

Numbers

1805 B.C. +
JOSEPH DIES

SLAVERY IN EGYPT

1446 +
EXODUS FROM EGYPT

1445 +
TEN COMMANDMENTS GIVEN

1444 +
FIRST CENSUS

1443 +
FIRST SPY MISSION

WILDERNESS WANDERINGS

1407 +
SECOND CENSUS;
BALAAM PROPHECIES

1406 +
JOSHUA APPOINTED;
CANAAN ENTERED

1375 +
JUDGES BEGIN TO RULE

1050 +
UNITED KINGDOM UNDER SAUL

WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT? The Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

WHO WROTE IT? Christian and Jewish traditions say the author was Moses.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN? In the 1400s B.C.

WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT? Numbers describes the events that took place just before and after the Lord commanded the Israelites to leave Mount Sinai and continues through their 40-year sentence of wandering in the wilderness.

THE BREAKDOWN

- Chapters 1–4: God orders a census
- Chapters 5–6: Laws concerning purity
- Chapters 7–10: The people leave Sinai
- Chapters 11–12: Rebellion
- Chapters 13–14: Reconnaissance mission
- Chapters 15–19: More laws; Korah rebels
- Chapter 20: Moses disobeys God; Aaron dies
- Chapter 21: Israel faces opposition
- Chapters 22–24: Balaam is hired to curse Israel but blesses Israel instead
- Chapter 25: The Moab mess
- Chapter 26: The second census
- Chapters 27–36: Final instructions

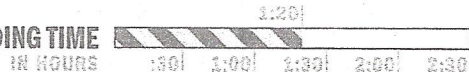
KEY CONCEPTS

- Worship (offerings, sacrifices)
- Laws, commandments
- Sin, rebellion, idolatry
- Order, arrangement
- Faith

SCORECARD

- **Moses:** The lawgiver
- **Aaron:** The high priest
- **Joshua and Caleb:** Two men of faith
- **Korah:** A would-be revolutionary
- **Balaam:** A prophet for hire

READING TIME



WORTH MEMORIZING

- **6:24-26**
“May the LORD bless you and protect you.
May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you.
May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace.”
- **23:19**
“God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind.
Has he ever spoken and failed to act?
Has he ever promised and not carried it through?”

THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE

- **THE NEED FOR ORDER.** Just as we need to be organized in our work, we need to be organized in our personal life. God is not a God of chaos but of stability.
- **WILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS.** When the spies returned, only Joshua and Caleb were willing to trust God and go forward; everyone else bailed out. Acting in faith is not recklessness. It's trusting God when we can't determine the outcome.
- **HANGING IN THROUGH THE TOUGH TIMES.** Forty years is a long time to be going nowhere. But the Israelites did it. And through that whole time, God continued to guide them and provide for them. Even though their tough times were their own fault, God didn't abandon them. That fact gave them the strength to go on.

Tribe	Leader
Reuben	Shammua son of Zaccur
5 Simeon	Shaphat son of Hori
6 Judah	Caleb son of Jephunneh
7 Issachar	Igal son of Joseph
8 Ephraim	Hoshea son of Nun
9 Benjamin	Palti son of Raphu
10 Zebulun	Gaddiel son of Sodi
11 Manasseh son of Joseph	Gaddi son of Susi
12 Dan	Ammiel son of Gemalli
13 Asher	Sethur son of Michael
14 Naphtali	Nahbi son of Vophsi
15 Gad	Geuel son of Maki

Tribe	Number
Reuben (Jacob's* oldest son)	46,500
22-23 Simeon	59,300
24-25 Gad	45,650
26-27 Judah	74,600
28-29 Issachar	54,400
30-31 Zebulun	57,400
32-33 Ephraim son of Joseph	40,500
34-35 Manasseh son of Joseph	32,200
36-37 Benjamin	35,400
38-39 Dan	62,700
40-41 Asher	41,500
42-43 Naphtali	53,400

WHAT'S THE POINT OF

Numbers?

