

This is a fitting text for us to consider at the end of Easter Sunday.

Because our text begins with Israel setting out from Egypt  
“on the day *after* the Passover.”

While the Egyptians are burying their firstborn –  
while the gods of Egypt are licking their wounds –  
the people of God go forth triumphantly.

Even so, we are the people of God who go forth in the power of the resurrection of Jesus.

Last time we looked at how Gad and Reuben were called  
to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Joshua.

Tonight, we reflect on the triumph of God over the powers of sin, death, and the devil,  
and we consider what it means for us –  
what it means for those who would follow Jesus.

What do the stages of Israel’s journey teach us?

They teach us first, to remember what God has done in Jesus to redeem us.

They teach us second, to bear the cross with patience.

They teach us third, to trust that God will bring safely us across the Jordan,  
into our glorious inheritance!

### **1. Passover and Israel’s Departure from Egypt (v1-4)**

*These are the stages of the people of Israel, when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. <sup>2</sup> Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the LORD, and these are their stages according to their starting places. <sup>3</sup> They set out from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month. On the day after the Passover, the people of Israel went out triumphantly in the sight of all the Egyptians, <sup>4</sup> while the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, whom the LORD had struck down among them. On their gods also the LORD executed judgments.*

This is the one place in the book of Numbers that identifies Moses as the author.

The rest of the book of Numbers appears to have been written down by someone else.  
But chapter 33 tells us that this one part was definitely written by Moses.

What is more, verse 2 tells us that “Moses wrote down their starting places,  
stage by stage, by command of the LORD.”

The LORD commanded this.

Why would the LORD command such a detailed listing of the *stages* of their travel?

We already have the whole books of Exodus and Numbers to give us the *story* –  
why do we also need a list of places?

When Origen preached a series of sermons on the book of Numbers around the year 200 he rightly pointed out that God does not command useless things!

What is the point of Numbers 33?

Numbers 33 recounts the journey of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land.

The stages of Israel's journey reflect the life of the people of God –  
from slavery in Egypt –  
to passing out of death into life as they cross the Red Sea –  
as they receive God's covenant law at Sinai,  
instructing them in the way they should go,  
as God provides for them in the wilderness –  
even as they grumble against the LORD,  
as they come now to the edge of the Jordan River –  
ready to enter the Promised Land.

Israel has been learning to walk in the way of the LORD.

As we saw last time in Numbers 32 – will Israel follow Joshua?

Will Reuben and Gad deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Yeshua?

Numbers 33 challenges all of God's people throughout all ages.

The stages of Israel's journey through the wilderness reminds the people of God  
that you are called to deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

As Jesus will say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life,

No one comes to the Father, except through me." (John 14:6)

The "stages of the wilderness" could also be called "the Stations of the Cross" –

as Israel is learning to bear the cross –

and as our Lord Jesus Christ would recapitulate Israel's life, death, and exile.

## **2. The Forty-Two Stages: Learning to Bear the Cross (v5-49)**

I have called it the "forty-two stages" – because the two key phrases are both used 42 times.

And they set out – 42 times

And they camped – 42 times

There is an ancient Jewish tradition that says that Israel crossed the Red Sea

at the end of the seventh day after they left Egypt –

but that they only reached the other side of the Sea on the morning of the eighth day.

In other words, the crossing of the Red Sea is portrayed as Israel's resurrection –

their return from the land of dust and death –

which happened on the first day of the new creation!

Likewise, ancient Jewish tradition says that Moses received the Law 50 days after Passover.  
In other words, Moses received the Law on the day of Pentecost.

Which means that from the crossing of the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai is 42 days.

Also, the gospel of Matthew starts with a lengthy genealogy.

There are 14 generations from Abraham to David.

There are 14 generations from David to the Exile.

And there are 14 generations from the Exile to Jesus.

In other words, there are 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus.

Matthew's gospel uses 42 generations to remind us of the story of God's covenant –  
from Abraham to David to the Exile to Jesus.

Matthew is just following a literary device that was used first by Moses.

Indeed, the Hasidic Jews divide the 42 stages of Israel's journey into three sets of 14.

Origen points out that “the sons of Israel by forty-two stages  
reach the beginning of their taking their inheritance...

And so the number of Christ's descent

is established through forty-two fathers according to the flesh,

as through forty-two stages of one who is descending to us.” (p170)

I'm not going to follow Origen's precise exposition,

because I think that he over-emphasizes the individual soul.

He sees Israel's stages as tracing a path for the individual to ascend to God.

I think that it would be more accurate to say

that Numbers shows us the path of the people of God –

and so we need to see – both individually and corporately –

how we are to follow Jesus on this path.

