

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Theology of Numbers

Session 15, 6-min. Video Overview

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All right, today we're jumping into the ancient book of Numbers. But we're not going to treat it like some dry historical document. No, we're looking at it as a high-stakes drama all about leadership under incredible pressure.

And the biggest threats? They don't come from outside armies. They come from your own family and your own people. Let's dive in.

So where does this story kick off? Not with some big epic battle. It starts with a crisis that's deeply personal. Before Moses even has to deal with the whole nation, he's facing a rebellion from inside his own inner circle.

The two people who should have had his back more than anyone? His brother Aaron and his sister Miriam. So what's their excuse? They point to his marriage to a Cushite wife, a woman from the region we'd call Ethiopia today. But let's be real.

That's just a cover story. The real issue here? It's a power play. You can hear it loud and clear in their question: Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? They're making a direct shot at his leadership.

Well, God does not let this slide. Not for a second. The response is incredibly fast and crystal clear.

God basically calls a meeting with all three of them and just lays it all out. He says, look, with other prophets, I speak in dreams and visions. But with Moses, it's different.

We talk face to face. It's made absolutely clear that Moses is just on a whole other level. And then comes this moment of what you could only call ironic justice.

Miriam, who probably started this whole thing by using Moses' dark-skinned wife as a weapon, is suddenly struck with leprosy. And the text is very specific. Her skin turns white as snow.

You see the irony, right? The punishment is a perfect and really powerful mirror of her prejudice. Okay, so right in the middle of all this family drama, the text describes Moses in a really interesting way. It calls him the most humble man on earth.

And you might be thinking, wait a minute, how can a truly humble person write that about himself? And that's a great question. Turns out, there's this fascinating debate over the original Hebrew word *oni*. Yes, it can mean humble.

But it can also mean oppressed or afflicted. And when you think about it, being attacked by your own brother and sister. Oppressed makes a ton of sense, doesn't it? So that whole mess with his family? Yeah, that was just the warm-up act.

Now, that same kind of internal pressure, that same challenge to leadership, it just explodes. It goes from a family problem to a full-blown crisis of faith for the entire nation. So 12 spies get sent to check out the promised land.

And the report they bring back is, well, it's a mix. The good news? The land is incredible, exactly as promised, flowing with milk and honey. They bring back a cluster of grapes, so huge it takes two guys to carry it.

But then, then comes the bad news from 10 of the spies. They are terrified. They talk about massive fortified cities and, get this, giants.

And this quote, this gets right to the heart of the problem. They said, "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes. You see, the issue wasn't just the giants.

The issue was how they saw themselves. They had what's been called grasshopper vision. This deep feeling of being small and powerless.

And that fear just spread through the camp like wildfire. Now, only two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, had a totally different take. They saw the same giants, same cities, but they were like, we can do this.

God is with us. But, you know, it's 10 against 2. And the voice of fear was just a lot louder. The majority report won, and the entire nation completely melted down and refused to go in.

This massive failure of faith pushes God to a breaking point. And what happens next is one of the most astonishing conversations in the entire Bible. Moses has to switch roles big time.

He goes from being the leader of the people to being their defense attorney, trying to save them from being completely wiped out. And God is furious. I mean, absolutely enraged.

His verdict? I'm going to wipe them out with a plague and start over with a new nation from you, Moses. Can you imagine hearing that? And this, of course, raises a massive theological question. Is God's mind set in stone, or can a human actually step in and argue the case? So what does Moses do? He doesn't just fall on his face and beg.

No, he makes a logical, brilliant argument. First, he appeals to God's reputation. He says, hey, what are the Egyptians going to say? That you were powerful enough to get them out of Egypt, but not strong enough to get them in? Then, he appeals to God's own character.

He literally quotes God's own words back to him. Slow to anger, abounding in love. He's using God's own stated identity as his defense.

It's so bold. And guess what? It works. God replies, I have forgiven them as you asked.

But, and this is a huge but, this moment shows us a really critical theme. Forgiveness doesn't always erase consequences. The people are spared, sure, but there is still a price to pay for their faithlessness.

And that price is 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The idea is that the entire generation that saw all those miracles but still refused to trust him, well, they would have to pass away before the next generation could inherit that promise. So you can just imagine the environment out there in the wilderness.

It's a total pressure cooker. And all these constant challenges are starting to take their toll, leading not just to more rebellion, but to a tragic personal failure right at the very top. First, another power struggle erupts, led by a man named Korah.

He wants the same status as Moses and Aaron. But watch Moses' reaction this time. It is a complete reversal of his earlier role.

He doesn't mediate for the people. He acts as an anti-mediator, telling God not to accept their offering. And the judgment is terrifyingly swift.

The earth literally opens up and swallows the rebels whole. Now, to really understand Moses' biggest mistake, you have to look at the context. It all happens in one terrible chapter.

First, his sister Miriam dies. Then the people start complaining again. And by the end of the chapter, his brother Aaron is also dead.

It's in the middle of this intense personal grief and relentless public pressure that Moses finally hits his breaking point. The people are demanding water. God tells Moses to speak to a rock.

Instead, in a moment of pure frustration, he strikes it twice. God makes it clear the sin wasn't just the physical act. It was what was underneath it.

A failure to trust. And for a leader held to such a high standard, the consequence is just heartbreaking. He too will not enter the promised land.

So the story comes full circle with one last cycle of complaining and judgment. But this time, it produces one of the most powerful and enduring symbols of salvation in the entire Old Testament. The pattern is familiar by now, right? The people complain.

God sends a punishment. This time, venomous snakes. But then he provides a kind of bizarre cure.

Moses is told to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. The remedy for a deadly snakebite isn't some complex ritual. It's a simple act of faith.

Just look up at the symbol of their affliction and live. And this is where the story takes on an incredible afterlife. Centuries later, in the New Testament, Jesus himself references this exact event.

He uses the image of the snake being lifted up as a direct metaphor for his own crucifixion, transforming this ancient story of judgment into a cornerstone of Christian theology. Think about that. That story of the bronze snake in the desert isn't just some random tale.

It's the direct setup for what is arguably the most famous verse in the entire New Testament, John 3.16. It's a powerful reminder that these narratives about leadership, failure, and faith aren't just historical artifacts. They are foundational stories that continue to echo, shaping belief and offering meaning thousands of years later.