The road to God's best may not be short.

BASIC SURVEY NUMBERS

AUTHOR: Not stated, but traditionally attributed to Moses.
DATE: Approximately 1400 BC.

IN TEN WORDS OR LESS

Faithless Israelites wander forty years in the wilderness of Sinai.

DETAILS, PLEASE

Numbers begins with a census—hence, the book's name. Fourteen months after the Israelites escape Egypt, they number 603,550 men, not including the Levites. This mass of people, the newly formed nation of Israel, begins a march of approximately two hundred miles to the "promised land" of Canaan—a journey that will take *decades* to complete. The delay is God's punishment for the people, who complain about food and water; rebel against Moses, and hesitate to enter Canaan because of powerful people already living there. God decrees that this entire generation will die in the wilderness, leaving the promised land to a new generation of more obedient Israelites.

QUOTABLE

> The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression (Numbers 14:18 KJV).

UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

Even Moses misses out on the promised land, punishment for disobeying God by striking, rather than speaking to, a rock from which water would miraculously appear (20:1-13).

SO WHAT?

God hates sin and punishes it. We can be thankful that Jesus took that punishment for us.

KEY THOUGHT:

There's nothing worse than taking a wrong turn into the land of unbelief, for God wants to lead us forward by faith.



This book includes at least 6 different headaches that Moses had to handle while on the road to Canaan.

PROBLEM

Chapter

General griping.....	11, 20, 21
Family squabble.....	12
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THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE BIBLE

Numbers

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KEY VERSES:

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace." Numbers 6:24-26



KEY ACTION:

Trust God's Word even when challenges loom, for His promises are as secure as His power.



KEY PRAYER:

O Lord, keep me from fearing the way ahead and rebelling against You in unbelief.

CLOSER LOOK

DOUBTERS GET THEIR WISH

The older generation of Israelites constantly doubted that God cared for them. As a result, they didn't think that He'd protect or provide for them. This belief caused them to imagine the worst. Once they did that, of course they began to murmur. Every time they ran into a problem, this cycle repeated. This happened *ten* times! (Numbers 14:22).

Finally, the Israelites arrived at the oasis of Kadesh Barnea on the southern border of Canaan. From there they were to march into Canaan, but first they sent twelve spies to scout out the land. They soon learned that its cities were highly fortified and its people powerful (Numbers 13). The Israelites moaned, "If only we had died . . . here in the wilderness!" Then they completely lost it, wailing, "Why is the LORD taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and our little ones will be carried off as plunder!" (Numbers 14:2-3 NLT). Far from being overcoming warriors, they wanted to dump Moses and choose a new leader to take them back to slavery in Egypt.

God had heard enough. He said, "I will do to you the very things I heard you say. You will all drop dead in this wilderness!" The Lord added, "You said your children would be carried off as plunder. Well, I will bring them safely into the land, and they will enjoy what you have despised" (Numbers 14:28-29, 31 NLT).

Sure enough, the entire older generation wandered forty years in the Sinai desert until they died. Then their children went boldly in and conquered the promised land.

READ NUMBERS 13-14.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 27.



When the Israelites doubted God, He prevented them from entering the land He promised them. *Moses Seeing the Promised Land* by Christian Holbe (1849-1938) depicts Moses gazing upon the land that he would not be allowed to enter.

CLOSER LOOK

KORAH LEADS A REBELLION

One day Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and 250 Israelite rulers confronted Moses and Aaron, saying, "The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?" (Numbers 16:3 NIV). They were accusing Moses of exalting himself to be leader. But he had never wanted to be God's spokesperson (see Exodus 4:10-15). Aaron and Moses were only doing their jobs because God had called them.

The rulers were disguising *their* own lust for more power under the pretext that "the whole community is holy," so Moses declared, "In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy" (Numbers 16:5 NIV). He also told them,

"The LORD is the one you and your followers are really revolting against! For who is Aaron that you are complaining about him?" (Numbers 16:11 NLT).

