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The book of Numbers receives its English name, 'Numbers,' from the Latin Vulgate name, '*Numeri*,' which focuses on the census that occupies a significant part of the early section of the book. The Latin title originally was taken from the LXX, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. In the Hebrew Bible, the document goes by the Hebrew name, 'במדבר,' meaning 'in the wilderness.'

The contents of Numbers tend to cause many modern readers, especially Christians, to jump over this document to something more interesting. The listing of the various laws, along with rituals and ceremonies, is not the most entertaining nor enriching reading that one can do. Over the centuries of Christian use, the tendency has been either to ignore the book or to use allegorical means of interpretation in order to falsely read spiritual edification back into the text. Either approach is wrong. Numbers deserves to be read for what it is, a depiction of the journey of the Israelites through the Exodus. From such historical reading, some insights can be gleaned for our spiritual enrichment. This seems to be the apostle Paul's point in 1 Cor. 10:11 regarding the story of the Israelites in the wilderness (NRSV): "These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come."

I. The Context

Again, context is all important to correct Bible interpretation. Unlike with NT documents, OT writings take on a somewhat different tone in certain aspects of context. The historical dimension is a bit different simply because authorship issues were virtually unimportant during the era of the OT. To be sure, concrete individuals were involved in the composition of the various documents, but these individuals were and remain anonymous. The central character of the document, especially the prophets, will be the focus of attention. To ancient Jews, who wrote the document was unimportant. With the literary aspects, patterns of thinking among ancient Jews are dramatically different than modern American patterns. Sometimes this complicates the process of understanding significantly. Yet, in spite of these barriers the OT writings continue to possess important spiritual insights that can greatly enrich our lives today.

a. Historical

No one knows for certain who was responsible for the final composition of this document. Like virtually all the documents in the OT, this book underwent successive revisions and expansions over time until reaching the form that we know, from during the time of the Babylonian Exile. For most OT scholars, the traditional issue of authorship is replaced by an effort to trace the various sources of materials that have been utilized in pulling the document together in its current form.

The general consensus is that our passage, 14:1-25, comes mainly from the Priestly Code tradition (known by the letter P). This material was pulled together in its final form "in the wake of the Babylonian exile (587-539 B.C.E.)" (IDB). The concern evidently was intended to preserve as carefully as possible the various traditions regarding the rituals and ceremonies for worship in the temple, in light of God's wrath being poured down on the destruction of Solomon's temple by the Babylonians. For more details on the various legal codes in the Pentateuch, see my *Biblical Law Codes* page at <http://cranfordville.com/OT->

