



The Journey

GOD GIVES DAILY GUIDANCE TO HIS PEOPLE.

Scripture Passage: Numbers 9:15-23 Memory Verse: Numbers 9:23

Sprinters run as fast as they can, but for a short distance. Marathoners need a different strategy to cover 26.2 miles. Their race lasts more than two hours, in contrast to sprints that are measured in seconds. Both require significant training and preparation, but the marathon really tests an athlete's endurance.

Life is much more like a marathon, and God's people need the right training to finish our race well. The Israelites knew they needed to follow God's leading every day. They stayed in place at God's leading, and they broke camp and journeyed at God's leading. God guided them daily.

As you prepare this Bible study, consider how you might encourage adults in your group who struggle in their Christian journey. Pray the Lord will give you an opportunity to point them toward the ways He usually guides His people—through His Word, prayer, and His church. Help them to embrace the benefit of listening to God daily.



Weekly Podcast: Group Leader Training

Scan here to gain insights about this week's study on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or at goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training.



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. (PSG, p. 1)

Think of a time when bad directions led you somewhere unexpected. How can getting just one detail wrong disrupt our travels?



Understand the Context (Numbers 1:1-10:10)

The book of Numbers fittingly begins with a census of God's people. God instructed Moses to count all the men twenty years or older (1:1-3). The text carefully recorded those numbers according to their respective tribes (1:4-46). Only seventy people had entered Egypt at the end of Genesis; but in more than four centuries, they had become a great multitude.

God provided instructions for the arrangement of the tribes (2:1-34). Each of the twelve tribes had its place around the Israelite camp: three each on the north, east, south, and west sides. The half tribes of Manasseh had their own space, and the Levites settled in the middle of the camp with the tent of meeting (2:17-21,24). God affirmed His desire to set apart Levi as the priestly tribe (3:1-51). Aaron's sons in particular would serve as priests, and the other Levites would assist them in the tabernacle (3:5-10). At God's direction, Moses assigned the various Levite clans their duties (3:25-39; 4:1-49).

God desired a holy, undefiled people. Those who sinned were to confess and offer a sacrifice of restitution (5:1-10). People also could consecrate themselves to God for life or for a period of time (6:1-21; the term "Nazirite" means "consecrated one"). Israel's tribal leaders then dedicated themselves and their tribes to God and brought offerings to support the work of the priests and Levites (7:1-88). This dedication lasted twelve days, according to the number of Israel's tribes.

The text then describes God's instructions for ceremonially cleansing the Levites (8:5-22). They were to shave their entire bodies, be sprinkled with water, and wash their clothes. After that, they were to present offerings to the Lord. They then could serve in the tent of meeting.

God gave Moses further instructions for Passover as the festival approached during the second year after the people left Egypt (9:1-14). The people celebrated Passover as Moses commanded on the fourteenth day of the first month (9:5), though some people were unclean and needed to wait until the second month to observe it (9:6-11). Foreigners who lived among the Israelites were also permitted to celebrate the festival (9:14).

The text describes how God led the people in their wilderness journey (9:15-23). A cloud covered the tabernacle during the day, and the appearance of fire covered it at night. As long as the cloud or fire remained, the people would remain in their camp. When the cloud or fire lifted, the people would resume their journey.

Finally, God commanded the creation of ten silver trumpets (10:1-10) to summon the people to assemble or sound an alarm for battle.

Read Numbers 9:15-23 in your Bible and underline the phrase "at the LORD's command" each time it appears. In what ways did the people demonstrate their faith in God? (PSG, p. 2)

ENGAGE



INTRODUCE:

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*).

As adults arrive, encourage them to share about a recent trip they took. Encourage them to share where they went and why, as well as landmarks or tourist 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 1 of the PSG.

ASK:

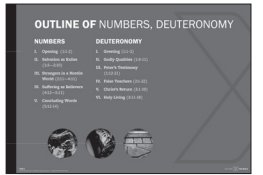
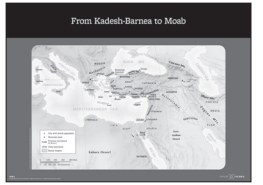
Think of a time when bad directions led you somewhere unexpected. How can getting just one detail wrong disrupt our travels? (PSG, p. 1)

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.



Group Activity Option

Music

Show a video of the hymn "Our God Will Go Before Us" by Keith and Kristyn Getty. (If the video does not have the words to the song, consider providing the lyrics.) After watching the video, encourage adults to share words or phrases that stuck out to them. Ask: **What is it about the promise of God's presence that helps us step out in faith?** Share that this session examines how Israel moved with the presence of God while they were in the wilderness.

15 On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and it appeared like fire above the tabernacle from evening until morning. **16** It remained that way continuously: the cloud would cover it, appearing like fire at night.

Exodus ends with the completion of the tabernacle and the arrival of God's glory to consecrate Israel's new worship center. Here, after recounting the census of the people, Moses returned to the dedication of the tabernacle and the **cloud** of God's glory over the *tabernacle*.

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, a portable structure 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).