Moses told the 250 rulers to take their censers, put burning coals and incense in them, and appear before the LORD. So the next morning they did. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were standing with their families beside their tents when Moses shouted, "Quick! he told the people. 'Get away from the tents of these wicked men' (Numbers 16:26 NLT). The next instant the ground opened beneath Korah's tents and swallowed them all up. Then fire from the LORD consumed the 250 rebellious rulers offering incense.

As those whom Christ has cleansed, we *are* all holy—but we still have to respect those whom God has appointed as leaders (Hebrews 13:7, 17).

READ NUMBERS 16-17.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 28.



Mania Hadfield (c.1760-1838) depicted God's wrath in the painting *The Judgment of Korah, Dathan and Abiram*.

CLOSER LOOK

MOSES LOSES HIS TEMPER



Moses brought water from a rock, but he did it with such fury that he may have broken his rod in two. Nicolas Poussin (1594–1655) painted this image titled *Moses Striking Water from the Rock*.

saying, “They drank from the spiritual rock . . . and that rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4 NIV).

Forty years passed. The Israelites had just rebelled in Kadesh Barnea. They began wandering in the desert and camped in a desolate, waterless region. In His great love and mercy, God prepared to do a miracle.

This time He commanded Moses to simply *speak* to a rock. But Moses was angry and shouted, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” (Numbers 20:10 NKJV). Then he whacked it with his staff . . . *twice!* Water gushed out, but God said that because Moses didn’t believe Him, and didn’t respect Him in front of the Israelites, he couldn’t lead them into the promised land. (See Deuteronomy 3:23–27; Psalm 106:32–33.)

This answers another question: the ark of the covenant was only about 3½ feet long (Exodus 25:10). Moses’ staff, which was an ordinary shepherd’s rod, would have been 5 to 6 feet long (Exodus 4:1–4). Yet Moses was able to place it *inside* the ark (Hebrews 9:4). How did it fit? Moses apparently struck the staff against the rock with such fury that it broke in two! *That* had to have looked bad.

READ NUMBERS 20:1–13 AND JOHN 4:1–42.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 30. →

HIDDEN TREASURE

BALAAM THE DISOBEDIENT PROPHET

The younger generation of Israelites finally prepared to invade Canaan from the east. They camped north of Moab, and Balak, its king, sent messengers to the prophet Balaam, urging him to come curse the Israelites. Balak promised him a great reward. But God warned, “Do not go with them. You are not to curse these people” (Numbers 22:12 NLT). Balaam really *wanted* to



Balaam was prevented from disobeying God, which John Linnell (1792–1882) portrayed in his painting *The Prophet Balaam and the Angel*.

go, so God let him. However, on the way there, God almost killed him. Shaken up, Balaam didn’t curse the Israelites. But later on, to earn that reward, he advised Balak to tempt the Israelite men to sin so that *God Himself* would curse them and send a plague on them. That’s why the Israelites killed Balaam (Numbers 31:16; Joshua 13:22).

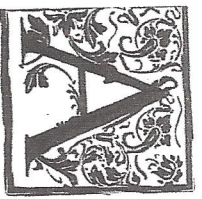
READ NUMBERS 22–23.

HIDDEN TREASURE

MOSES TAKES A CENSUS

At the beginning of the time in the wilderness, God told Moses to “count . . . all the men in Israel who are twenty years old or more and able to serve in the army” (Numbers 1:3 NIV). They took a census and counted 603,550 men, not including the priestly tribe of Levites (Numbers 1:47–49; 2:32). Forty years later, because of Balaam’s evil advice, the Israelites sinned, so God sent a plague. Some 24,000 people died. (These were mostly men, since it was they who had sinned.) After this, God told Moses to take another census. This time there were only 601,730 men (Numbers 25:9; 26:1–2, 51). After forty years they were 1,830 *fewer*. Why? There had probably been some 22,000 *more*, but they had died in the plague.