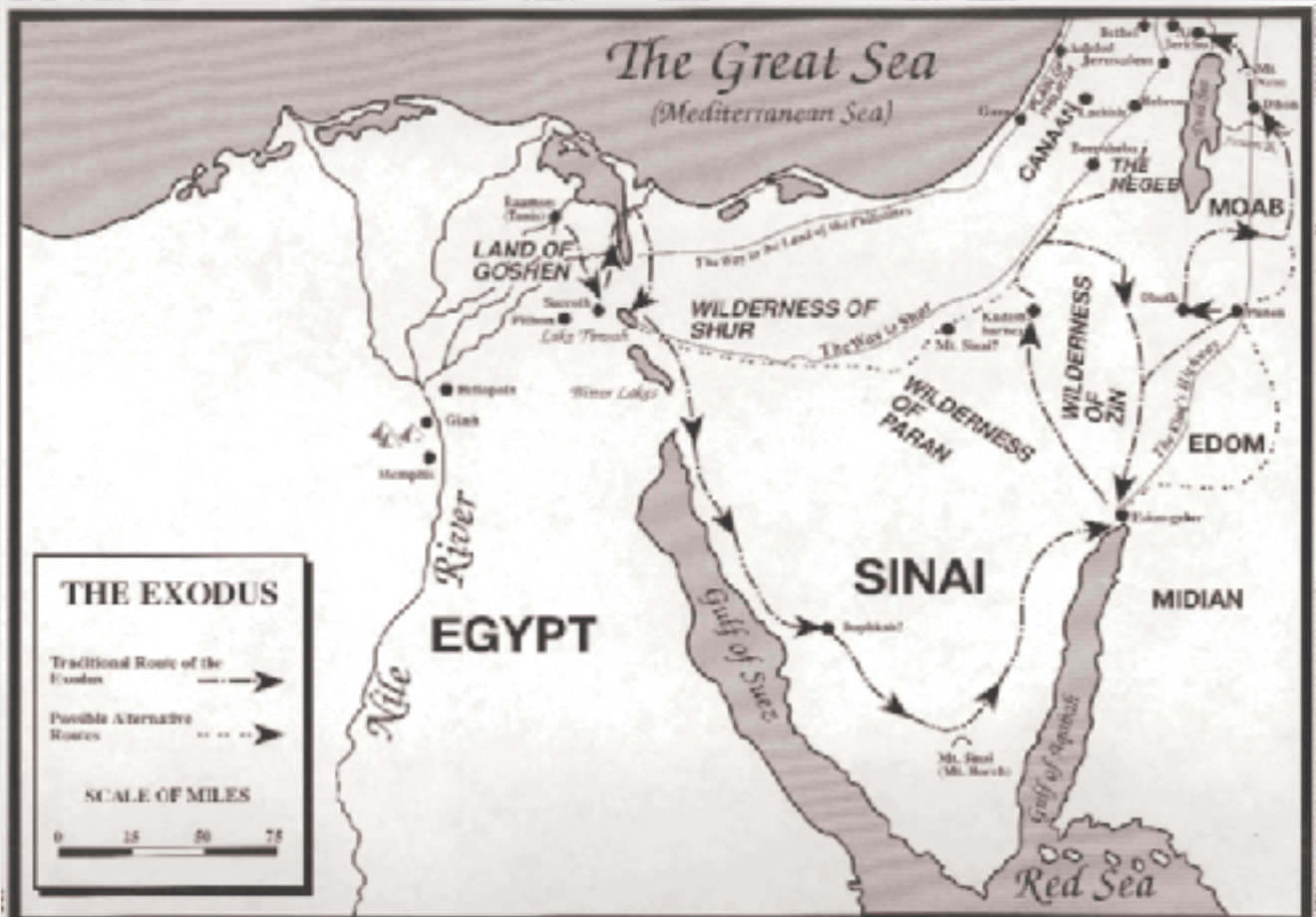
_____ . It's in the *OT Study Aids* section of the *Bible Study Aids*. Thus the final editors of the book of Numbers incorporated this material into the document for that purpose.

The above treats what is commonly referred to as the external history, that is, the history of the composition of the document. But the internal history, that is, the history described inside the book, plays an important role in this passage. The setting of 14:1-25 is the rebellion of the people at Kadesh when the spies made their report regarding the land of Caanan. Following their departure from Sinai (in chap. 10), a series of problems surfaced, mostly in the complaining of the people over their traveling conditions. First they complained about the situation in general (11:1-4) and in punishment several were destroyed by a divinely sent fire at Taberah. Then the people were upset by having only manna to eat, so the Lord sent quail at Kibroth-hattaavah (11:5-35) but punished more Israelites with death for their griping. At Hazereth, Moses' siblings, Aaron and Miriam, criticized Moses' leadership and were punished severely by God (12:1-16). From Hazereth the group moved on to the Wilderness of Paran and camped at Kadesh (12:16; 13:15). Here they would stay for



quite some time. "It is not certain how long this first sojourn in Kadesh lasted. The whole series of chapters from Num. 15:1 to 19 has no mention of any removal, and ch. 20 finds them still in Kadesh, so that it might be inferred from them that almost the entire period of the wilderness sojourn was spent there" (IDB, "Kadesh").

