



EXPLORE **THE BIBLE.**

Adults

Numbers & Deuteronomy

Commentary

Fall 2025



STEP BY STEP

In poetry and music, various metaphors have been applied to life on earth. For example, one song tells us that “life is a highway,” a journey that never stops and takes us on any number of adventures if we will take the time to embrace the magic. Decades earlier, a poet suggested that life is more like a choice between “two roads” that split at the edge of the woods. We’d love to try them both, but we have a choice to make—and the road we choose makes “all the difference.”

For all the images used for our short time on this earth, roads and highways might resonate more than others. It’s the simple process of putting one foot in front of the other each day that keeps us going. No matter how hard life gets, if we can just move a little farther down the line, we’re confident that better days will shine on us.

Humans are incredibly resilient that way.

Speaking of resilient, the ancient Israelites had started a life journey on pretty solid footing. They escaped the slavery of Egypt, walked through the walls of the Red Sea, and received God’s gameplan at Mount Sinai. Before long, they were on the edge of the promised land . . . until they weren’t.

Stubborn rebellion and disobedience moved them back to “Start” in the game of life. Now, their journey entailed forty years of walking around in circles until an entire generation died out. But while putting one foot in front of the other raised new struggles, they never lost God’s presence or His promises. Even as they were marking time in the desert, He was leading them—step by step—toward a second chance at Canaan.

That’s the story of Numbers and Deuteronomy. It’s all about God leading and protecting a band of imperfect people through a wilderness as they learned to trust Him. And as they learned to trust Him, they moved closer to the promised land.

That’s not just the story of the Israelites, though. It’s our narrative, as well. Rebels against our Creator we are born into a wilderness of sin that we can’t escape on our own. But God demonstrated His love by sending His Son to die in our place, to pay the price for our sin. All we have to do is put one foot in front of the other, step toward Him, and trust Him with our lives. If you’re ready to take that step, here’s what you must do . . .

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus as God’s Son and accept His gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross. Jesus also rose from the dead, making a new, eternal life possible for us.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: “Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In the name of Jesus I pray, amen.”

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.

CONTENTS



FEATURES

- Meet the Writers 4
- From the Team Leader 5
- Biblical Background 6
- Outline 9
- Map 139

SESSIONS

SUGGESTED FOR
THE WEEK OF

<i>Sept. 7</i>	Session 1: The Journey (Num. 9:15-23)	10
<i>Sept. 14</i>	Session 2: Provision (Num. 11:4-17)	20
<i>Sept. 21</i>	Session 3: The Land (Num. 13:17-31)	30
<i>Sept. 28</i>	Session 4: Rebellion and Judgment* (Num. 14:11-24)	40
<i>Oct. 5</i>	Session 5: Lack of Trust (Num. 20:2-13)	50
<i>Oct. 12</i>	Session 6: God's Plans (Num. 22:22-35)	60
<i>Oct. 19</i>	Session 7: Instructions Given (Num. 33:50-56; 34:13-15)	70
<i>Oct. 26</i>	Session 8: Remember (Deut. 4:1-9,15-20)	80
<i>Nov. 2</i>	Session 9: Love (Deut. 6:1-9,20-25)	90
<i>Nov. 9</i>	Session 10: Undivided Worship (Deut. 12:1-11,29-32)	100
<i>Nov. 16</i>	Session 11: Covenant Relationship (Deut. 28:1-6,15-19)	110
<i>Nov. 23</i>	Session 12: Fully Committed (Deut. 30:11-20)	120
<i>Nov. 30</i>	Session 13: God's Power (Deut. 33:1-5,26-29)	130

*Evangelistic Emphasis

MEET THE WRITERS



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Explore the Bible: Adult Commentary (ISSN 1092-7174; Item 005850585) is published quarterly by Lifeway Christian Resources, 200 Powell Place, Suite 100, Brentwood, TN 37027-7707, Ben Mandrell, President. © 2025 Lifeway Christian Resources.