#### **a. From Rameses to Sinai: Water and the Word (v5-15)**

<sup>5</sup> So the people of Israel set out from Rameses and camped at Succoth. <sup>6</sup> And they set out from Succoth and camped at Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness. <sup>7</sup> And they set out from Etham and turned back to Pi-hahiroth, which is east of Baal-zephon, and they camped before Migdol. <sup>8</sup> And they set out from before Hahiroth<sup>[a]</sup> and passed through the midst of the sea into the wilderness, and they went a three days' journey in the wilderness of Etham and camped at Marah. <sup>9</sup> And they set out from Marah and came to Elim; at Elim there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they camped there. <sup>10</sup> And they set out from Elim and camped by the Red Sea.

The first point that we need to see is that Israel's journey begins *after* Passover.

Just like the Christian life begins at Passover – with the resurrection of Jesus!

Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed, *therefore* let us keep the feast.

The Christian walk *starts* with salvation.  
We have been redeemed from Egypt – delivered from bondage and death –  
therefore we walk.

If you were still bound in your sins, then you could not walk!  
You would be enslaved under the dominion of sin and death!  
The only reason that you can walk in the way of our Lord  
is because he has set you free!  
God never says “obey me and then I’ll save you.”  
We would have no hope if God did that!  
Rather, God says, “I have redeemed and delivered you – therefore walk before me.”

The opening stages of Israel’s journey highlight this.

They start from Rameses.

The city of Pi-Ramesses was built between 1290-1250 B.C. –  
it flourished as the capital of Ramesses II,  
but by 1060 B.C. the Pelusiac branch of the Nile began to silt over,  
and the city was left without water, and thus was abandoned.

This suggests an early date for the composition of Numbers 33.

After 900 B.C., there are very few references to the city of Rameses,  
so this provides strong corroboration for a 13<sup>th</sup> century composition date.

But the point is that they start from the city of Pharaoh –  
just as each of us start from the city of man.  
We are born in sin – in bondage to the ruler of this age.

And they journeyed to Succoth – which means “booths” –  
the name of the feast of booths is “Succoth.”  
The Christian life is a life of pilgrimage.

And from Succoth they camped before Migdol (which means, “the stronghold”) –  
a reminder that Israel was not yet escaped from Pharaoh!

It was only when Israel crossed the Red Sea –  
when they passed through the midst of the sea into the wilderness –  
that they left behind the power of Pharaoh –  
with Pharaoh’s armies drowned in the Sea.

But while Israel had escaped Pharaoh,  
while they had been baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,  
they did not yet believe God’s promises.

They came to Marah – which means “bitterness” –  
and at Marah they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter.  
Why did God send them to “bitter waters”?

You know!

Why does God send bitter trials to his children?  
He is testing you – to see whether you will believe his promises!  
Israel failed – because they grumbled against Moses –  
but when Moses cried out to the LORD,  
God had mercy on them in spite of their grumbling,  
and God made the bitter water sweet.

But from Marah they came to Elim,  
“where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees.”  
Yes, sometimes God sends bitter trials to his children to test our faith.  
But other times God sends delight and bounty to his people.  
Twelve springs of water! – one for each tribe!  
Seventy palm trees! – for the 70 elders who would be appointed later  
(And it is only right to remember that Jesus appointed 12 apostles –  
and 70 others to preach the good news)

*<sup>11</sup> And they set out from the Red Sea and camped in the wilderness of Sin. <sup>12</sup> And they set out from the wilderness of Sin and camped at Dophkah. <sup>13</sup> And they set out from Dophkah and camped at Alush. <sup>14</sup> And they set out from Alush and camped at Rephidim, where there was no water for the people to drink. <sup>15</sup> And they set out from Rephidim and camped in the wilderness of Sinai.*

In verse 11 we hear that they camped in the Wilderness of Sin –  
(Sin is simply the Hebrew word – it’s related to the word “Sinai”)  
Exodus 16 tells us that this is where God first sent manna and quail.

In verse 14 we hear that they camped at Rephidim where there was no water  
(as related in Exodus 17).

And finally, in verse 15, we hear that they came to the wilderness of Sinai  
(Exodus 19 – Numbers 10 all take place here).

If you are counting, Sinai is the 11<sup>th</sup> camp.

These first 11 stages take us through the formation of the People of God.  
Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.  
And Israel came to Mt. Sinai where God spoke.  
Israel was cleansed by the washing of water and the word.

And even so,

in Christ, the church has been cleansed by the washing of water with the word.  
We have a new identity in him –  
we have a new community in one another.

And we now journey together as the people of God through the wilderness –  
through trials and tribulations –  
until our Lord Jesus, the great Joshua, leads us into the Promised Land!

