legacy)! You may have committed the same crime, but it is about those against *whom* you have sinned that matters.

Although Moses was a prophet and did much good, God didn’t give him a pass. God didn’t say his good outweighed his bad. As a result, Moses suffered significant consequences for his sinful disobedience.

When you think about it, this holds true not just in God’s courtroom but also in courtrooms worldwide. When a good and upstanding citizen breaks the law, a judge doesn’t give them a free pass. They still get speeding tickets. They still receive sentences. The good they do doesn’t cancel or outweigh the bad.

Regardless of who a person is (a prophet) or what he has done (“all the signs and wonders”), sin still requires punishment. Even “small” sins committed towards the end of a productive and impressive life count. None of it matters. This problem with ALL sins, which are all committed against God, and all people who do sins, “great” and “small,” is why we need a Savior from sin; this is why we need Jesus.

### **Conversation Starters:**

- In what other ways do we struggle with entitlement or impatience? What does this say about our faith?
- What are the eternal consequences of sinning against God?
- Can you think of specific ways Jesus fulfilled this law *for us*? For example, how did he demonstrate patience and self-sacrifice? What are the eternal consequences of Jesus' perfect obedience *for us*?

### **Sharing Personally:**

*Moses' sin in Numbers 21 and how God dealt with it confuses me. Although Moses was a prophet and did much good, God didn't give him a pass for striking the rock. God didn't say his good outweighed his bad. As a result, Moses suffered significant consequences for his sinful disobedience.*

*However, when I think about it, this holds true not just in God's courtroom but also in courtrooms worldwide. When a good and upstanding citizen breaks the law, a judge doesn't give them a free pass. They still get speeding tickets, DUIs, and felony convictions. They still receive sentences. The good they do doesn't cancel or outweigh the bad.*

*Although it might be hard for us to reconcile, regardless of who a person is, even a prophet like Moses, or what he has done, miraculous "signs and wonders," sin still requires punishment. Even "small" sins committed towards the end of a productive and impressive life count. None of it matters.*

*This problem with ALL sins, which are all committed against God, and all people who do sins, "great" and "small," is why we need a Savior from sin; this is why we need Jesus.*

*Our good doesn't outweigh the bad and never will. Therefore, we need Jesus to step into our place in God's courtroom and declare, "This is another one for whom I lived perfectly, this is another one for whom I bled and died, this is another one for whom I was raised to life."*

## NUMBERS 21

### The Sin of the Next Generation and The Snake on a Pole

The Israelites sound like children who have been on a long road trip eating PBJs in the car every day. “*There’s no food!*” and “*We hate this food!*” They were safe, fed, and hydrated. Nothing was actually wrong. They also sounded just as whiny as the previous generation that had to die in the desert.

Every generation inherits sin. The slightest discomforts and inconveniences can turn hearts against God. Human faith is fragile and conditional. God sends to the people deserved judgment. Just as Satan and the first sin brought death into the world, each of these venomous snakes brought destruction and death to the Israelite camp ([Romans 6:23a](#)).

The snake on a pole foreshadows Christ on the cross. We all have been poisoned by sin, and death is inevitable. But God put Jesus on the pole of the cross so that all who look to him and trust will live.

Jesus, in his great conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3, referenced this account when talking about what faith is and what it does, saying, “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life*” ([John 3:14–15](#)).

When God told the people to look at the bronze snake, it wasn’t the snake healing the people. It wasn’t some magic charm or legitimate Rabbit’s Foot or anything like that. (Unfortunately, the people treated it like this later on in their history, and it had to be destroyed). The bronze snake itself did not save them; instead, God saved them by the promise he attached to it.

Our God loves to work through promises and intentional symbols. He was getting the world ready to see what he would do when he solved the world’s biggest problem, sin. The snake on a pole pointed forward to the day when God would hang sin on a cross.

When we see Jesus hanging on the cross, we see sin and its effects. God lifted Jesus on a pole so that every one of your problems caused by sin is a problem that God promises will one day be solved. All of the guilt you are bearing from your past sins, God pledges Jesus has paid for in full. Then, when you are sin bitten, you can look to Jesus and live.



Christian artist Chris Powers beautifully captured the law and gospel messages of Numbers 21 in his video [Set Your Eyes](#) which you can find on YouTube. This week you could even consider sharing this video with your LDS contacts and ask them what their big takeaway from the video is.

#### **Conversation Starters:**

- **What “works” were required for the salvation of those bitten by the snake?**
- **What “works” are required for the salvation of those bitten by the snake of sin?**
- **True or False: When Christ was on the cross, he was the world’s worst sinner.**
- **True or False: When Christ was on the cross, he was the world’s only sinner.**

#### **Sharing Personally:**

*Like the children of Israel in Numbers 21, I, too, have been bitten by a venomous snake and face certain death. The snake that bit me is called Sin.*

*And, like the children of Israel, I have been given a strange antidote. The Israelites weren’t required to do particular works to be saved. All they did was look at a snake on a pole. They looked and lived. They trusted in the promise attached to that pole, and that was it. They lived.*

*God’s promises of salvation are attached to Jesus on the cross. In faith, I look to the cross and trust that Jesus has done everything required for my salvation. Jesus is the complete antidote for sin.*

#### **Additional Resources:**

Visit the [Witnessing Scenarios](#) section on TILM.org for more resources on talking about sin.

## **NUMBERS 22–24**

The Israelites finally began their quest to conquer the surrounding nations, and the LORD blessed each battle. But, understandably, Moab was terrified! Israel had just defeated the nation that had previously beaten them. So, King Balak turned to the dark arts for help.

In this section, we see God's protection over his people and his power over the dark forces of this world.

Balaam is a non-Jew, greedy soothsayer who uses divination to speak with the LORD. Because of his reputation, we assume he is pretty familiar with the dark arts. Did you notice that he doesn't seem to be phased by the talking donkey? Maybe such odd occurrences were not strange to him.

It is a bit confusing when God tells Balaam to "go," then "don't go," then "go" again. Remember, God is watching Balaam's heart and knows his intentions. He also wants to use these episodes to show his people and the surrounding nations his unwavering commitment to protecting and blessing his people.

Greedy Balaam and terrified King Balak wanted so badly to curse the Israelites. It is almost comical watching them try again and again in different locations. If Balaam was an experienced soothsayer, he likely had been able to influence the demons and dark powers he had served. However, the God of Israel was different. The LORD would do nothing but bless his people. He would forever be a faithful husband to his bride.

### **Conversation Starter:**

- Read [Numbers 23:20,23](#) and [Romans 8:38–39](#). What can separate us from God's love?
- Scan the prophecies for hints of the coming Messiah. There are quite a few!

### **Tying it All Together:**

Look again at the LDS focus below, and then think about some questions you could ask your Mormon contacts to expand on and explain the topics covered in these chapters of Numbers.

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### **Conversation Starters:**

- **What do these chapters teach us about faith and its object?**
- **What do these chapters teach us about God's faithfulness**
- **What do these chapters teach us about humanity's unfaithfulness?**
- **How do we enter the “promised land of eternal life with our Heavenly Father?” (Make sure they think about how God didn't even let Moses enter the promised land of physical Israel because of his sin.)**