

SESSION 1

The Journey

NUMBERS 9:15-23

GOD GIVES DAILY GUIDANCE TO HIS PEOPLE.



Many of us rely on GPS navigation when going someplace new. Not only will it tell us to turn left in 1.2 miles, but it will also tell us what time we can expect to arrive. GPS systems weren't as reliable when they first came out. They were programmed at the factory and didn't automatically update with the most up-to-date information. They didn't know about new roads or routes. Thus, sometimes they gave wrong information, and people got lost.

THINK OF A TIME WHEN BAD DIRECTIONS LED YOU SOMEWHERE UNEXPECTED.
HOW CAN GETTING JUST ONE DETAIL WRONG DISRUPT OUR TRAVELS?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

The book of Exodus divides into three parts, which are separated geographically. The first (chaps. 1-12) records events in Egypt. The second (chaps. 13-18) describes Israel's trek from Egypt to Sinai. The third part (chaps. 19-40) details events at Sinai. Similarly, the book of Numbers presents three primary scenes, and geographic locations identify each. The first part (chaps. 1-10) occurred while the Israelites were still at Mount Sinai. The second describes their journey from Sinai toward Canaan (chaps. 11-25). The final section (chaps. 26-36) describes God's people on the plains of Moab—across the Jordan River from Jericho. This week's study occurred while they were camped at Mount Sinai.

We often associate Mount Sinai with Moses receiving the Ten Commandments and the Israelites worshiping the golden calf. Another dramatic event, though, occurred there earlier. God spoke to Moses from a burning bush at Sinai (Ex. 3:1-5). The text refers to Sinai by another name, Horeb (3:1), which means "Desolation." Certainly, it was (and is) desolate. As the book

of Numbers opens, the Israelites had been gone from Egypt for a little over a year and had been in this desolate place for just over a month (40:2; Num. 1:1).

One major theme in the opening chapters of Numbers involves being "consecrated." It means to be set aside as holy or sacred, emphasizing keeping something pure. The recurring emphasis on being consecrated underscores God's setting aside His people to be unlike all others. He wanted them to be holy unto Him and devoted wholly unto Him. They were to serve, honor, and obey Him alone. The question of Numbers is how they would do in fulfilling that intent. In the opening chapters, they did well.



15 On the day the **tabernacle** **A** was **set up**, **B** the **cloud** **C** covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and it appeared like **fire** **D** above the tabernacle from evening until morning. **16** It remained that way continuously: the cloud would cover it, appearing like fire at night. **17** Whenever the cloud was **lifted up** **E** above the tent, the Israelites would set out; at the place where the cloud stopped, there the Israelites camped. **18** At the **LORD's command** **F** the Israelites set out, and at the LORD's command they camped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they camped. **19** Even when the cloud stayed over the tabernacle **many days**, **G** the Israelites carried out the LORD's requirement and did not set out. **20** Sometimes the cloud remained over the tabernacle for only a few days. They would **camp** **H** at the LORD's command and set out at the LORD's command. **21** Sometimes the cloud remained only from evening until morning; when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. Or if it remained a day and a night, they moved out when the cloud lifted. **22** Whether it was two days, a month, or longer, the Israelites camped and did not set out as long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle. But when it was lifted, they set out. **23** They camped at the LORD's command, and they set out **at the LORD's command**. **I** They carried out the LORD's requirement according to his command through Moses.

Key Words

- A.** Israel's portable worship structure. It was built at the command of God "that I may dwell among them" (Ex. 25:8).

- B.** The tabernacle was set up in the middle of Israel's camp, symbolizing God's dwelling place among His people.

- C.** Before the tabernacle was built, the Lord appeared to Moses in a cloud outside the camp (Ex. 33:7-10). After the tabernacle was completed, the cloud covered the tabernacle (Lev. 16:2,12-13).

- D.** The fire of God's presence first appeared to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:2). It led the Israelites out of Egypt (13:21-22), rested on Mount Sinai (19:18), and settled on the tabernacle (40:38).

- E.** The movement of the cloud/fire was God's signal that it was time to depart or make camp.

- F.** This was not a verbal command, but a visual one.

- G.** Sometimes, the cloud stayed for several days, as when Israel camped at Sinai. Other times, it would remain only a few days (v. 20) or even just one day (v. 21).

- H.** When and where they would camp was determined entirely by God.