READ NUMBERS 25–26.



tragic story recently unfolded in Maine. Two hikers, rescued after getting lost in a state park, got in their car and drove away. But in the foggy darkness they took a wrong turn, drove down a boat ramp, and plunged into the ocean. By the time rescuers arrived it was too late.

There's nothing worse than taking a wrong turn, and that's a key message in the book of Numbers. Somehow on the way to the Promised Land, the Israelites took a wrong turn, and a one-month journey became a forty-year trek.

As you study Numbers, you can divide the book by its two numberings or censuses—one census of the Exodus generation and the other of the generation about to enter Canaan. Between these two events, an incredible story unfolds around several great themes: The covenant with its regulations; the land promised to Abraham and his descendants; and the promises of God, which are never invalidated by human failure. The greatest lesson in Numbers involves the crisis of faith that occurred when the Israelites believed the ten faithless spies instead of listening to Joshua and Caleb. The nation panicked in the desert, and their unbelieving hearts represented nothing less than rebellion against God.

Numbers warns us against taking the wrong turn of unbelief. We should listen to the Joshuas and Calebs in our lives and trust God's Word even when challenges loom. His promises are as sure as His power, and His peace is as near as His presence.

THE FOURTH BOOK OF MOSES CALLED NUMBERS

NUMBERS IS THE BOOK OF wanderings. It takes its name from the two numberings of the Israelites—the first at Mount Sinai and the second on the plains of Moab. Most of the book, however, describes Israel's experiences as they wander in the wilderness. The lesson of Numbers is clear. While it may be necessary to pass through wilderness experiences, one does not have to live there. For Israel, an eleven-day journey became a forty-year agony.

The title of Numbers comes from the first word in the Hebrew text, *Wayyehaber*, "And He Said." Jewish writings, however, usually refer to it by the fifth Hebrew word in 1:1, *Bemidbar*, "In the Wilderness," which more nearly indicates the content of the book. The Greek title in the Septuagint is *Arithmoi*, "Numbers." The Latin Vulgate followed this title and translated it *Liber Numeri*, "Book of Numbers." These titles are based on the two numberings: the generation of Exodus (Num. 1) and the generation that grew up in the wilderness and conquered Canaan (Num. 26). Numbers has also been called the "Book of the Journeys," the Book of the Murmurings, and the "Fourth Book of Moses."

WATCH WORDS

- * dedication (being set aside for God's service)—7:88 (also 7:10)
- * stranger (a sojourner or temporary resident in the land)—15:14
- * rock (place of safety)—20:10
- * plague (a terrible occurrence as a divine judgment against sin)—25:9 (also 14:37)
- * vengeance (revenge, or the righteous pursuit of justice)—31:2

Moses Intercedes for the People

11 Then the LORD said to Moses: "How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them? 12 I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they."

13 And Moses said to the LORD: "Then the Egyptians will hear it, for by Your might You brought these people up from among them, 14 and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, LORD,

14:18 abundant ▶ see Ps. 37:19.

14:18 clear

(Heb. *naqah*) (Ex. 20:7; 34:7; Ps. 19:12) H5352: Closely associated with the concept of punishment, *naqah* means to be set free from something, or be made clean and without guilt. So, anyone who takes the Lord's name in vain will not be held "guiltless" (Ex. 20:7). However, as the Lord notes here, He alone has the power to "clear" the guilty (see also Ex. 34:7). David severely rebuked Abishai for suggesting he attack Saul, "for who can stretch out his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?" (1 Sam. 26:9). Likewise, David prayed that God might "cleanse" (or clear) him "from secret faults" (Ps. 19:12).

NUMBERS IN REVIEW

HOT SEAT

1. We are a clan of the Levite tribe responsible for carrying the curtains and covering of the tabernacle when we move about the desert. Who are we?

WHO SAID IT?