**b. From Sinai to Kadesh: Are We There Yet? (v16-36)**

*<sup>16</sup> And they set out from the wilderness of Sinai and camped at Kibroth-hattaavah. <sup>17</sup> And they set out from Kibroth-hattaavah and camped at Hazeroth. <sup>18</sup> And they set out from Hazeroth and camped at Rithmah. <sup>19</sup> And they set out from Rithmah and camped at Rimmon-perez. <sup>20</sup> And they set out from Rimmon-perez and camped at Libnah. <sup>21</sup> And they set out from Libnah and camped at Rissah. <sup>22</sup> And they set out from Rissah and camped at Kehelathah. <sup>23</sup> And they set out from Kehelathah and camped at Mount Shepher. <sup>24</sup> And they set out from Mount Shepher and camped at Haradah. <sup>25</sup> And they set out from Haradah and camped at Makheloth. <sup>26</sup> And they set out from Makheloth and camped at Tahath. <sup>27</sup> And they set out from Tahath and camped at Terah. <sup>28</sup> And they set out from Terah and camped at Mithkah. <sup>29</sup> And they set out from Mithkah and camped at Hashmonah. <sup>30</sup> And they set out from Hashmonah and camped at Moseroth. <sup>31</sup> And they set out from Moseroth and camped at Bene-jaakan. <sup>32</sup> And they set out from Bene-jaakan and camped at Hor-haggidgad. <sup>33</sup> And they set out from Hor-haggidgad and camped at Jotbathah. <sup>34</sup> And they set out from Jotbathah and camped at Abronah. <sup>35</sup> And they set out from Abronah and camped at Ezion-geber. <sup>36</sup> And they set out from Ezion-geber and camped in the wilderness of Zin (that is, Kadesh).*

I've titled verses 16-36 "Are We There Yet?"

This is the long journey from Sinai to Kadesh –  
the journey recounted in Numbers 11-12.

The first two stops are memorable:

we heard about Kibroth Hattaavah in Numbers 11 –  
where the people of Israel had a strong craving,  
and God sent quail – which brought about a plague.

At Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron rebelled –  
and Miriam was struck with leprosy (Numbers 12).

[From Hazeroth to Moseroth (v18-30) we do not know where these locations were.

Deuteronomy 10:6 says that Aaron died at Moseroth.

Numbers 33:38 says that Aaron died at Mount Hor.

Since Israel was wandering in the wilderness over a period of 40 years,  
it is likely that Moseroth was near Mount Hor.]

Kadesh is the 21<sup>st</sup> camp since Sinai (32 over all)

And according to Numbers 20, this is where Miriam died.

Origen tries to find some spiritual meaning in the etymology of the names.

There could be some value in that –

but I think that for us the wiser course is to zoom out and look at the big picture.

Moses makes no reference to the Great Rebellion of Israel at Kadesh.

After all, he's not giving a detailed history –

he is not explaining why Israel takes so long to get to the Promised Land,

he is only tracing the stages of Israel's journey to the Promised Land.

And he's reminding us that it's a long way from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Yes, there's grumbling and disobedience along the way.

But God is faithful.

God will bring his people to the Promised Land.

The Passover was not celebrated in vain!

The resurrection of Jesus was not in vain!

Are we there yet?

No.

Not yet.

But God is faithful.

And he who raised Jesus from the dead will not fail in his promises!

**c. From Kadesh to the Plains of Moab: the Death of Aaron and the Coming of Israel (v37-49)**

<sup>37</sup> *And they set out from Kadesh and camped at Mount Hor, on the edge of the land of Edom.*

And at the 33d camp – 22 since Sinai – Aaron dies

These 11s are getting curious.

Mount Sinai was number 11.

Mount Hor is number 33.

<sup>38</sup> *And Aaron the priest went up Mount Hor at the command of the LORD and died there, in the fortieth year after the people of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, on the first day of the fifth month.* <sup>39</sup> *And Aaron was 123 years old when he died on Mount Hor.*

Certainly Israel's stay at Mount Hor gets a lot of attention in Moses' treatment.

Here at the edge of the land of Edom

Aaron dies – in the 40<sup>th</sup> year after Israel came out of Egypt –

on the first day of the fifth month –

at the age of 123.

And also (verse 40):

<sup>40</sup> *And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negeb in the land of Canaan, heard of the coming of the people of Israel.*

In Numbers 21 we heard of this episode.  
It's not just that the king of Arad "heard" –  
he *fought* against Israel! –  
and lost!  
Israel's first victory over the Canaanites  
is reported immediately after the death of the High Priest.

And from Mount Hor they camped at Zalmonah.  
I think that Psalm 68 recounts this episode.  
Psalm 68, after all, retells the story of the Exodus –  
and speaks of the glory of the LORD at Sinai –  
and how God led his people through the wilderness.  
Verses 11-15 of Psalm 68 recount an obscure moment in redemptive history –  
the vocabulary is hard to fit together –  
but clearly it speaks of the Almighty scattering kings –  
and snow falling on Zalmon.  
The rest of Psalm 68 will then connect the wilderness wanderings  
with Israel's entry into the Land,  
and indeed, the LORD's entry into the Temple of Solomon.