At Kadesh, Moses sent out twelve spies (a representative from each of the tribes) to survey the promised land and to report back to the people. The group took forty days checking out the countryside and brought their report (13:25-33) to the assembled Israelites at Kadesh (13:1-33). All but two of the



twelve spies thought the land could not be conquered, although all agreed as to its fertility and desirability. Caleb brought a minority report with his admonition (NRSV), "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it" (13:30). "Then the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we.' So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, 'The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them'" (NRSV; 13:31-33). Our passage picks up with the response of the people to this report in chapter fourteen.

b. Literary

The book itself has no real organizational structure, at least one that follows detectable structuring of materials. Outlining the document is thus arbitrary and somewhat subjective. Literarily, the book seems to have two major sections, oriented around the two census of the people. Chapters 1-25 relate to the first census, while chapters 26-36 relate to the second census. The first section basically traces the demise of the first generation who rebelled in the wilderness and were not allowed to enter Caanan. The second section tells the story of the subsequent generation who eventually made it into Caanan.

This our passage, 14:1-25, in this first section gives attention to the rebellion of the people to the report of the twelve spies at Kadesh-barnea. This was one of the longest stays at a single place during the wilderness journey. The episode is a part of a larger narrative (13:1-14:45) describing the entire affair of rebellion, including the abortive invasion attempt. As such this narrative depicts one of many episodes of the Israelites complaining against circumstances and frequently Moses' leadership of the people. These run from chapter eleven through chapter twenty-five when the last remnants of the original generation die in the wilderness. Yet, this spy story plays a crucial role in providing literary cohesiveness to the entire book of Numbers. Prior events lead up to this narrative; subsequent events are in varying degrees the result of what happened in chapters thirteen and fourteen.

The NRSV breaks the passage into two text units, vv. 1-12; 13-25, under the titles "The People Rebel" and "Moses Intercedes for the People." This is how we will approach the text with some modifications, even though subdivision of text take place in the two sections. These will be noted in both the paragraphs and subheadings.

II. The Message

1. The People Rebel, 14:1-10a

NASB

1 Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. 2 All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 "Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" 4 So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell

NRSV

1 Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" 4 So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell

NLT

1 Then all the people began weeping aloud, and they cried all night. 2 Their voices rose in a great chorus of complaint against Moses and Aaron. "We wish we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!" they wailed. 3 "Why is the LORD taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and little ones will be carried off as slaves! Let's get out of here and return to Egypt!" 4 Then they plotted among themselves, "Let's choose a leader and go back to Egypt!"

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell

on their faces in the presence of all the assembly of the congregation of the sons of Israel. 6 Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, of those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; 7 and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, "The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. 8 "If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us -- a land which flows with milk and honey. 9 "Only do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they will be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them."

10 But all the congregation said to stone them with stones.

on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites. 6 And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes 7 and said to all the congregation of the Israelites, "The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. 8 If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. 9 Only, do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them."

10 But the whole congregation threatened to stone them.

face down on the ground before the people of Israel. 6 Two of the men who had explored the land, Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, tore their clothing. 7 They said to the community of Israel, "The land we explored is a wonderful land! 8 And if the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey, and he will give it to us! 9 Do not rebel against the LORD, and don't be afraid of the people of the land. They are only helpless prey to us! They have no protection, but the LORD is with us! Don't be afraid of them!"

10 But the whole community began to talk about stoning Joshua and Caleb.

Comments:

The people's reaction to the spies' report is to accept the majority report and reject the minority report. The passage naturally divides itself into the following subdivisions: vv. 1-4 (People's reaction to the spies' report); and vv. 5-10a (Moses and Aaron plead with the people to obey God).

a. The People React to the Report, vv. 1-4

Instead of trusting God to overcome the obstacles that lay ahead in Caanan, the people listened to the depicting of these obstacles and saw impossibility in front of them. "Then all the people began weeping aloud, and they cried all night" (v. 1, NLT). The majority report of the ten spies had contained exaggerations that managed to slip through without challenge (13:33, NLT): "We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. We felt like grasshoppers next to them, and that's what we looked like to them!" The giants are identified with the Nephilim who are mentioned in Gen. 6:4 as being part-human and part-deity. They trigger the flood in the earlier account. This was a lie from the spies, used as a scare tactic, as well as the declaration in 13:32 (NLT): "The land we explored will swallow up any who go to live there."

