

# “ARE WE THERE YET?” SERIES

## PART 2: SETTING OUT – THE TEMPTATION TO LOOK BACK

### BEFORE THE LESSON

Numbers is one of the books of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible traditionally attributed to Moses, and part of a larger narrative about releasing God’s people from slavery and taking them through the wilderness to the land they were promised. Numbers in particular is the story of the wandering in the desert, where the Israelites were taught about the consequences for their actions along with the patience and love of the God they kept rebelling against. It is important to recognize that though we want to identify with Moses, we often act more like the Israelites, and can learn from their mistakes and from the stories told in this book.

### STARTING THE LESSON

When asked about our favorite book in the Bible, it’s doubtful that many of us would choose Numbers. It contains plenty of census taking and instruction, and uncomfortable stories of the Israelites disobeying God. But it also contains stories of God’s provision for his people. Numbers, or as it is titled in Hebrew, *Bemidbar*, which translates to “In the Wilderness,” tells the story of the Israelite’s time in the desert between fleeing Egypt and entering the Promised Land. In today’s lesson, we’ll be discussing the temptation to focus on what we’ve left behind instead of what lies before us.

#### TIPS TO SHARE WITH LEADERS

Have some fun with the Starter Question portion of the study and use this time to get to know the members of your group through casual discussion. Creating a space where everyone feels comfortable participating at the start will carry over into the more serious questions of the study.

If you choose the snack starter question, consider keeping a list of what each of your members like, and sending it to them as a small care package with a note or creating a buffet of everyone’s favorites at your next in-person group meeting.

#### STARTER QUESTION

- What is your favorite road trip or travel snack? Is there a story behind your pick?
- Parents and/or childcare providers: What is the silliest or most inconsequential thing you’ve seen a child throw a tantrum over? (For example, not getting to eat candy they found on the street, or upset they were not allowed to drive the family car as a toddler)

#### OPENING PRAYER

“Lord, we are thankful that you are with us when we experience seasons that feel like the wilderness. Help us to see the ways we are turning from you and guide us back in the right direction. May we be focused on following your leadership, as we know you want good things for each of us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### BIBLE PASSAGE REFERENCE

Numbers 11:1-6 NIV

1 Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. 2 When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the fire died down. 3 So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the Lord had burned among them.

4 The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! 5 We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. 6 But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"

### QUESTION 1

- At this point in the Exodus story, the Israelites had been traveling in the desert for over two years. They were stationed at Mount Sinai for a while, but recently uprooted as God led them on the next leg of their journey to the Promised Land. According to the first verse, how do the Israelites respond?

*They complain about their hardships.*

### QUESTION 2

- The people of Israel complained "in the hearing of the Lord." Instead of taking their frustrations to him, they complained to one another, and he overheard them. Why might this cause the Lord to become angry?

*The Lord had freed them from slavery and was leading them to a place of promise and goodness, but they could only complain. Like a loving parent doing what was best for their child only to be responded to with a tantrum, God was upset with his children.*

### QUESTION 3

- Later in Numbers we find line, "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love" (Num 14:18a), a statement God made about himself (Ex 34:6) and that Moses quotes back to him. As we consider this characteristic of God, how can we explain his outburst of anger here? Is it inconsistent with his character?

*Note that God declares himself as slow to anger, not one who is never angry. This wasn't the first time the Israelites had complained and wouldn't be the last. But when Moses — a servant of God and the leader of the people of Israel — prayed, the abounding love of God for his people outweighed the anger they had caused.*

### QUESTION 4

- Reread verses 4-6 aloud. After the fire of the Lord died down, what did the Israelites do?

*They started complaining and crying — again.*

### QUESTION 5

- Remember, the people of Israel had been traveling for over two years. Their primary food starting only a few months into their journey was manna, a foodstuff that appeared on the ground every morning from the Lord to sustain them that looked like a seed and could be ground into flour which would be made into bread-like loaves or cakes. Can you imagine eating the same meal, multiple times a day, every day, for months on end? How long do you think it would take until you were tired of it?