Israel's first triumph over the Canaanites in Numbers 21  
foreshadowed the Lord's final triumph in the ascension of Christ:  
as Paul in Ephesians 4 will apply Psalm 68 to Jesus –  
"when he ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men."

God gives gifts to his church.  
He gave Moses and Aaron to Israel.  
And after Aaron came Eleazar –  
and after Moses came Joshua –  
and in Jesus Christ, God has given first the apostles,  
then the prophets, and evangelists, pastors and teachers.  
God has given us his gifts to lead us and to teach us in his ways.

<sup>41</sup> *And they set out from Mount Hor and camped at Zalmonah.* <sup>42</sup> *And they set out from Zalmonah and camped at Punon.* <sup>43</sup> *And they set out from Punon and camped at Oboth.* <sup>44</sup> *And they set out from Oboth and camped at Iye-abarim, in the territory of Moab.* <sup>45</sup> *And they set out from Iyim and camped at Dibon-gad.* <sup>46</sup> *And they set out from Dibon-gad and camped at Almon-diblathaim.* <sup>47</sup> *And they set out from Almon-diblathaim and camped in the mountains of Abarim, before Nebo.* <sup>48</sup> *And they set out from the mountains of Abarim and camped in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho;* <sup>49</sup> *they camped by the Jordan from Beth-jeshimoth as far as Abel-shittim in*



*the plains of Moab.*

Verses 41-49 then trace the final 9 camps,  
as Israel traveled around the southern edge of Edom, and back up the east side of Edom.

And finally, they camped in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.  
There is a lot of Christian hymnody that speaks of “crossing the Jordan”  
as a picture of entering into our heavenly rest.

“Thine Be the Glory” (#274) concludes:  
“make us more than conquerors, through thy deathless love:  
bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above.”

“There Is a Land of Pure Delight” (#550) has two stanzas that name the Jordan:  
3. Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood stand dressed in living green;  
so to the Jews old Canaan stood, while Jordan rolled between....  
5. O could we make our doubts remove, those gloomy doubts that rise,  
and see the Canaan that we love, with unclouded eyes;  
6. Could we but climb where Moses stood and view the landscape o'er,  
not Jordan's stream, nor death's cold flood, should fright us from the shore.

Perhaps the most famous is “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” (#598)  
3. When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of death, and hell's Destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side;  
songs of praises I will ever give to thee.

All of these hymns capture the basic function of the Jordan River in Numbers.

In the book of Numbers, crossing the Jordan means entering into your inheritance.  
The story here in Numbers 33 is Israel’s journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.  
And that story is retold in the church’s journey from Easter Sunday to the New Creation.  
In the resurrection of Jesus, God has triumphed over sin and death.  
Now, we are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.

### **3. The LORD’s Command on the Plains of Moab: Enter Your Inheritance (v50-56)**

<sup>50</sup> *And the LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying,* <sup>51</sup> *“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan,* <sup>52</sup> *then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places.* <sup>53</sup> *And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it.* <sup>54</sup> *You shall inherit the land by lot according to your clans. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance. Wherever the lot falls for anyone, that shall be his. According to the tribes of your fathers you shall inherit.* <sup>55</sup> *But if*

*you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. <sup>56</sup> And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.”*

Verses 50-56 then describe that entry into the Promised Land.

Israel is the Son of God who is called to drive out the wicked,  
destroy idolatry,  
and inherit the land.

I recently saw the movie, “Noah.”

One of the things that Darren Aronofsky did well in that movie,  
was communicate the idea of the Son of God.

Noah was called to be the second Adam.

He wasn’t called to *save* humanity.

He was called to *be* humanity.

I think we often want to think of Noah as someone  
who tried to convince people to join him on the ark.

But that was not his job!

And in the same way, Israel was not called to *convert* the Canaanites –  
but to destroy them.

Quite frankly, this is why the Jews often thought that the Messiah would destroy the nations.

They saw what happened in the Flood –  
they saw what happened in the Conquest –  
and they thought that this was the pattern for the Nations.

They failed to see what the Prophets had taught –  
that Israel’s failure to do and to be  
all that the Son of God was called to do and to be  
meant that the curse of the nations now lay on Israel.

But that is why Paul says in Galatians 3

[read 3:7-14]

Jesus Christ bore our curse on the cross –

and through his resurrection from the dead, he has triumphed over sin and death –  
therefore “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring,  
heirs according to promise.” (3:29)

While not quoted above, I found this very helpful:

<http://stephanhuller.blogspot.com/2010/07/origens-twenty-seventh-homily-on.html>