After a night of commiserating in their disappointment, they turned on Moses and Aaron, along with the Lord (NLT): "2 Their voices rose in a great chorus of complaint against Moses and Aaron. 'We wish we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!' they wailed. 3 'Why is the LORD taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and little ones will be carried off as slaves! Let's get out of here and return to Egypt!" Disappointment led to self-pity and self-pity turned to anger and blaming others. The tragedy here is that this was based on two false assumptions: (1) unrealistic expectations of how they would enter the promised land, and (2) a biased, distorted report from the spies. At the heart of their response was an unwillingness, or inability, to trust the God who had brought them out of Egypt and had taken care of them thus far in their journey.

They then conjured up the plan to choose different leaders who would take them in defeat back to Egypt and to slavery (NLT): "Then they plotted among themselves, 'Let's choose a leader and go back to Egypt!'" The past slavery looked better to them at this moment than the divine promises of a land flowing with milk and honey down the road.

The people's reaction so often mirrors our reaction in difficult and disappointing circumstances. Looking backward rather than forward, especially when God is leading us forward, is always a temptation. The

future involves risks; the past has certainties. Tomorrow is unknown, while yesterday is known. When faced with such challenges as the Israelites were, we must not make their mistake. Our decisions must always be forward looking, and must be based on correct assumptions and understandings of the situation. The Israelites' mistaken decision cost them the promised land and forever changed the course of history for this group.

b. Moses and Aaron Plead with the People to Obey, vv. 5-10a

Both leaders, Moses and Aaron, pled with the people to make a different decision. Their plea is summarized as falling on their faces before the assembled group. This action by Moses and Aaron is described some five times in Numbers: 14:5; 16:4, 22, 45; 20:6. In 14:5 and 16:4, they fell on their faces before the assembled Israelites as a symbol of anger against the murmuring of the people. In 16:22, 45, they fell on their face before God as a symbol of reverence and respect. In 20:6 both situations are combined.

Two of the twelve spies, Caleb and Joshua, also joined Moses and Aaron with similar pleas and symbolic actions. Their tearing of their clothes before the assembled group symbolized mourning and grief, here at the group's decision. Their pleas focused on the goodness of the promised land, rather than its badness as was the majority report. They also reflected confidence in God's leadership to overcome the obstacles.

The people reacted to all four with the threat to stone them to death. Their anger was at a point of willingness to execute anyone who said anything good about what lay ahead of them in the promised land.

The possible connections to our world in this pericope are varied. For one thing, distrust and rejection of divinely appointed leaders, when they are indeed following God's leadership, is dangerous. Notice the qualification "when they are indeed following God's leadership." It's one thing to question leadership when there's a sincere difference of opinion over where God is taking us. This ought to be done vigorously, although with respect and courtesy. But it's a horse of a different color to question leadership that's following God's marching orders. This was what happened at Kadesh-barnea and it proved disastrous.

The key is whether or not the leaders' are following God in their leadership. How can this be determined? For us today, one measuring rod is whether the leadership directions are consistent with spiritual principles contained in scripture. If not, then their leadership should -- and must -- be soundly rejected! Jesus and the apostles made this abundantly clear in the New Testament. Remember Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees and the apostolic rejection of false teachers. But some decisions facing churches are not always clearly marked out by scriptural principles. Especially is this so when facing building programs etc. Here common sense reasoning should supplement perceived spiritual guidelines. With sufficient prayer, reflection and discussion, a consensus of viewpoint can be determined about what the church should do. If not, then no decision should be made.