Exodus 25:1-39:43 describes the instructions for building the tabernacle. All was done exactly as God commanded (Ex. 39:42-43). The tabernacle included a holy place and a most holy place, and its furnishings included the ark of the covenant, an altar of incense, a table for holy bread, a lampstand, and an altar of burnt offering outside the tent proper. The ark of the covenant was placed inside the most holy place, normally to be seen only once a year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:12).

(v. 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. He had commanded Moses to build the tabernacle as His dwelling place, and the cloud demonstrated God's presence. As noted, when Moses dedicated the tabernacle, the cloud covered it, and God's glory also filled it. Not even Moses could enter because of the radiance (40:34-35).

The biblical text sometimes refers to the tabernacle using other terms, particularly the "tent of meeting" (indicating a place where God would meet with His people) and (as here) *the tent of the testimony*. The word "testimony" also can

mean "witness." Again, by demonstrating His dwelling in the tabernacle through the presence of a cloud, God was providing a visible witness to His presence and to His approval of this structure. His people could take courage from seeing He was with them.

Moses compared the glory of God to *fire*. The expression literally reads "the appearance of fire" in both verses 15 and 16. Interpreters have generally understood the cloud as containing a fiery glow at night. During the day, God's people could follow the cloud; but if they were moving at night, they would better be able to discern a fiery glow.

Such a sight also likely would add to their perception of God's power and holiness. He was with them at all times, and He was demonstrating that presence day and night.



The Tabernacle

Discover more about this place of worship built by the Israelites.

(v. 16) God's people never failed to see the cloud's presence as it guided them. By day or by night, they followed the cloud. The fiery presence of their Creator and Lord never left them.

One of the most precious promises God gave His people was the promise of His presence. He had told Moses He would be with him to help him lead the people from Egypt (Ex. 3:12), and He had kept His word. Now, as the people began the second year of their journey (Num. 9:1), God's presence remained among them just as clearly.

In the New Testament, Jesus assured His followers He would be with them forever (Matt. 28:20), and He later sent the Holy Spirit to guide them to the truth they needed (John 16:13). The Lord's presence is still a reality among His people. While we are not guided by clouds or fire, we have the reliability of His Word and the assurance that His Spirit will lead us in the right paths.



OVERVIEW:

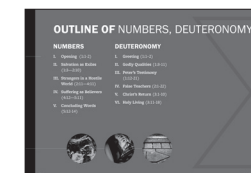
APPLICATION POINT: Believers can be assured that God is with them and can provide trustworthy guidance.

Share the following information in Understand the Context (PSG, p. 2) 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 after a census of the people, 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:

Encourage adults to work in pairs to review verses 15-16 (PSG, pp. 3-4). After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share. Emphasize that God wanted to dwell among the Israelites, so He made His presence known above the tabernacle.

ASK:

How do you think the visible evidence of His presence made the Israelites feel? How can we be assured of God's presence in our lives? (PSG p. 4)

TRANSITION:

God was all about revealing His presence to His people. But His presence provided much more than just comfort and encouragement. It also guided them on their journey.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Diary

Show adults a diary or journal. Talk about why people keep a diary. Give each adult a sheet of paper and pencil. Direct them to read Numbers 9:15-16 and to write a diary entry in the voice of an Israelite experiencing these events. After a few minutes, allow a few volunteers to share their entries. Emphasize the power of God's presence among His people and remind adults that God still reveals His presence to those who will trust Him.

17 Whenever the cloud was lifted up 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 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, 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 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.

(vv. 17-18) *Lifted up* occurs three times in the passage in slightly different forms, but each of includes the same basic sense. It’s important to understand that the cloud did not lift on its own. This was no morning fog. God was the Source of the lifting. Again, the settling or lifting of the cloud provided a visible expression of His guidance and faithful direction for His people.

When God moved, the people set out with Him. The verb also can be rendered “journeyed” or “traveled,” and it stresses not merely the resumption of travel, but the travel itself. God determined when His people needed to resume their travel by lifting the cloud *above the tent*. The word appears in seven consecutive verses in this passage. So, it is reasonable to believe that the text stresses God’s intentional direction of His people.

Of course, if the cloud *stayed* above the tabernacle, Israel remained in place. The Hebrew verb used here, *shakan* (sha-KAHN), can also mean “to dwell.” It is related to *mishkan* (mish-KAHN), the word for “tabernacle,” God’s dwelling place. Literally, the text describes God’s cloud as dwelling over His dwelling place.

When God’s people saw the cloud staying in place, they *camped*. They set up their temporary lodgings when the cloud stood still over the tabernacle. This word occurs six times in five verses to stress the people’s response to God’s guidance.

(vv. 19-20) Moses had noted again that Israel only moved at the Lord’s command (v. 18). Literally, this means “according to the mouth of the LORD.” The expression occurs seven times in these three verses and could indicate a verbal command. However, the text does not say for sure, and the expression may be figurative, referring to God’s

guidance through the movement of the cloud, without requiring speech. However, adding “through Moses” after the expression in verse 23 may suggest God also spoke to Moses about the people camping or setting out.