2. "Rise up, Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you."

WHO SAID IT?

3. "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."

TIME TRAVELER

4. You are a child of the rebellious generation that grumbled and said they could not like the promised land. You have been sent into the desert for 40 years while that grumbling generation dies off. What did God say you would be during that time?

- A. A shepherd
- B. Forsaken
- C. A warrior
- D. Destitute

WHO DUNNIT?

5. Who led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron but ended up "swallowed" by the earth?

HOT SEAT

6. I assisted Moses in leading the Israelites, then died and was buried at Kadesh, in the Desert of Zin. Who am I?

WHO SAID IT?

7. "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

"?" CRYPTIC PHRASES

- 8. Who was Baal of Peor?
 - A. Son of King Sihon
 - B. King of Moab
 - C. A false god
 - D. Balaam's servant

WHO SAID IT?

9. "What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!"

MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY

10. At the end of their period of dedication, what are the Nazirites commanded to do after they bring their offerings before the Lord at the tent of meeting?

MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY

11. Aaron set up the lampstand in the temple according to the instructions God had given. Of what material was the lampstand made?

- A. Gold
- B. Silver
- C. Bronze
- D. Brass

WHO SAID IT?

12. "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"

ANSWERS:

- 1. Gershonites (4:24-26)
- 2. Moses (10:3)
- 3. Caleb (13:8)
- 4. A (14:26-33)
- 5. Korah (16:1-34)
- 6. Miriam (20:1)
- 7. Balaam's donkey (22:28)
- 8. C (25:1-3)
- 9. Balak (23:1)
- 10. shave their heads (6:18)
- 11. A (8:8)
- 12. A (8:8)

LIFE LESSONS: Gratefully and joyfully celebrate what God gives you (9:1-14). Approach God with respect (11:1-2).

What's the Cost?

Moses and Aaron both died in the desert before they reached the Promised Land because they disobeyed the Lord when Moses struck the rock for water (20:8-12).
Obedience pays!

NUMBERS

THE LEADING of GOD

The cloud of the glory of God came on the tabernacle to lead it. When it settled, the Israelites camped; when it lifted, they broke camp and followed it. God guides his people!

HUMBLE MOSES

Although Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth (12:3), the Israelites accused him of bad leadership and rebelled against him at least ten times. They suffered the consequences of their actions. In most cases, Moses himself interceded for them, and God stopped the curse!

They complained about hardship; fire of the Lord burned among them (11:1-3).

They complained about food; they were struck with a severe plague (11:31-34).

Miriam and Aaron complained about Moses' wife; Miriam became leprous (12:1-15).

They grumbled about conditions; they received venomous snakes among them (21:4-9).

BY THE NUMBERS

36 CHAPTERS
1,288 VERSES
28,141 WORDS

DID YOU KNOW?

▶ There were over 600,000 fighting men in Israel over the age of 20. Including women and children, there could have been well over three million people traveling together through the desert!

▶ Two complete censuses were taken, the first when the Israelites were given the law and the second after they had spent 40 years in the desert (1:2; 26:2).

▶ The events narrated in the book of Numbers describe what took place in the 38 years after the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai in Leviticus, up to Moses' speech in Deuteronomy.

**MIND
NUMBERS**

Why was the tent of meeting ill?
It smoked all day.
(See Numbers 9:15.)

What bugged the spies who entered Canaan?
The Canaanites made them feel like grasshoppers.
(See Numbers 13:33.)

What's got four legs, long ears, and is smarter than a pagan prophet?
Balaam's donkey
(See Numbers 22:33.)

Does God Favor Men?

When Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses, God gave Miriam a skin disease (Numbers 12:1-16). But God didn't give Aaron that disease. Did God favor Aaron because he was a man? The answer is no. The only reason Aaron wasn't given a skin disease was because it would have stopped him from being high priest (see Leviticus 21:16-23). God healed Miriam, and she was able to continue being a prophet. God also let Aaron continue to be high priest. God forgave both and let each one continue being important. That's not favoring men at all.