- I.** Having learned important lessons regarding disobedience at Sinai, the people were willing to trust God's directions.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. God's Presence

(Num. 9:15-16)

Believers can be assured that God is with them and can provide trustworthy guidance.

- **God made His presence with His people visible. How do you think the visible evidence of His presence made the Israelites feel?**
- **How can you be assured of God's presence in your life?**
- **What are some ways you can benefit from His presence?**

2. Faithful Direction

(Num. 9:17-21)

Following God's guidance will require believers to act on His instruction.

- **Have there been times when God made you wait for an answer or solution from Him? How did that experience affect your faith?**

3. Active Obedience

(Num. 9:22-23)

Following God in faith means that we act on His timeframe and not our own.

- **Why does it matter that we follow the Lord's lead?**
- **Why do we sometimes delay doing what He wants us to do?**

Apply the Text

- **How might the Lord be leading your Bible study group or church into a new ministry?**
- **What can the group or church do to follow His lead?**

KEY DOCTRINE:

God

To God we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience. (See Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 1 John 5:3.)

BIBLE SKILL:

Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about a biblical concept.

Exodus 9:15-23 describes how God led His people through the wilderness. Read the article "Pillar of Fire and Cloud" in a Bible dictionary and record any new insights. Reflect on these questions: How does God primarily guide His people today? What is the relationship between Bible reading and prayer and God's guidance? How can you be sure you are following God's will for your life?



Explore the Bible Prayer Guide

Scan here for a weekly prayer guide based on this quarter's Bible passages.



Day 3: Numbers 9:18

Highlight the words “at the LORD’s command.”

Two verbs in verse 18 describe what the Israelites did: they “set out” and they “camped.” We sometimes forget that hundreds of thousands of people were involved in the exodus. Over six hundred thousand men left Egypt; the number of people swells exponentially when we add women and children (Ex. 12:37; Num. 1:45-46).

Earlier, the Lord laid out an arrangement for the tribal clans and their position around the tabernacle (Num. 2:1-33). Had He not, confusion and disorder would have ruled the day. Whether the people were camping or setting out for the next leg of the journey, they would have otherwise resembled a disorganized mob.

The first to set out were the Levites. They camped closest to the tabernacle and were responsible for its set-up and transport. Concerning the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant was always out front as the people relocated. Next was the tabernacle structure itself—with its curtains, posts, tent pegs, and ropes. Last in the procession of the Levites were the furnishings for the tabernacle. This included the utensils they used for presenting the incense, grain, and animal sacrifices.

Where is God leading you?



Day 4: Numbers 9:19-21

Circle “many days” and “few days.”

The final chapter of Exodus describes the setting up of the tabernacle for the first time. The structure itself would have been impressive. Nothing, though, could compare to what brought its ultimate glory. “The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Ex. 40:34). The cloud was the visible manifestation of God’s presence with His people.

At times, the cloud stayed in place for “many days.” Other times, the wait lasted “only a few days.” These verses are a reminder that the Lord sometimes compels us to wait. He may call us to sit still—which can be difficult to do. Many times we wait without knowing why. Verse 21 provides a contrast to verses 19-20. Rather than the tabernacle remaining in place for multiple days, at times the sacred space was to be in place only overnight. When the cloud lifted the next morning, the people resumed their journey.

This description raises the question of how quickly the tabernacle could be set up. Exodus 40 provides the answer: “You are to set up the tabernacle . . . on the first day of the first month” (Ex. 40:2). We get an echo of this detail in Numbers 9:15, “On the day the tabernacle was set up. . . .” This was possible because of the number of people involved. Over 8,500 Levites were responsible for the tabernacle, and each had a task for which he was responsible (Num. 4:46-49). This reminds us that God is a God of order, not chaos and confusion.

Have there been times when God made you wait for an answer or solution from Him? How did that experience affect your faith?



Day 5: Numbers 9:22-23

Note the repetition of “the LORD’s command” in verse 23.

The phrase “when it was lifted, they set out” conveys two ideas—first, the people followed the Lord’s directive promptly. Second, the phrase emphasizes that God’s people followed His lead decisively and consistently. Because of the way the Lord led, they knew each day where they were supposed to be.