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Explore the Bible
Adult Commentary
Fall 2025
Volume 3, Number 1

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Printed in the United States
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FROM **THE TEAM LEADER**



Steadfast faith. Time-tested devotion. We each desire a deep faith in God that enables us to persevere through the valleys and rejoice on the mountaintops of life. In the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy, we get a front-row seat as the Israelites journeyed from Mount Sinai through the wilderness to the edge of the promised land. Like most expeditions, this journey was packed with unexpected events, a longer-than-expected timeline, and unforeseen challenges. The Israelites responded to these circumstances with grumbling, frustration, and disobedience to God's commands. Upon reaching the Plains of Moab, Moses called the Israelites to commit to wholehearted devotion—following God, His commands, and His ways.

Through the twists and turns of events, God's faithfulness to His people never faltered. He was with them. Time and again God demonstrated His loyalty to provide for and protect them as He led them to the promised land. His promise to be their God was neither forgotten nor dismissed. Despite their unfaithfulness, He remained fully faithful.

The lessons learned by the Israelites prove to be powerful truths we can cling to today. Our journeys will take unexpected turns, leaving us frustrated or unsure of what may lie ahead. Thankfully, we aren't left on our own to navigate our experiences. Like the Israelites, we can choose to follow Him each day. We serve a God who is wholly trustworthy. He is with us!

In Him,

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Explore

Discover



BIBLICAL **BACKGROUND**

The books of Numbers and Deuteronomy are just that. They are books of transition and final words. The book of Numbers serves to bridge the gap between the first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt and the second generation of people born during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The events cataloged in the book of Numbers also cover the journey from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab, tracing the years between the receiving of the Ten Commandments and the final days before entering the promised land.

Deuteronomy is a book of final instructions from Moses. In the book Moses reiterated the Lord God's special relationship with the children of Israel and implored them to faithful obedience to all God commands. The book contains warnings to the Israelites about the temptations that lay ahead for them as a nation. The three lengthy addresses in this book were Moses's attempt to equip the new generation of Israelites for life in the promised land.

WRITER

Christian and Jewish tradition are in almost unanimous agreement that Moses was the author and compiler of the first five books of the Bible. These books are known as the "Pentateuch," which means "five vessels." They are also known as "the Law of Moses." In Jewish theology, these books are called "the Torah," which means "teaching" or "instruction."

For centuries, the recognized author of these five books was Moses, who served as the Lord God's deliverer from Egyptian slavery for the children of Israel. The internal evidence in Scripture, the centuries-long belief, and even modern archaeology continue to point to the authenticity of Moses's authorship. Jesus spoke of Moses as the author of the Law of Moses (Mark 7:10). A strong internal witness supports that much of these five books was written by Moses (Josh. 1:7-8; 2 Chron. 25:4; Neh. 13:1). While some passages Moses obviously did not write, such as the death of Moses in Deuteronomy 34, most of the content was recorded by Moses—much of which was written down at the command of God (see Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:24). This doesn't preclude the thought that these writings were compiled and organized in their final form by the work of others.

DATE

First Kings 6:1 notes that Solomon began building the temple "in the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt." Solomon began building the temple in 996 BC so the exodus event would



have begun around 1446 BC. Forty years of wandering in the wilderness would put the Israelites entering the promised land around 1406 BC. Thus, the books of the Pentateuch would have been written during this time frame with Numbers and Deuteronomy being written just prior to the people entering the promise land.

NUMBERS

This fourth book of the Pentateuch takes its name from the fact that it begins with a census of the fighting men in Israel (Num. 1:1-46). Numbers contains a second census in chapter 26. Because of this fact, the title *Numbers* was given to the book.

The book of Numbers covers most of the years of the Israelites' journey to Canaan. It chronicles the forty years of wandering from Sinai to Canaan. The book also covers three cycles of rebellion by the children of Israel that brought punishment and chastisement from God. At the center of these rebellions and perhaps the crisis point in the book of Numbers was the sending out of twelve spies to reconnoiter Canaan. The report brought back by ten of the spies led to wholesale rejection of God's planned inheritance. Because of these episodes of rebellion, the first generation to leave Egypt died in the wilderness. The book closes with this second generation poised to enter the land of promise.

Purpose and Themes in Numbers

Numbers sets out two sides of the character of God. The first aspect is the chastening wrath of God in response to the frequent rebellion of the children of Israel. Israel's disobedience permeates the book as pictured in both rebellion and a lack of faith in God's power and plan. The book points in graphic details to the consequences of disobedience to God.