What's In It For Me?

NUMBERS TEACHES ME . . .
GOD'S WORDS AT THE CENTER OF MY LIFE.
GOD IS WITH ME TO ASK QUESTIONS—BUT NOT TO COMPLAIN.
WHEN I FORGET, THERE WILL BE GOD'S REMINDER.
HE WHO IS IN GOD GIVES ME COURAGE.
I CAN BE PRAISED WITH WHO I AM.

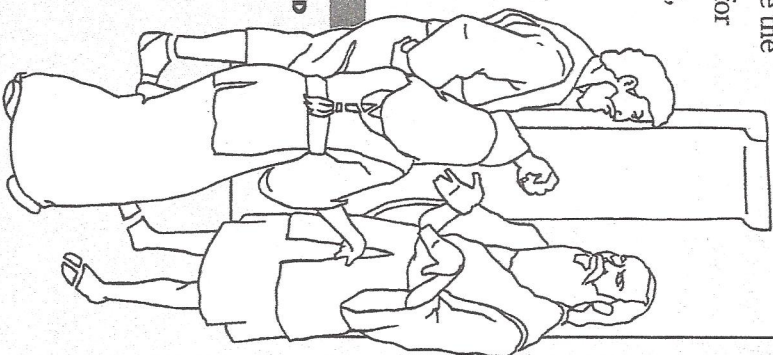
AN INTRODUCTION TO

NUMBERS

This book gets its name from the two times that the Israelites were counted, or "numbered." The people were first counted right before they journeyed to the edge of Canaan, the land God had promised them. God wanted the people to enter the land and conquer it, but they were too afraid. So God made the people wander in the wilderness for 40 years. During those long years, the children of the people who disobeyed God learned to trust God. At the end of this book, after another numbering, the children were grown-up and ready to conquer Canaan.

Headlines

- MEN GROW LONG HAIR FOR GOD**
Numbers 6, page 178
- LEVITES CLEAN UP**
Numbers 8, page 182
- AARON'S SONS DECLARED TRUMPETERS**
Numbers 10, page 184
- SPIES SEE GIANTS!**
Numbers 13, page 188
- MOSES LETS HIS STAFF DO THE TALKING**
Numbers 20, page 198
- NEW LAWS FOR WOMEN TO INHERIT LAND**
Numbers 36, page 222



WHY WAS OPPOSING MOSES LIKE OPPOSING GOD?
SEE NUMBERS 13.

The Old Testament Judas

HE SPOKE ALL the right words. He made all the right sacrifices. He publicly stood up for the one true God and refused to bad-mouth God's people.

And for his glowing testimony, the Lord organized his death, along with many other enemies of God.

Surprised? You're not alone. The story of Balaam (Numbers 22-24) has perplexed Bible readers for centuries. On the one hand, Balaam seems like such a fine, clean-cut, upstanding citizen. God personally appears to him and gives him prophetic words to speak. The man repeatedly declares to anyone who will listen that he will only speak the words God gives him (22:38). Three times Balaam refuses to curse Israel, even though a wealthy and powerful king promises him a vast reward for doing so. Instead, Balaam blesses God's people.

So why does the Bible consistently portray him as a scoundrel? Why does it say that God "refused to listen to Balaam" (Deuteronomy 23:5), that Balaam "loved to earn money by doing wrong" (2 Peter 2:15), and that he would "deceive people for money" (Jude 1:11)? Why did God mark Balaam for death? And why does the Bible associate Balaam with false teachers whom Jesus Christ himself promises to fight against (Revelation 2:16)?

The answer emerges when you dig into Balaam's personal history. While on the outside he put on a good religious show, on the inside he reeked of pride, deception, and greed. He ended up selling out God's people for a few lousy shekels. Call him the Old Testament Judas.

