

A Good Start

Numbers 10:11–36

In the late 60s science fiction TV series “Star Trek,” Captain James T. Kirk of the starship Enterprise stated his mission: “to explore strange new worlds; to seek out new life and new civilizations; *to boldly go where no man has gone before!*”

This morning in our text from Numbers, Israel sets out through the vast Sinai desert, going where none of them had ever gone before. Israel had been encamped at Sinai for over a year. The tabernacle is now constructed (Ex. 40); Aaron and his sons have been ordained as priests (Lev. 8); the first census of the people has been taken (Num. 1); the order in which the tribes are to march has been announced (Num. 2); the Levites have been ordained to their office as assistants to the priests (Num. 8); the first memorial Passover has been celebrated on the anniversary of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt (Num. 9); the presence of Almighty God, symbolized by the glory-cloud, now stands over the tabernacle (Num. 9); and the silver trumpets, which will signal when it is time to break camp and begin to march, have been crafted and put into service (Num. 10). Many of us know from experience that getting a household out the door to go to church, or leave on vacation, takes planning and coordination; how much more difficult to move a sometimes unruly assembly of 2½ million souls safely through the Sinai desert on their trek to the Promised Land!

I have four points this morning: (1) The LORD leads the way; (2) The people follow in the prescribed order; (3) Moses invites his father-in-law’s family to come along; (4) The LORD blesses his people. First,

1. The LORD leads the way.

Notice the reference in verse 11 to “the tabernacle of the *Testimony*.” As God’s people we are encouraged to give testimony of our faith in Christ (“Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,” Ps. 107:2), but here is *the God of heaven* testifying concerning himself! The presence of the glory-cloud standing over the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle, pointing upward, was an enduring expression that the God who revealed himself in creation and redemption now dwelt personally among his people, assembled before him. The personal presence of the God of heaven, the one only true and living God, in the midst of his people, was what distinguished Israel and set it apart from all other peoples on the face of the earth. No other nation or people-group could claim that privilege.

And so it is with us today. Under the new covenant the glory-cloud is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ—God the Son sent from the Father to atone for our sins. “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt [lit. *tabernacled*] among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”¹

¹ John 1:14

This is the same promise as that given to Israel under the law—and even better! In Christ, God is *with* us! “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, *God with us*” (Matt. 1:23). *Emmanuel*, God *with* us! Sometimes we miss the significance of this astounding truth, or we take it for granted and think: *Big deal! I’ve heard this before*. We don’t say these words aloud, but our actions reveal that our hearts are set on “earthly things” (Phil. 3:19). *Earthly* things—rather than on the God who gives us life in his Son—are what is most *important* to us. If we were to list our personal priorities honestly, the God of heaven would actually rank very low. We say he is God, but it is all lip-service, for in actuality, something else is our god. If that is true for us, then something is terribly amiss, and we best acknowledge that. We need to repent of our idolatry and begin to seek God first. How tragic to attend a church where the Word is faithfully preached, while our practice reveals that we are on our way to hell.

Verse 13 of our text states that Israel “*started out* for the first time.” “Started out” is a verb meaning *to pull up tent stakes or break camp*. After camping in the same spot for over a year, fed by delicious manna every morning, and given drink from the refreshing waters of the spiritual rock that followed them,² they might have wanted to just stay put. But the Promised Land lay ahead. Verse 13 continues: “. . . according to the command of the LORD by the hand of Moses.” This is a repetition of the distinctive phrase that we saw seven times in the last paragraph of chapter 9. The Hebrew is literally “at the *mouth* of the LORD by the hand of Moses.” This was a forceful way of reminding the people that their path through the vast desert had been preplanned at the explicit direction of God himself. This was not merely Moses’ idea. Journeying to Canaan was God’s expressed will.

Israel was beginning a trip through a vast, largely uninhabited wilderness. Here was a large number of vulnerable human beings of every age group from newborn babies to very elderly. They were recently-emancipated slaves with no experience in self-rule. No one in the company had ever been that way before. They were not on the usual trade route between Egypt and Canaan. They had no experienced guide among them. They were not seasoned travelers. They had no army traveling with them to protect them from bandits or robbers. They were all on their own, humanly speaking. All the odds were stacked against them. But they had something no one else had: the presence of the living God. They had his promise that he would never leave them nor forsake them. So it is for us, traveling the road of life.