The second aspect of God's character is His continuing love and faithfulness to His chosen people. The Lord God remained faithful to the Israelites even when they chose to reject Him. Here is the theme of reconciliation and hope. God shines through as the God of the second chance. Because of these "second chances," we also see a growing development of Israel as the people of God and an understanding that they are answerable to God.

DEUTERONOMY

The name *Deuteronomy* means "second law." The name is believed to have come from the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek called "the Septuagint." The translators, working in about 250 BC,

changed the meaning of Deuteronomy 17:18-19 where God instructed any king on the throne of Israel to make a copy of the law for his own personal meditation and constant reading. Instead of translating these words as “copy of this law” they recorded it as “this second law.” Most likely this mistranslation accounts for the name of the book. The Hebrew Bible instead uses the opening words of chapter 1 and simply calls this book, “these the words” or “words.”

Deuteronomy contains what might be called Moses’s farewell address. The book contains three major addresses to the people of Israel. As Moses faced his own imminent death, he took one more opportunity to prepare the Israelites for what lay ahead. The first address (1:1–4:49) gives a summary of God’s deliverance from Egypt and His leadership through the wilderness to the moment when they camped directly across the Jordan River from Jericho. In this first address, Moses gave a series of warnings against abandoning the Lord God after the Israelites entered the land.

The second address (5:1–26:19) contains a series of instructions on godly living. Over and over the people of Israel were urged to be obedient to God. The final address (27:1–30:20) contains a heartfelt challenge from Moses to the people to stay fully committed to the Lord. Moses reviewed the covenant commitment of Israel with the Lord God and pleaded for them to remain faithful.

Purpose and Themes in Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy is the high point in the relationship between God the Deliverer and the children of Israel that He had chosen for His own. Through the messages of Moses, the love relationship between God and the people becomes vividly clear. The much-repeated call for complete and undivided obedience and devotion to God dominates much of this book.

Another theme in Deuteronomy is the training and education of children. They, too, must be taught to love and obey God continually. Still another theme is the emphasis on the holiness of God and the worship of God.

Israel had a unique relationship with God, unlike that of any other nation on earth. The book continually emphasizes the critical necessity for complete and undivided love toward God. Moses gave to Israel an extensive list of consequences for disobedience to God. Israel would learn the hard way that choices make a difference. Because of these themes of obedience, commitment, and holy living, Deuteronomy stands as one of the most quoted books throughout the rest of Scripture, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.



Numbers

- I. **First Census and Consecration of Israel at Sinai**
(Num. 1:1-6:27)
- II. **Preparation for Departure to the Promised Land**
(Num. 7:1-10:36)
- III. **From Mount Sinai to Kadesh**
(Num. 11:1-15:41)
- IV. **Rebellion Against Aaron's Priesthood**
(Num. 16:1-19:22)
- V. **From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab**
(Num. 20:1-25:18)
- VI. **Second Census and Preparation of the New Generation**
(Num. 26:1-30:16)
- VII. **Preparation for Entering the Promised Land**
(Num. 31:1-36:13)

Deuteronomy

- I. **First Address of Moses**
(Deut. 1:1-4:49)
- II. **Second Address of Moses**
(Deut. 5:1-26:19)
- III. **Third Address of Moses**
(Deut. 27:1-30:20)
- IV. **Final Days of Moses**
(Deut. 31:1-34:12)

The Journey

GOD GIVES DAILY GUIDANCE TO HIS PEOPLE.

Overseas travel has been a privilege of mine. These trips have included walking tours of some historic sites such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany, Versailles in Paris, plus several ancient sites in Rome. Each time the tour guide would raise his or her “banner” so we could easily follow.

The walking tour in Beijing, China, stands out in my mind. Our young tour guide carried an unopened, brightly colored umbrella that stood out in stark contrast to the various colored pennants of other tour guides. As we stood in Tiananmen Square preparing to enter the Forbidden City, I was struck by the sight of literally thousands of tourists gathered in little groups under the “banners” of scores of tour guides. I was thankful that our tour guide’s brightly colored umbrella stood out in stark contrast. I couldn’t imagine getting lost in that crowd in a strange city where I didn’t know the language. My job was to keep the umbrella in sight. If I became distracted by all the fascinating sights within the Forbidden City, I could have easily become lost and left behind in this wondrous but unfamiliar place. The presence of that raised umbrella was a source of comfort and confidence as we wove our way through the various temples and palaces of this ancient site.