One key element to this endeavor is absolute obedience. Even if the cloud remained *many days*, the people remained faithful. They put their own desires to the side and awaited God’s direction.

Joshua used a similar Hebrew phrase to describe most of Israel’s wilderness wandering (Josh. 24:7), so “many days” could have referred to years instead of days. In this context, however, it most likely should be taken literally. The people did stay at Mount Sinai for forty days and nights twice as they waited on Moses to receive God’s commandments (Ex. 24:18; 34:28), but that seems to be the longest they stayed at a single location. In most cases, a *few days* seemed to be more common.

The words *carried out* and *requirement* are related and denote the people’s careful observance of the charge given by the Lord. His direction was key to their successful journey, so they paid careful attention to His leading.

(v. 21) The cloud did not always stay in one place for long. This verse emphasizes a potential short stay for God’s people. The stop could possibly be nothing more than an overnight rest, *from evening until morning*. Not knowing when they might set out probably proved difficult; but through God’s direction, they learned patience.

The text gives no reason as to why God chose to have the people set out or camp when they did. It does stress His faithful direction and guidance, and the cloud demonstrated His presence with them, but it never reveals the reasons behind His timetable.



READ:

ACTIVITY:

DISCUSS:

RECAP:

ASK:

APPLICATION POINT: Following God’s guidance will require believers to act on His instruction.

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

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.

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.

Summarize the following excerpt from page 6 of the PSG:

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.

Have there been times when God made you wait for an answer or solution from Him? How did that experience affect your faith? (PSG, p. 6)

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. They carried out the LORD’s requirement according to his command through Moses.

(v. 22) The text again notes the unpredictability of God’s leading: *two days, a month, or longer*. Shorter camping times meant the people would scarcely get settled in before they gathered their possessions and moved out again. If the people were already tired, they might struggle with (or even resent) a quick turnaround. Longer camping times might prove restful, but without progress toward their ultimate destination.

The people’s active obedience was key to their receiving the land God had promised their ancestors centuries earlier. As they journeyed, some likely wanted to get to Canaan faster, while others were more patient. Nevertheless, they had to learn to trust God’s pace. They needed to believe that He would lead them faithfully, and they needed to demonstrate their faith by obeying and following. They were not to run ahead of God’s leading or to lag behind it.

The principle applies to us as well. We create problems for ourselves when we either try to run ahead of God’s timing or resist moving when He moves. Like Israel, we are best served when we stay in step with God’s timing. This requires discernment, which requires time in His Word.

(v. 23) The text stresses one last time how the people carefully followed God’s leading. *They camped at the LORD’s command, and they set out at the LORD’s command*. He knew the way better than they did! He also knew the dangers they might face along the way, the needs they would experience, the enemies they would encounter, and the other challenges they would meet. He knew what was coming and they did not.

While He 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.

The people of Israel demonstrated their faith in God through their active obedience. They did not obey Him to become His people, for they already were His people by covenant. God had established His covenant with Abraham centuries earlier and ratified that covenant with His people at Mount Sinai. The commands were not a means to a relationship with Him, but a reflection of an existing relationship. His commands reflected the best way for them to live.

The apostle Paul stressed how people enter into a relationship with God by grace through faith, not by doing good works (Eph. 2:8-9). Yet, he also noted that God created us to do good works that demonstrate we are His workmanship (2:10).

The passage stresses God’s presence (Num. 9:15-16), God’s faithful direction (9:17-21), and the people’s active obedience (9:22-23). Yet, it closes with the words *through Moses* (literally “by the hand of Moses”). Sometimes God communicated directly with the people. In Numbers 9, the cloud over the tabernacle was a visible means of God communicating with His people. However, He often communicated through Moses, as He did at Mount Sinai.

God spoke to Moses face to face at certain times (Ex. 33:11-16), an action that demonstrated Moses’s close relationship with God. Then, Moses would demonstrate obedience by sharing the Lord’s message with the people. “Through Moses” suggests that God was also giving verbal direction to the people through Moses, in addition to guiding them by the cloud.

Key Doctrine

God

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



READ:

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

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

EXAMINE:

Direct the group to read the information for verses 22-23 (PSG, pp. 7-8). Note that the PSG emphasizes 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.

ASK:

Why does it matter that we follow the Lord’s lead? Why do we sometimes delay doing what He wants us to do? (PSG, p. 8)

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Direct adults to work in teams of two or three to complete the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 8). Note that Exodus 9:15-23 describes how God led His people through the wilderness on their way to the land of Canaan. Instruct the teams to read the passage again slowly, noticing how the text intentionally reaffirms God’s faithful guidance and Israel’s careful obedience. Read also the article “Pillar of Fire and Cloud” in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* or another Bible dictionary. As a group, review the questions in the Bible Skill.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Review these points from Apply the Text on page 9 of the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *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 first set of questions on page 9 of the PSG. 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. Encourage them to reflect on and respond to the second set of questions on page 9 of the PSG during the week.

PRAY:

Close in prayer, asking God to help adults become more sensitive to His leadership each day.

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.

LEADER EXTRAS



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