When King Balak of Moab saw Israel's multitudes marching past his threatened domain, he grew fearful. He knew he could never defeat such a vast army in battle, so he sent for an internationally famous magician named Balaam to curse the Israelites. Had Balaam really wanted to please God, he never would have agreed to meet with Balak in the first place. But when Balaam smelled the money, three times he tried to grant the wicked king his evil wish—and three times God "turned the intended course into a blessing" (Deuteronomy 23:5).

But Balaam wanted that money! So with the direct route closed to him, he went underground. He secretly advised the Moabite women to seduce Israelite men and invite them to participate in their people's pagan religious services (Numbers 25:1-3; 31:16; Revelation 2:14). His plan to seduce succeeded where his plan to curse had failed—and 24,000 Israelites died in a divinely sent plague as a result (Numbers 25:9).

Like Judas, who sold out his Master for thirty silver coins and betrayed him with a kiss, Balaam plotted against Israel for money and betrayed God's people just moments after blessing them. In public, he did and said all the right things. But in private, he let greed dictate his actions. And so we read his biblical epitaph: *They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword* (31:8).

In the end, Balaam earned his wages, all right. His paycheck sent him six feet under.

THE POINT: Religious show without genuine devotion leads to tragedy.

Balaam

Meddling in the Family Business

Numbers 12

WHEN THEY WERE liberated from Egypt after so many long, grinding years of captivity, the Israelites were happy to be on their own. But after a year of wandering through the deserts of the Middle East, they began to complain.

It was easy to find things to gripe about. Some complained about the itinerary. Others complained about the steady diet of manna. Still others grumbled about the water quality.

For Miriam and Aaron, Moses' two siblings, an easy target for discontent was Moses' wife. They didn't like the fact that he had married a foreign woman. Their criticism of their younger brother represents one of the human race's earliest recorded cases of family meddling.

Miriam and Aaron even managed to put a spiritual veneer on top of their observations. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hesn't he spoken through us, too?" (Numbers 12:2).

The pair received an unexpected answer when God called them to task. "Aaron and Miriam!" he called out, demanding that they report immediately to the Tabernacle (12:4-5).

God explained that Moses enjoyed a unique and privileged relationship with him. "I speak to him face to face," said God. "So why were you not afraid to criticize my servant Moses?" (12:8). God then punished Miriam's meddling by striking her with an advanced case of leprosy.

Moses begged God to heal his sister, and God reduced the sentence: Miriam would not die of her disease, but she would be banished from the community for a week.

The punishment turned out not to be as severe as it could have been. But the lesson was clear. Apparently, cheap-shot remarks about family members are more serious to God than many of us thought.

Sexual and Spiritual Seduction

Numbers 25

IF THERE'S ONE simple lesson we can find in Numbers 25, it's that people's romantic involvement can impair their judgment, leading them into compromising situations they never would have imagined.

The word *seduce* usually refers to sexual temptation. But the Bible contains many stories about people who were tempted in another way: spiritually. The concept of faithfulness can be applied both to our spouse and our God.

The Israelites were camping at Acacia Grove when some of the men wandered off to have sex with local Moabite women—a direct violation of God's command. Soon after, the Israelites were joining the Moabites in their idolatry, worshipping foreign gods like Baal—pale and evil imitations of the Almighty Creator of the universe.

From the moment he created the human race, God knew we had a weakness for both sexual and spiritual infidelity. Although the two don't always go together, in this case one led directly to the other.

One of the Israelite men even brought a Midianite woman back to his tent for more frolic. One of the young priests showed what God thought of this by killing both the man and the woman with a single thrust of his spear. Then God commanded the Israelites to attack the Midianites for deceitfully convincing them to worship foreign gods.

God created men and women to love and honor him. He also gave us the ability to love one another through the gift of sexuality. We don't always use these gifts wisely, and when we trip up, there are immense consequences. But if we seek faithfulness—both in our walk with God and in our sexuality—we will bring beauty and life to our world instead of ugliness and death.