Wandering in an unknown place can be confusing and even frightening. Comfort abounds in knowing that we are with someone who knows the right way. For the Israelites as they prepared to leave Mount Sinai on their way to the land that God had promised to them, everything about the trip was marked by the unknown. All they had ever known was their little area of Egypt, known as Goshen. The descendants of Jacob had lived in this northeast region of the Nile Delta for four hundred years. Suddenly they had left Egypt and entered into a great expanse of wilderness of which they knew nothing. Thankfully, God provided them with a guiding “marker.” This marker was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The nation learned early on that they were to obey the leading of God through this divine sign He had given them.

Numbers 1:1–10:10

The book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Pentateuch written by Moses during the exodus event. This book covers the transitional period between the events at Mount Sinai and the preparation for entering the promised land that took place on the Plains of Moab across the Jordan River from Jericho. Keep in mind that Moses faced a monumental task of taking a group of used-to-be slaves and forming them into a cohesive nation. Throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the tasks of providing laws of conduct, provisions for worship, regulations of that worship, and the organization for travel, protection, and war are outlined. The early chapters in Numbers continue that organization.

Included in Numbers 1; 3; and 4 are instructions for the various tasks given to the tribe of Levi. Their special responsibility was the oversight of the tabernacle and its furnishings. The tabernacle had been completed in the first day of the second year of the exodus (Ex. 40:2,17). These tasks were assigned to the Levites to facilitate worship in the tabernacle. Also, provision was made for transporting the tabernacle.

The organization of the Israelites continued in Numbers 2 as details are given as to the way the camp was to be set up. Because the worship of the Lord was central in all that the Israelites did, the tabernacle was centrally located in the camp with those who led and assisted in worship camped adjacent to the tabernacle. This would also provide physical protection from the enemies of Israel who sought to prevent their advance. The population figures given for each section (east, south, west, and north) were similar in size. Later in chapter 10, the marching order of the tribes and those moving the tabernacle would point to the ongoing importance of protecting the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle.

God had told the people, “You must be holy because I am holy” (Lev. 11:45). Numbers 5 takes up where many of the instructions in Exodus and Leviticus left off: holiness within the camp and within the nation was absolutely essential.

While the narration of the construction and set up of the tabernacle is recorded in Exodus 36–40, in Numbers 7 the offerings of dedication of the tabernacle are given. Note that in 7:2-9, six wagons were given to the Levites for transporting the tabernacle. The ark of the covenant and the other sacred objects of the tabernacle were to be carried.

Numbers 8 details the purification/consecration of the Levites for service to God. With that, the congregation of Israel was ready to leave Mount Sinai. The children of Israel were now ready to move toward the land that had been promised to them centuries earlier.



God's Presence (Num. 9:15-16)

God was with the Israelites as they journeyed from Mount Sinai to the Plains of Moab. He directed them by fire at night and as a cloud by day. This pillar was a continuous and visible appearance of God's glory.

VERSE 15

On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and it appeared like fire above the tabernacle from evening until morning.

The ever-present pillar of **cloud** by day and **fire** by night was a visible, assuring symbol of the presence of God that accompanied the Israelites throughout their journey from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. This pillar of cloud first appeared when the Israelites left Egypt (Ex. 13:21-22). The pillar of cloud served as a protective shield for Israel when the chariots of the Egyptian Pharaoh pursued them (14:19-20). The pillar of cloud moved between the Israelites and Egyptians, protecting the Israelites as they prepared to cross the Red Sea. The book of Exodus closes with a summary statement of God's use of this pillar of cloud and fire to direct the journeying of the Israelites (40:34-38).

Exodus 14:19 indicates that "the angel of God" was present in the pillar of cloud. On several occasions in the Old Testament, the mention of "the angel of the LORD" was a reference to an appearance of the Lord Himself. Exodus 14:24 gives further insight: "the LORD looked down at the Egyptian forces from the pillar of fire and cloud." Because of these verses, some Bible expositors see this as a theophany, that is, a personal and physical manifestation of God to the Israelites. This was not an appearance in human form; rather, it was in the form of the pillar of cloud and fire. "The angel of the LORD" appeared to Moses in "a flame of fire within a bush" (3:2). Frequently in the Old Testament clouds were

indicators of the presence of God. Other occasions where the cloud of God's presence and glory appeared include God's appearance on Mount Sinai (19:9,16), at the tent of meeting (33:7-11), and the dedication of the tabernacle (40:34).

