

This lesson features selected passages in the book of Numbers that tell us something about the logistics of the children of Israel's journey through the wilderness on their way to the promised land. We discover that they made and broke camp in an orderly fashion and that the presence of the LORD could be seen as a cloud covering the tabernacle. They understood that it was time to break camp and journey to a new location when the cloud rose up from the tabernacle.

Numbers 2:1-2

1 And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, 2 Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the ensign of their father's house: far off about the tabernacle of the congregation shall they pitch.

This chapter in Numbers describes how the camp of the children of Israel was arranged when they arrived at a new location and the order in which they broke camp to set forth to the new location during the forty years in the wilderness. The LORD begins by commanding that each tribe was to camp together with a banner designating the name of their tribe. The tabernacle was setup in the center of the camp, surrounded by the various families of the tribe of Levi. Each of the other tribes was to pitch their tent outside the perimeter formed by the tribe of Levi and had a designated position to camp in relation to the tabernacle. For instance, the tribe of Judah was to camp on the east of the tabernacle, joined by the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun. The other points of the compass also had three tribes assigned to pitch their tent in that direction relative to the tabernacle.

This chapter also describes the order in which the children of Israel broke camp when it was time to travel to the next location in the wilderness. The tribes to the east of the tabernacle broke camp and set forth first, followed by the tribes that camped to the south. The Levites were to take down the tabernacle and pack up everything related to it and set forth after the eastern and southern tribes. Next the tribes camped to the west of the tabernacle packed up and joined the convoy, followed by the tribes to the north.

34 And the children of Israel did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses: so they pitched by their standards, and so they set forward, every one after their families, according to the house of their fathers.

In obedience to the command of the LORD, the children of Israel used this arrangement when they made camp and when they broke camp to travel wherever the LORD led them. The process was done in an orderly fashion so that everyone knew where they were to be and what they were expected to do.

Numbers 9

15 And on the day that the tabernacle was reared up the cloud covered the tabernacle, *namely*, the tent of the testimony: and at even there was upon the tabernacle as it were the appearance of fire, until the morning. 16 So it was alway: the cloud covered it *by day*, and the appearance of fire by night.

These verses tell us that the presence of the LORD enclosed the tabernacle and was visible day and night. The glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle on the first day it was erected and continued to be present throughout Israel's forty year journey through the wilderness (Ex. 40:34-38). During the day the LORD's presence could be seen as a cloud covering the tabernacle and at night it was seen as fire (no doubt similar to the fire of the burning bush in Ex. 3:2). As the next verses describe, the visible presence of the LORD was how the children of Israel recognized when it was time to break camp for the next leg of their journey. The tabernacle is also described as "the tent of the testimony" because within the ark of the covenant inside the tabernacle was the stone tablets on which the law was written. This law was called the testimony because it was part of the covenant that Israel had made with the LORD and testified to their part of the covenant, which was obedience to the law of the LORD (Ex. 24:3-8, 25:21-22).

17 And when the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, then after that the children of Israel journeyed: and in the place where the cloud abode, there the children of Israel pitched their tents.

Being able to see the manifestation of the presence of the LORD enabled the children of Israel to recognize when the LORD was leading them to a new location. They simply followed the cloud through the wilderness. Where it stopped, they stopped and made camp. The Levites set up the tabernacle and when the priests placed the ark and the other articles of furniture in their places in and around the tabernacle, the presence of the LORD would again fill the tabernacle. When it was time to move to a new location the cloud would rise up from the tabernacle as a signal to the children of Israel.

18 At the commandment of the LORD the children of Israel journeyed, and at the commandment of the LORD they pitched: as long as the cloud abode upon the tabernacle they rested in their tents.

The movement of the cloud is described as "the commandment of the LORD" and they obeyed by going wherever the LORD commanded through the behavior of the cloud. Their route through the wilderness was not one chosen by Moses or the people. They simply followed wherever and whenever the LORD chose to lead them.

Numbers 10:1-10: The LORD commands Moses to make two silver trumpets to be used for various purposes. They were to be used to call assemblies among the leaders of the tribes or the entire congregation of Israel, depending on whether or not one or both trumpets were blown. The trumpets were also to be used to guide the orderly breaking of camp according to the instructions given in Numbers 2. When an enemy attacked then the trumpets were to be used to sound an alarm to the people to prepare to fight as well as calling on the LORD to defend them. The trumpets were also to be used during offerings made on holidays throughout the year.

Numbers 10:11-28: Thirteen months after leaving Egypt (and eleven months at Sinai), the cloud of the presence of the LORD lifts up from the tabernacle to signal that it was time to leave Mt. Sinai and set off on their journey to Canaan. The children of Israel pack up and leave in an orderly fashion according to the instructions given in Numbers 2.

Numbers 10:29-32: Moses urges his brother-in-law Hobab to go with Israel in their journey to the promised land so that he could act as a guide, with the reward of being able to share in the LORD's blessings. The text does not explicitly state that Hobab agrees, but the absence of further protest from the man implies that he did.

Numbers 10

35 And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee. 36 And when it rested, he said, Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.

Verses 33-34 describe how that the children of Israel traveled away from Mt. Sinai about three day's journey. It says the ark led the procession "to search out a resting place for them." Commentators suggest that the cloud of the LORD's presence may have hovered over the ark as the priests carrying it followed the cloud wherever the LORD led them.

"And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said" – It is not clear if this prayer of Moses was uttered every time they began a new leg of their journey or only on this initial time. It's likely, however, that he did do so every time the ark led the procession of the people out to a new location.

"Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee" – Moses seems to be praying that the LORD would clear any enemies and dangers from path of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness. The awesome power of the LORD's presence would intimidate and defeat those who would attempt to interfere with the His plans to bring Israel safely to the land of Canaan.

"And when it rested, he said, Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel" – Once a new campsite had been identified, Moses asks that the LORD would move from being in front of the children of Israel's caravan and return to the center of the camp, where He would dwell among His people.

The children of Israel had the visible manifestation of the presence of the LORD to guide them through the wilderness. Today, the LORD does not provide us with something visible to follow as we journey through the wilderness of the world. However, we have something better than what the children of Israel had. We have the completed revelation of scripture (the Bible) to study and learn God's will. We also have the Holy Spirit residing within us as born-again believers to help us use the scripture to discern God's will.

2 Tim. 3:16-17 *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."*

John. 14:26 *"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."*

John 16:13-14 *"Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you."*