Verse 23 uses repetition to strengthen the impact of the message. Three times this verse speaks about “the LORD’s command.” This makes a total of seven times God’s command is mentioned in this “Song of the Journey” (see also vv. 18,20). For a second time, the phrase “the LORD’s requirement” appears—making yet another reference to God’s command (also v. 19). Thus, the emphasis of this verse is on the Lord’s directive. The question is how the people responded. Two verbs describe their response: they either “camped” or “set out.” The dual emphasis of verse 23 is on the Lord’s directive and the people’s obedience. The message is clear. When He led, they obeyed.

Finally, verse 23 echoes two statements that had been said of Moses earlier. Exodus 33:11 says, “The LORD would speak with Moses face to face, just as a man speaks with his friend.” Numbers 1:54 says, “The Israelites did everything just as the LORD had commanded Moses.” In this verse, the people carried out God’s directive that He had given “through Moses.”

Why does it matter that you follow the Lord’s lead?

APPLY THE TEXT

Examine your own life. How are you doing at following the Lord’s lead? How can you become more attentive to His guidance?

JOURNAL



Building Disciples by Apprenticing Other Leaders

Starting new groups is critical to the life of your church and the lives of the individuals in your group. People in your group need to be challenged to take on a greater role in your church. Providing the opportunity to do so helps them grow and removes the largest barrier to starting new Bible study groups—finding a leader. You can make a difference in the growth of individuals and in the future growth of your church by apprenticing potential group leaders. Here’s how you can use the *Daily Discipleship Guide* to make this happen.

- **STEP 1:** Prior to group time, ask a potential leader to follow along in the Leader Helps for that session as you lead the group. Tell him or her to note what you did and what you adjusted. You’re just coaching your apprentice to use the book he or she has in a different way.
- **STEP 2:** After that group experience, spend time with the group member going over what you did and how you adjusted the leader material for the group.
- **STEP 3:** Invite him or her to do this again in a few weeks.
- **STEP 4:** Ask him or her to lead a group time or part of one using the suggestions in the Leader Helps for that session. You may be away that week, or you can simply observe as a group member. Offer to help him or her prepare if needed.
- **STEP 5:** As your apprentice gains confidence, allow him or her to teach more in the near future.
- **STEP 6:** As a need for a new group surfaces, prepare to move on to lead the new group, with the apprentice becoming the leader of the current group (which tends to work best), or commission the apprentice and a few others from the group to start a new group.
- **STEP 7:** Do it all again.

Not everyone in the group will become a Bible study leader. For those who do, you can become a mentor to potential leaders, extending your teaching ministry and demonstrating discipleship.

The Journey

Session 1 • Numbers 9:15-23



ENGAGE

PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 1** (Poster: Map: From Kadesh-Barnea to Moab) and **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Numbers, Deuteronomy). Make copies of **Pack Item 7** (Handout: Numbers, Deuteronomy Time Line).

INTRODUCE: As adults arrive, encourage them to share about a recent trip. Ask them to share where they went and why, as well as sites they visited along the way. Find out if they used a GPS on any part of the trip.

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 2.

ASK: Think of a time when bad directions led you somewhere unexpected. How can getting just one detail wrong disrupt our travels? (p. 2)

EXPLAIN: Share that this session is the first in a study of Numbers and Deuteronomy. Direct attention to **Pack Item 1** (Poster: Map: From Kadesh-Barnea to Moab). Provide copies of **Pack Item 7** (Handout: Numbers, Deuteronomy Time Line) for additional context for the books. Point out that in these books, Israel moved through the wilderness, but they always had a solid Source of direction: the Lord’s presence.

TRANSITION: As you reflect on the journey Israel was undertaking, think about your own spiritual walk. Consider times when you’ve followed the wrong guide and where those experiences led. Ask God to help you go where He wants you to go for His glory.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

OVERVIEW: Share the following information in **Understand the Context** (p. 5) to help set the background for the book of Numbers: *The book of Numbers presents three primary scenes, and geographic locations identify each. The first part (chaps. 1–10) occurred while the Israelites were still at Mount Sinai. The second describes their journey from Sinai toward Canaan (chaps. 11–25). The final section (chaps. 26–36) describes God’s people on the plains of Moab—across the Jordan River from Jericho.*

IDENTIFY: Use **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Numbers, Deuteronomy) to show where this session falls. Explain that the first several chapters of Numbers describe a census of the people. Note that in Numbers 9:15, Moses returned to the narrative.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Numbers 9:15-16 as the group listens for God’s actions in the verses.