The pillar of cloud/fire continuously rested over the **tabernacle** day and night. The Hebrew term for *tabernacle* comes from a verb meaning "to dwell." The tabernacle was God's chosen dwelling place among the Israelites. Details regarding the tabernacle, its furnishings, and so forth are found in Exodus 25-40. Exodus 40 records how after the construction of the tabernacle was completed, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (40:34). While in this instance the tabernacle was also called "the tent of meeting," this structure should not be confused with the smaller "tent of meeting" Moses set up outside the Israelite camp to meet with God after the golden calf incident (33:7-11).

The tabernacle is also called **the tent of the testimony** (see also Num. 17:7,8; 18:2; "tabernacle of the testimony," Ex. 38:21; Acts 7:44). This name was most likely applied to the tabernacle because it housed the ark of the covenant ("ark of the testimony," Ex. 25:22), which contained the Ten Commandments (Deut. 10:5). God had said He would meet with Moses and later the high priests above the mercy seat of the ark (Ex. 25:21-22). The mercy seat consisted of a lid of pure gold (v. 17) with two golden cherubim that stood guard over the ark of the covenant (vv. 18-20). Both the tabernacle and the ark bore witness to the special relationship between God and His people.

VERSE 16

It remained that way continuously: the cloud would cover it, appearing like fire at night.

The pillar of cloud/fire was a constant part of the Israelites' journey to the promised land. It was easily recognizable in contrast to all other clouds by its shape and fixed position over the tabernacle or in front of the marching line of the Israelites. Moses spoke of the presence of this pillar of cloud/fire as a clear sign of God's presence and watchcare over the people He had chosen (Num. 14:14).

God's presence at the tabernacle was indicated by the cloud/fire remaining over it **continuously**. The pillar of cloud/fire first appeared on the first day the Israelites left Egypt and is last mentioned in Deuteronomy 31:14-15. The pillar was present "throughout all the stages of their journey" (Ex. 40:36,38).

Numbers 9:16 is a parallel verse to Numbers 9:15, essentially repeating the same information. In fact, much of Number 9:15-23 contains a repetition of the same thoughts. This may indicate that the passage is closely akin to Hebrew poetry or celebratory prose. Hebrew poetry is characterized by such things as parallel ideas and repetition of thought. This passage may be an echo of an earlier celebratory song or Hebrew poem rejoicing in God's presence among the Israelites.

In any case, the entire passage speaks volumes about the wonder of God's continual presence and guidance of the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness. There is a sense of excitement and wonder in these verses describing the manifest presence of the God of the universe. The prayer of praise by the Levites and other leaders recorded in Nehemiah 9 recounted how even after the golden calf incident, God did not abandon His people. "Even after they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, 'This is your god who brought you out of Egypt,' and they had committed terrible blasphemies, You did not abandon them in the wilderness because of your great compassion. During the day the pillar of cloud never turned away from them, guiding them on their journey. And during the night the pillar of fire illuminated the way they should go" (Neh. 9:18-19; see vv. 17-21).



Explore Further

Read "Pillar of Fire and Cloud" on page 1270 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In addition to God's revelation of Himself through creation (Rom. 1:18-20), what are some ways you can know and trust that God is present in your circumstances? How are things like regular prayer, Bible study, and gathering with other Christians on a regular basis helpful in seeing God's presence in our lives?

Faithful Direction (Num. 9:17-21)

The Israelites watched the pillar of cloud. When the cloud lifted from its place above the tabernacle and moved, the Israelites moved with it. They followed the cloud. When the cloud stopped moving and remained in one place, they stopped traveling and remained in that location. The Israelites journeyed or camped at the Lord's command.

VERSE 17

Whenever the cloud was lifted up above the tent, the Israelites would set out; at the place where the cloud stopped, there the Israelites camped.