Consider a Facebook friend, sharing pictures of a child’s wedding. A young couple with beauty and energy and potential—but little experience—beginning a

² 1 Cor. 10:4

lifetime together. The congregation gathers to celebrate the occasion. The goal is to live well, to make the right decisions, to avoid pitfalls, to use their gifts in the service of Christ, to leave a positive mark upon the world, to be faithful to one another and to the Lord all the days of their life, to be faithful unto death. Sometimes, we do not know the best way to take. There will be temptations along the way.

Now you who have grown up with GPS might not be able to relate to this, but forty or fifty years ago, people traveling through a strange area might drive down unfamiliar roads, thinking they were on their way to their destination—and suddenly get the sinking feeling that they had no idea where they were. The kids in the backseat might ask, “How far do we have to go?” and the driver, if he were honest, would have to admit, “I have absolutely no idea.”

But how reassuring it should have been to families setting off through a trackless desert with young, vulnerable children, to recognize that God who made them was personally watching over them and knew exactly where they, his people, were, and where he was leading them, and he would infallibly take them to the Promised Land! People of God, that is our confidence as well. Almighty God is with us, and step-by-step is guiding us to the Promised Land.

There is an old children’s song: “My Lord knows the way through the wilderness; all I have to do is follow!” Follow! That’s all we have to do!

2. The people follow in the prescribed order.

Verses 14–27 record the order in which the tribes marched, and I’m happy to tell you it corresponds exactly with the prescribed order set forth back in chapter 2. There were to be four groups of three tribes each, camping to the east, south, west and north of the tabernacle. When marching day was announced, the people would not go forth as an unruly mob, everybody scrambling to be first. No! There was to be an orderly, purposeful march. Israel would march under four “standards” or banners. Judah would set out first, leading the tribes on the east; Reuben would set out next, leading the tribes on the south; the tabernacle, carried by the Levites, would set out next, followed by the tribes on the west, led by the tribe of Ephraim; and finally by the three tribes on the north, led by the tribe of Dan. This was the order that God had prescribed, and chapter 10 reveals that this order was carefully followed. Israel marched in the order God had divinely ordained. This was indeed a good start! They are organized around the tabernacle, the throne of Almighty God, the symbol of his holy presence. The cloud goes with them, directing their way through the vast, unknown desert.

While the tribes began to move out, the Gershonites and Merarites took down the tabernacle, then the Kohathites set out, carrying the holy things. Verse 33 records that Israel “departed from the mountain of the LORD on a journey of three days; and the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them for the three

days' journey, *to search out a resting place for them.*" Here is a picture of life in this vale of tears. We work to provide a living for ourselves. The world is constantly changing. Companies are bought and sold, and people are expendable and lose their jobs. The inflation tax affects everybody and erodes the value of our money. Foreign wars consume our wealth. Prices keep going up. Whereas back in the 1950s a working man could support his family while his wife stayed home to raise the kids, now, two incomes barely make ends meet. A society that is obedient to God enjoys his blessing, but our society is in rebellion against God. The ark of the covenant went before the Israelites "*to search out a resting place for them.*" This is what every human being truly needs! In this world we find no true resting place apart from Christ. Hear his words: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you *rest*. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find *rest* unto your souls" (Matt. 11:28–29). The human soul, like the dove sent out by Noah, does not find rest, whether in philosophy, the arts, popular culture, or the social media. True rest is found only in Christ!

Israel did not have to guess where they were going. The ark of the covenant, carried on the shoulders of the Levites, went ahead of the congregation of Israel as they marched through the desert, in order that the people could confidently follow, as God himself showed them the way. Here were the children of Israel journeying through a vast, trackless desert. They are heading toward Canaan. This first march was about a three-day's journey (v. 33).

Israel began well. If they had continued in faithful obedience, they would not have had to spend thirty-nine extra years, wandering in the wilderness. But alas! Such was not to be. The people got off track, as we will learn. Had they continued, things would have gone a lot better for them.

Paul tells the Galatians: "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?"³ The Galatians started well, but then things took a turn for the worse. They did not "obey" the truth.