EXAMINE: Emphasize that God wanted to dwell among the Israelites, so He made His presence known above the tabernacle.

- **(9:15)** The term “tabernacle” comes from a word that means “to dwell” and describes God’s dwelling place among His people. The word first appears in Exodus 25:8 and denotes a tent that Israel could transport through the wilderness. Solomon built the temple 480 years later as a permanent structure where God’s people could worship Him (1 Kings 6–8; see 6:1).
- **(9:15)** The cloud of God’s glory is significant, as it was a common companion with Israel in the wilderness. When God’s people left Egypt, God showed His presence with a cloud (Ex. 13:21). The cloud was a visible manifestation of His guidance; the people did not need to fear, because God led them! By covering the tabernacle, God also confirmed that His glory/presence would dwell there.

ASK: How do you think the visible evidence of God’s presence made the Israelites feel? How can you be assured of His presence in your life? What are some ways you can benefit from His presence (p. 4)



The Tabernacle

Scan here to discover more about this place of worship built by the Israelites.

READ: Direct the group to read silently Numbers 9:17-21, considering Israel’s response to God’s revelation of Himself.

ACTIVITY: Prior to the session, collect several board games that require players to move around the board. During the session, show adults the games and encourage them to share how players determine their movements. Point out that knowing where and when to move is an important skill in life.

DISCUSS: Draw two columns on the board: *Move* and *Not Move*. Encourage the group to share how Israel determined whether they needed to move or stay put. Lead a brief discussion about why they were willing to follow God’s presence.

RECAP: Emphasize that at times, the cloud stayed in place for many days. Other times, the wait lasted only a few days. These verses are a reminder that the Lord sometimes compels us to wait. He may call us to sit still—which can be difficult to do. Many times we wait without knowing why.

ASK: Have there been times when God made you wait for an answer or solution from Him? How did that experience affect your faith? (p. 4)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Numbers 9:22-23 as the group reflects on how God set the timeframe for Israel’s journey.

EXAMINE: Explain the two implications from “lifted up”: abrupt action that suggested prompt obedience and decisive leadership that followed God’s plan with no questions asked. Encourage adults to suggest why both of these are important to experiencing God’s presence and following Him well. Note that we can afford to act “abruptly” when we are confident in God’s leadership.

READ: Read verse 23 aloud once again. Emphasize the “LORD’s command” and the “LORD’s requirement.” Share that through all the focus on the movement of God’s presence, we can learn much from Israel’s obedience.

- **(9:23)** While God could have told them everything in advance, He chose a different path. He commanded them to follow Him as He revealed the way. Most of the time, God does not reveal His entire agenda at once. As humans, we might feel overwhelmed, and our faith would be hindered. Instead, He graciously reveals His purposes on a “need to know” basis. This allows us to trust Him and obey one step at a time.

ASK: Why does it matter that we follow the Lord’s lead? Why do we sometimes delay doing what He wants us to do? (p. 4)

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE: Review these points from this week’s Bible passage:

- Believers can be assured that God is with them and can provide trustworthy guidance.
- Following God’s guidance will require believers to act on His instruction.
- Following God in faith means that we act on His timeframe and not our own.

IDENTIFY: Encourage adults to consider the three statements and to identify the one that presents the greatest challenge to them. Provide an index card and direct them to write

a prayer, asking God to help them lean into His presence and help as they address this issue during the week.

DISCUSS: Direct the group to read the **Apply the Text** questions on page 4. Allow adults to suggest ways the group can be more involved in an existing ministry or start a new ministry. Urge them to make this a matter of prayer during the week.

PRAY: The **Explore the Bible Prayer Guide** provides weekly prayer prompts based on this quarter’s Bible passages. Encourage adults to scan the QR code on page 4. Be prepared to lead a prayer based on Numbers 9:15-23 using the prompts in the prayer guide: *Thank God for His constant presence in your life. Thank God for the ways He has directed and guided you. Ask God to give you the wisdom to know when to wait on Him and when to step out in faith. Pray that you would be faithful to God where you are right now.*

AFTER THE SESSION

Reinforce the session by texting or emailing the group. Remind the group of the suggestions they came up with for existing or new ministries. Challenge them to prayerfully consider the options during the week and to bring their top two options to the next session. Urge them to seek God’s leadership as they reflect on where God might be leading them.