God's presence with His people Israel pointed to their uniqueness among the peoples present in the land of Canaan. Later on the border of the promised land, Moses marveled to the people, "For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call to him?" (Deut. 4:7). This awareness of the presence of God with them gave the Israelites the certainty that He would also guide them throughout their journey to the land of Canaan.

Numbers 9:17-23 sets forth a continuing pattern of travel followed by encampment—**Whenever the cloud was lifted up above the tent, the Israelites would set out; at the place where the cloud stopped, there the Israelites camped.**

The theme of this entire passage is the leadership of God. The position and movement of the cloud spoke the "orders for the day." Obviously, the position of the cloud was within sight of the entire camp of Israel—"visible to the entire house of Israel throughout all the stages of their journey" (Ex. 40:38). The words "the entire house of Israel" indicate that every household was responsible for obedience to the direction of God through the cloud. Again, Exodus 40:38 affirms that God directed Israel through the cloud for the entire time they were journeying from Egypt to the promised land.

Moses, speaking from the Plains of Moab at the end of their journey, portrayed this divine guidance with the picture of God carrying the Israelites "as a man carries his son all along the way you traveled until you reached this place" (Deut. 1:31). Here is an affirmation once again that the pillar of cloud/fire led the Israelites the entire time from Egypt to the cusp of the promised land.

VERSE 18

At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at the LORD's command they camped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they camped.

This verse continues the pattern of travel followed by encampment. Six times in verses 18-23 it is stated that the movement of the Israelites was **at the LORD's command** (italics added). The position and movement of the pillar of cloud/fire was a direct command from God as to whether the

Israelites should remain where they were encamped or break camp and move on with their journey. The nation of Israel was not traveling and camping at the discretion of Moses or Aaron or one of the tribal leaders. Instead, they were following direct guidance from God Himself. God was present and actively involved in this whole journey of the children of Israel from Egypt to Canaan.

VERSE 19

Even when the cloud stayed over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites carried out the LORD's requirement and did not set out.

The length of time of this wilderness wandering of the Israelites was forty years. What we know about those years is contained in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. One aspect of their journey was that the travels and encampments of the Israelites were irregular in length. Numbers 9:19-22 indicate this irregularity with such phrases as **many days**, “a few days” (v. 20), “only from evening until morning” (v. 21), “two days, a month, or longer” (v. 22). But what from a human perspective may have seemed to be random was from God's perspective working out His purposes and plans according to His sovereign will. No doubt each period of travel and encampment played a role in shaping the generation who would enter the promised land into the nation they would become. To gain a feel for the Israelites' travels during those years, see the listing of stops in Numbers 33.

Part of the Israelites' training was that they **carried out the LORD's requirement** (“kept the charge of the LORD,” ESV, KJV; “obeyed the LORD's order,” NIV). This phrase seems to be more than just following the Lord's command to travel or encamp. The Hebrew word for *requirement* is a different word from “command” (Num. 9:18,20,23). It has the meanings of “responsibility,” “duty,” “service,” “obligation,” “guard,” “watch.” The term for *carried out* is used of God's command that the Levites were to “watch over” the tabernacle (Num. 1:53). In this case, the term carries the meaning of “guard duty.” The whole idea was that the Levites were to stand watch over the tabernacle and its sacred furnishing. They were to ensure that no Israelite violated the sacredness of the tabernacle by approaching the tabernacle inappropriately.

In the case of the other tribes of Israel, who were encamped at a distance surrounding the four sides of the tabernacle (2:1-34), the use of the same language suggests that the tribes also had a duty to watch over the

tabernacle as well, standing guard and protecting it from any external threats from enemies while they were encamped.

VERSES 20-21

Sometimes the cloud remained over the tabernacle for only a few days. They would camp at the LORD's command and set out at the LORD's command. Sometimes the cloud remained only from evening until morning; when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. Or if it remained a day and a night, they moved out when the cloud lifted.

These two verses continue the pattern of camp, travel, and camp again, emphasizing the irregular lengths of stay at various locations on the journey to Canaan. Because the amount of time at each encampment was not spelled out by God beforehand, the Israelites needed to be prepared both to stay for an extended period or move at a moment's notice. Note again the emphatic statement that **they would camp at the LORD's command and set out at the LORD's command**. Again, the cloud's movement or lack thereof served as the indicator of whether God wanted the Israelites to remain at or leave from their present location.