We as readers of the narrative in Numbers can see what God wanted the Israelites to do, in part because the writer of the narrative slants his story this way. When we are inside an episode trying to make decisions our perspectives are not as broad and as clear. Thus caution and humility by everyone is needed.

2. Intercession for the People, vv. 10b-25

NASB

10b Then the glory of the LORD appeared in the tent of meeting to all the sons of Israel.

11 The LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst? 12 "I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them,

NRSV

10b Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites.

11 And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? 12 I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them,

NLT

10b Then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared to all the Israelites from above the Tabernacle.

11 And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people reject me? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them? 12 I will disown

and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they."

13 But Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your strength You brought up this people from their midst, 14 and they will tell *it* to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people, for You, O LORD, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. 15 "Now if You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, 16 'Because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.' 17 "But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, 18 'The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth *generations*.' 19 "Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."

20 So the LORD said, "I have pardoned *them* according to your word; 21 but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD. 22 "Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, 23 shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it. 24 "But My ser-

and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they."

13 But Moses said to the Lord, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, 14 and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; for you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. 15 Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, 16 "It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.' 17 And now, therefore, let the power of the Lord be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, 18 "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.' 19 Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now."

20 Then the Lord said, "I do forgive, just as you have asked; 21 nevertheless—as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord— 22 none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, 23 shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see

them and destroy them with a plague. Then I will make you into a nation far greater and mightier than they are!"

13 "But what will the Egyptians think when they hear about it?" Moses pleaded with the LORD. "They know full well the power you displayed in rescuing these people from Egypt. 14 They will tell this to the inhabitants of this land, who are well aware that you are with this people. They know, LORD, that you have appeared in full view of your people in the pillar of cloud that hovers over them. They know that you go before them in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. 15 Now if you slaughter all these people, the nations that have heard of your fame will say, 16 'The LORD was not able to bring them into the land he swore to give them, so he killed them in the wilderness.' 17 "Please, Lord, prove that your power is as great as you have claimed it to be. For you said, 18 'The LORD is slow to anger and rich in unfailing love, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. Even so he does not leave sin unpunished, but he punishes the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations.' 19 Please pardon the sins of this people because of your magnificent, unfailing love, just as you have forgiven them ever since they left Egypt."

20 Then the LORD said, "I will pardon them as you have requested. 21 But as surely as I live, and as surely as the earth is filled with the LORD's glory, 22 not one of these people will ever enter that land. They have seen my glorious presence and the miraculous signs I performed both in Egypt and in the wilderness, but again

vant Caleb, because he has had a different spirit and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it. 25 "Now the Amalekites and the Caananites live in the valleys; turn tomorrow and set out to the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea."

it. 24 But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. 25 Now, since the Amalekites and the Caananites live in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea."

and again they tested me by refusing to listen. 23 They will never even see the land I swore to give their ancestors. None of those who have treated me with contempt will enter it. 24 But my servant Caleb is different from the others. He has remained loyal to me, and I will bring him into the land he explored. His descendants will receive their full share of that land. 25 Now turn around and don't go on toward the land where the Amalekites and Caananites live. Tomorrow you must set out for the wilderness in the direction of the Red Sea.

Comments:

Only when God intervened, were the Israelites prevented from killing these four individuals, Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua (v. 10b, NLT): "Then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared to all the Israelites from above the Tabernacle." God now responded to the spies' report, and He wasn't at all happy with how the people had responded.

This divine appearance had two segments: to Moses (vv. 11-25) and then to Aaron and Moses (vv. 26-38). The first segment focuses on God's forgiveness of the Israelites but with the judgment that none of the present generation would enter the promised land, except for Joshua and Caleb. The second segment, vv. 26-38, is more severe in tone and climaxes with the death of the ten spies. From all appearances the first narrative, vv. 11-25, comes dominately from the Priestly source (P) and highlights the unselfish leadership of Moses, while the second narrative, vv. 26-38, comes from a combination of Yahwist and Elohist sources (JE) with a focus on God's wrath on the ten spies.

