



The Journey

GOD GIVES DAILY GUIDANCE TO HIS PEOPLE.

NUMBERS 9:15-23

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

NUMBERS 1:1-10:10

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 worshipping 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.

📍 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?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GOD'S PRESENCE (NUM. 9:15-16)

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.**

VERSES 15-16

Verse 15 serves as an introduction to the next part of the narrative—God's people would soon begin their travels from Sinai toward Canaan. The verse also echoes an event Scripture has mentioned twice before (Ex. 40:2; Num. 7:1). The people erected the *tabernacle*. This is a retelling of that same event.

The tabernacle was a movable, tent-like structure. It consisted of two primary parts. The outer courtyard measured 150 by 75 feet. Surrounding the courtyard were sixty wooden posts overlaid with bronze. Curtains hung between the posts. Inside the courtyard stood another tented structure. Whereas the courtyard was open to the sky, this smaller structure was completely covered with skins and cloth. This structure was the tabernacle itself; it measured 45 by 15 feet. Inside this covered structure were two rooms. The larger room, which one entered first, measured 15 by 30 feet and was known as the Holy Area. It contained the table of showbread, the lampstand (or "menorah"), and the altar of incense (Ex. 25:23-30,31-40; 30:1-10). The smaller room, measuring 15 by 15 feet, was the Most Holy Area (or "Holy of Holies" in some translations). It contained the ark of the covenant (25:10-22).

The Hebrew word translated *tabernacle* means "dwelling place." Thus, the tabernacle was a visual reminder of God's presence with His people. In giving Moses instructions about the tabernacle's design and furnishings, God said, "They [the Israelites] are to make a sanctuary for me so that I may dwell among them" (25:8).

The *tent of the testimony* points specifically to the small, enclosed tabernacle structure that housed the ark of the covenant. Inside the ark were the tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. Exodus refers to these as "the two tablets of the testimony" (31:18; see 25:21-22). The "tablets of the testimony" likely led to the tabernacle being called the *tent of the testimony*.

The *cloud* by day and the *fire* by night covered the Holy Area and the Most Holy Area. The Hebrew verb tense for *covered* indicates a single act. In other words, the tabernacle was covered and remained covered. The adverb *continuously* in verse 16 means without interruption. The fire and cloud remained in place and never stopped being there.

This fire and cloud had guided God's people as they approached the Red Sea. At the sea, it stood between them and the Egyptian army (13:21-22; 14:19-20). There, it guarded them from danger. Here, the fire and cloud represented God's presence with His people. The fire and cloud would serve again as a guide as God's people began their journey toward Canaan.

 **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?**

FAITHFUL DIRECTION (NUM. 9:17-21)

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.**

VERSES 17-18

The book of Exodus records God’s instituting Passover, delivering the Israelites from Egypt, and leading them to a new land. Numbers 9 somewhat echoes those events in three ways. First, the Israelites initially celebrated Passover at God’s directive while they were still in the house of Pharaoh. When they celebrated it a second time, they again did it at the Lord’s directive (Num. 9:1-5). Second, He made provisions for those who would have been deemed unacceptable. In Egypt, He had the non-Israelite men circumcised before they could receive Passover. In chapter 9, God made provision for some men who had handled a corpse and were thus ritualistically unclean (vv. 6-12). Afterward, they could receive Passover. Third, both stories tell of God’s guiding and guarding His people with the cloud and fire.

The passage does not describe how *the cloud was lifted up above the tent*. It does not explain how long it took for the cloud to reposition itself or how far it hovered above the tent. These details, thus, were not the emphasis or focus of what was happening. The dual focus was on God’s leading and His people’s following.

Beginning in verse 17 and continuing through the end of the chapter, the text has a poetic and rhythmic quality. Some biblical scholars believe verses 17-23 may have been a song the Israelites sang as they journeyed. If so, that explains the repetitive nature of this “Song of the Journey.”

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.

VERSES 19-21

The final chapter of the Book of Exodus described the setting up of the tabernacle and its furnishings for the first time. The priests were in place with their sacred garments. The instruments and people involved were anointed according to the Lord’s command. The structure would have been impressive with its fabrics, woods, and metals. 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. Moses was unable to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud rested on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Ex. 40:34-35). As mentioned above, the cloud was the visible manifestation of God’s presence with His people.

Many times we wait without knowing why.

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?**

ACTIVE OBEDIENCE (NUM. 9:22-23)

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.**

VERSES 22-23

The previous verse spoke of the tabernacle being in place only overnight. Verse 22 describes the opposite side of the pendulum’s swing. The phrase *two days, a month, or longer* is all-inclusive. It covers any length of time the cloud remained in place.

The succinct phrase, *when it was lifted, they set out*, conveys two ideas—first, an abrupt action. The people followed the Lord’s directive promptly. Some commentators believe Moses assigned people to watch the cloud day and night. This would have ensured the Israelites did not miss the Lord’s lead. Second, the phrase emphasizes that God’s people followed His lead decisively and consistently. Nowhere do we get a hint that the phrase would ever be followed with, “except when. . .” Because of the way the Lord led the Israelites, they knew each day where they were supposed to be.

KEY DOCTRINE: God

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

With a crescendo, verse 23 reaches the finale of the “Song of the Journey.” It 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). The literal translation of the Hebrew phrase is, “at the mouth of the LORD.” 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*. Each of these verbs has been used multiple times in the preceding verses.

The dual emphasis of verse 23 is on the Lord’s directive and the people’s obedience. The overall message is clear. They would not move forward apart from God’s direction. They were dependent on Him for leadership and guidance. When He led, they obeyed.

They would not move forward apart from God’s direction.

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 final verse of the “Song of the Journey,” the people carried out God’s directive that He had given *through Moses*. They knew that in obeying Moses’s words, they were obeying God’s commands.



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



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?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + 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.



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?



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



Memorize Numbers 9:23.

Prayer Needs



Explore the Bible Prayer Guide

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