The text also indicates that the Israelites were obedient to God's directions. How refreshing that this text highlights the ready obedience of the children of Israel to God's commands. This certainly would not always be the pattern of the nation in the years to come, neither in the wilderness nor in the promised land.



Explore Further

Just as God was present with the Israelites at the tabernacle and later the temple, so too He is present with us today through His Holy Spirit who indwells every believer. God has promised never to leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6). He has also promised us that nothing can ever separate us from Him and His love for us (Rom. 8:31-39). How can knowing these promises encourage you in the days ahead? Consider memorizing Romans 8:37-39 as an assurance of God's presence and love you can draw upon in times when you need such reassurance.

Active Obedience (Num. 9:22-23)

The Israelites were faithful to follow God's direction regardless of the amount of time spent traveling or camping. Whether it was two days or a month, the people carefully followed God's direction.

VERSE 22

Whether it was two days, a month, or longer, the Israelites camped and did not set out as long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle. But when it was lifted, they set out.

Note again the repetition of thought concerning the cloud and its movements guiding the people. The formula of departure and encampment is again prominent. The signal to move was the cloud being **lifted** from over **the tabernacle**. Until then, whether it was **two days, a month, or longer**, the Israelites **did not set out**. Verses 22-23 further highlight an important theme repeated over and over in the focal passage: the exacting obedience to God's directions given through the pillar of cloud/fire. Again, as we will see in the following sessions, the Israelites' obedience here stands in sharp contrast to the many occasions during their journey when they complained against God. They exhibited disbelief and ungratefulness throughout the journey to the promised land.

VERSE 23

They camped at the LORD's command, and they set out at the LORD's command. They carried out the LORD's requirement according to his command through Moses.

This verse summarizes the whole of this passage: **They camped at the LORD's command, and they set out at the LORD's command**. The Hebrew term for *command* literally means "mouth" and by extension refers to speech or commands.

Once again, we see a reference to carrying out **the LORD's requirement** (see v. 19). This included the watch over the tabernacle that God required from the Levites (1:53) and the people (2:1-34). The tabernacle and the worship of the Lord were central to the life of the nation. Nothing was more important than the presence and glory of the Lord.

Moses is mentioned for the very first time in this section outlining God's guidance of the nation through the pillar of cloud/fire. The text clearly indicates that God was the one leading and guiding, while Moses was simply God's conduit for His commands.

This visible symbol of God's presence, the pillar of cloud/fire, was such a monumental part of the exodus event that it is written about in a variety of places throughout Scripture. In addition to the references in the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy), the pillar is mentioned in such Scripture passages as Nehemiah 9:12,19; Psalms 78:14; 99:7; 105:39; Isaiah 4:5; and 1 Corinthians 10:1-2. Clearly this experience of God's presence and guidance left a major impression on the nation of Israel.

Beyond that, during the Festival of Tabernacles the miraculous presence of God in the pillar of cloud/fire was memorialized by the lighting of four enormous menorahs, or candelabra, in the temple courtyard. It is claimed in the Mishnah (collection of Jewish oral laws) that the light from these huge menorahs filled Jerusalem with light to the extent that there wasn't a dark courtyard in the city.¹ The lighting of these menorahs would have been a poignant reminder to the worshipers of God's guidance in the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel. Even more significant is that during a particular Festival of Tabernacles, Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). While God led the Israelites through the pillar of cloud/fire during their journey from Egypt to the promised land, followers of Christ now have the assurance of Jesus's divine presence within them in the Person of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11; Gal. 4:6). As we follow Jesus Christ, we will never walk in darkness again. He promises never to leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6), and through Him we have eternal life (John 3:16).



Explore Further

God's guidance in life is vitally important, but acting in obedience to that guidance is important as well. God's guidance is there for our benefit and protection. But without obedience, God's guidance is of little value. Read the article "Obedience" on pages 1176–1177 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. According to the article, what should motivate believers to obey God? What is the relationship between trust in God and obedience to His commands? What does a lack of obedience in the life of a believer indicate? What is the fruit of obedience? Of disobedience? (See Gal. 5:16-25.)

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 206, note 1.