Our study gives attention to the first segment in vv. 11-25. A dialogue between God and Moses provides the structure for the passage: (1) God spoke, vv. 11-12; (2) Moses replied, vv. 13-19; (3) God responded, vv.20-25.

God spoke, vv. 11-12. God expressed His displeasure with the Israelites and proposed to annihilate them and start over with the descendants of Moses. His anger was based on the Israelites' repeated failures to trust Him in spite of all that He has done for them in the past. His anger led to the willingness to destroy them through natural disaster and to spiritually disown them. His anger led to the proposal to start over with Moses' descendants to build a stronger and more powerful covenant people. The covenant agreement at Sinai had given God the choice of severing ties with the Israelites if they broke the covenant. He contemplated that possibility with Moses here at Kadesh.

Moses replied, vv. 13-19. I'm confident, at least the thought passed through Moses' mind to not protest God's proposal. Instead, Moses chose to function as intercessor for the Israelites to God. He made his case to spare them on several foundations: (1) the surrounding nations will conclude that the God of the Israelites is impotent, if He doesn't carry through on His promise to bring them into the promised land (vv. 13-16); (2) Moses appealed to God's gracious, loving care for the Israelites (vv. 17-19). Moses' role as mediator and intercessor between God and the Israelites is a major theme of the exodus story in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This was a major part of his role as leader to the people.

God responded, vv. 20-25. God indicated His willingness to forgive as Moses had requested, but one proviso was inserted: none of the present generation would enter the promised land because of their disobedience. Finally, Moses is instructed (v. 25) to resume the journey with the people but to turn south and travel along the Red Sea road.

Connections of this pericope to our world come to mind. For one thing, a good leader always chooses the welfare of his people over his own advantage. When a spiritual leader opts to look out for himself rather than for his people, he has forfeited his right to lead. Moses could have remained silent, or else, agreed to God's proposal to annihilate the Israelites, but he didn't.

Moses' appeal to God to spare the Israelites was not based on any merit by the people. Their actions reflected their unworthiness of God and would have completely justified God's choice to get rid of them. Moses instead appealed to two aspects of God's character as the basis for sparing the Israelites: (1) His reputation as a God who is faithful to his promise and can get things done; (2) His character as a gracious, loving God who can forgive people's sinfulness. When it comes to God's dealings with us today, the same principles still apply. Everything has to do with who God is; nothing is done by God for us because we deserve it.

God mixes both love and anger together in His dealings with us. To be sure, our sinfulness provokes God's anger just as it did with the Israelites. Forgiveness is possible, but sin and sinful actions always involve punishment in some fashion. God's love doesn't not neutralize His wrath at sin. Divine judgment is still an essential part of His dealings with humankind.

Final Reflections. The episode in the wilderness journey of the ancient Israelites has many lessons to offer us. Our decision making needs to be based on solid foundations, not lies and biased opinion. Crucial to our decision making is trust in the leadership of God. Our faith in God can prompt us to step into the unknown future with confidence and courage, when human angles argue against such decisions.

Every group of God's people need good leaders who both trust in God and care for their people. Moses, although far from perfect himself, put the interests of the Israelites ahead of his own interests. God blessed him for that.

The God that we trust is both faithful and gracious in His dealings with us. He will keep His promise, even when sorely tempted to forget it because of our sinful actions. He is a gracious, loving God who deeply cares for His people, even when they don't care for Him. But sin is still sin and will result in divine judgment and punishment. God as a living being is capable of both loving us and getting very angry with us. Our sinful actions result in disaster, just as they did for the Israelites. When we sin, we forfeit the greater blessings of the Lord that otherwise would have been ours. Our journey through life is stripped of its richness and is instead lived out as a barren wilderness wandering, devoid of the spiritual blessing of Almighty God.