*Some may love eating the same meal over and over, some may get frustrated with the repetition rather quickly. We can likely all agree that years of the same food would start to feel boring.*

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#### QUESTION 6

- What do the Israelites long for instead of the monotonous manna?

*The food they were familiar with eating back in Egypt, fresh and full of flavor (verse 5).*

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#### QUESTION 7

- The people of Israel were in an unfamiliar place, eating unfamiliar food, in most likely uncomfortable conditions. They longed for the comforting things of home. But they were looking back at their time in Egypt with rose-tinted glasses and forgetting about the slavery they suffered that provided the food they ate. It is easy to cast judgement on the Israelites for idealizing their time in Egypt, but we can be just as guilty of focusing on what we don't have instead of what we do. What were the Israelites not paying attention to in their current situation?

*First, they were no longer in slavery, but freed people, on their way to a better life. They were seeing the presence of God as a cloud of smoke and a pillar of fire with their own eyes. And six days a week, food was miraculously appearing before their eyes in order to sustain them.*

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#### QUESTION 8

- When we face change or feel like we're traveling through the wilderness, we can find ourselves focusing on all of the things God hasn't been doing for us instead of all the things he has. Have you noticed this happen in your own life? What things did you find yourself wanting to return to, even after God had led you away from it?

*Leaders: Allow some space for your group members to share. These could be small things, like unsubscribing from Netflix to curb their media binging habits, or large and complicated things, like struggling to overcome addiction or severing familial relationships. Remind your group that sometimes God asks us to give up good things — like delicious Egyptian cuisine — because he has something better planned.*

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#### QUESTION 9

- What are some practical ways we can fight the impulse to focus on what we don't have instead of what God is doing and providing for us?

*Focusing on what we are grateful for will help turn us back towards what God is doing in our lives. Discuss some habits that help your group members practice gratefulness.*

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#### QUESTION 10

- We can, like petulant children or the people of Israel, focus on the instant gratification of what makes us happy now instead of the good things that await us in the future, and miss all of the things God is doing in the meantime. The Israelites woke up to manna in the morning but overlooked the miracle even as they gathered it in jars. What miracle are you overlooking today?

*There are so many things in our lives we take for granted, it could be our health, our safety, our jobs, our families, our homes. The story of the Israelites we studied today shows us that even though we fuss and complain, God's love for us is abounding, and he wants good things for us, but it might be uncomfortable to get there. Let us be people who are moving in the direction of the hope of what God has in store for us instead of looking back to what we've left behind.*

## PRAYER MINISTRY

- **Suggestion 1: Gratitude Journaling**

*Leaders: Ask your group to grab a piece of paper or pull up a note app on their phone to be able to write a short list.*

In Ann Voskamp's book *One Thousand Gifts*, she shares the transformative practice of being on the lookout for the good gifts God gives her and challenges herself to make a list of 1,000 things she is grateful for. Take a few minutes to write down 5 gifts from God you saw in your life today — they can be large or small, gifts come in all sizes. Then, share your lists with the group, and end with a prayer thanking God for all he has done for you, and asking him to help us keep our eyes open for his gifts. Challenge everyone to keep their lists going by starting a gratitude journal and continuing to write down what they're grateful for.

- **Suggestion 2: Remembering God's Nearness**

Even when the Israelites were frustrated and complaining in the desert, God was still with them and still listening to them. Even when we are frustrated and complaining, God is still with us. We can get caught up in our routines and responsibilities and forget or overlook that God is nearby and providing us with sustenance. For today's prayer time, dwell with the presence of the Lord. Hold out your hands with your palms up, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and say the simple prayer, *Holy Spirit, come*, repeating as needed. Quiet your thoughts as much as you can and focus on the presence of God being near. Spend a few minutes waiting and notice any sensations — what are you feeling in your heart and in your body, what are you hearing or seeing in your mind? Do any passages of Scripture, words, prophetic or metaphorical images from God, etc. come to mind? Close with a prayer asking the Spirit to remind us of God's closeness each day. If you're comfortable, share what you felt, heard, or saw with the group, and pray accordingly.