Christ's disciples are duty-bound to obey him. Deuteronomy 13:4 puts it this way: "You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and *obey* His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him." We are saved by faith, not by works. But faith is demonstrated by a life of obedience. If we truly believe in Christ, then we gladly keep God's commandments. If we have made a good start, then we should aspire to end well. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."⁴

One author wrote: "Israel began well. This shows us that the problems that subsequently developed were not due to ignorance on Israel's part or a lack of

³ Gal. 5:7

⁴ Rev. 2:10

clarity on the Lord's part."⁵ Israel began well. This is a positive model for saints today in our own wilderness journey.

Church of Jesus Christ, we are on a God-centered pilgrimage. We are conscious that we are servants of God. We tithe to the church. We give to Bible distribution and foreign missions. Some Christians go on self-funded mission trips. Faithful Christians gladly give, instead of spending every cent on ourselves, enjoying the good life. We believe Christ's promise: "Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting" (Luke 18:29–30).

The Christian life is a pilgrimage that involves self-denial, discomfort and suffering, but there is a reward at the end—and what a reward it is! "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3, 10). The reward is *heaven*! To enjoy the presence of the Lamb of God who gave his life for us, for all eternity!

The Israelites began well. Had they continued, things would have gone better for them. But in the next chapter, the people complain. And in chapter 14 the people flat-out refuse to enter Canaan. How tragic! Their obedience was short-lived. As Paul would later say to the Galatians, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal. 5:7).

3. Moses invites his father-in-law's family to come too.

In verses 29ff. we read that "Moses said to Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, 'We are setting out for the place of which the LORD said, "I will give it to you." Come with us, and we will treat you well; for the LORD has promised good things to Israel.' And he said to him, 'I will not go, but I will depart to my own land and to my relatives.' So Moses said, 'Please do not leave, inasmuch as you know how we are to camp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes. And it shall be, if you go with us—indeed it shall be—that whatever good the LORD will do to us, the same we will do to you.'"

It is not entirely clear whether "Hobab the son of Reuel" is another name for "Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian," or someone else.⁶ Commentators are not agreed. It is possible that "Hobab" was Jethro's son (Moses' brother-in-law). In any case, it is worth noting that Moses' in-laws were *Midianites*, not ethnic Jews. Yet they were invited to go to the Promised Land. The gospel was not just for one ethnicity. It was for all those who would take up the call to journey with God's

⁵ Iain M. Duguid and R. Kent Hughes, *Numbers: God's Presence in the Wilderness* (Preaching the Word) (PocketBible)

⁶ Ex. 3:1

people. So it is today. The gospel is for those who want to join the church in following Christ.

Was Hobab persuaded by Moses' appeal? Hobab responds, "I will not go, but I will depart to my own land and to my relatives." It is possible that he later changed his mind, or went back for a time to settle his affairs, and afterwards returned. In any case, it is noteworthy that we later find his posterity settled among the Israelites. Judges 1:16 records that "the children of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up from the City of Palms with the children of Judah into the Wilderness of Judah, which lies in the South near Arad; and *they went and dwelt among the people.*" Judges 4:11 observes that "Heber the Kenite, of the children of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, had *separated himself from the Kenites* and pitched his tent near the terebinth tree at Zaanaim, which is beside Kadesh." Certainly Israel included believing Gentiles within its number. So it is with the church today. By God's grace we who were not a people are now numbered among the people of God!

4. The LORD blesses his people.

Verses 35–36 state that "so it was, whenever the ark set out, that Moses said: 'Rise up, O LORD! Let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You.' And when it rested, he said: 'Return, O LORD, to the many thousands of Israel.'" The ark was the visible symbol of God's presence among his people. In following the ark, the people were following the LORD.

Today, we follow God as we obey his inspired Word, which is read and taught in faithful churches. Christ is present with his church, teaching us through the mouth of his ordained ministers. Christ will never lead us astray but will always lead us into the green pastures of his holy will. If we follow him, we will be blessed. If we turn away from him, we will be cursed. Our goal should be to follow Christ day-by-day, willingly and cheerfully, always making obedience our chief pursuit. If we not only *start* well, but *continue*, we will inherit the blessing. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

We, God's people, are "boldly" going where we have never gone before. As we go boldly to the throne of grace, to obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need, so we boldly follow our Savior to heaven, not on the basis of our own deserving, but because he is the Savior who promises, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." We are blessed with Christ! Amen.