

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS CHAPTER 33

In this chapter we have,

I. A particular account of the removals and encampments of the children of Israel, from their escape out of Egypt to their entrance into Canaan, forty two in all, with some remarkable events that happened at some of those places, **#Nu 33:1-49**.

II. A strict command given them to drive out all the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, which they were not going to conquer and take possession of, **#Nu 33:50-56**. So that the former part of the chapter looks back upon their march through the wilderness, the latter looks forward to their settlement in Canaan.

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 49.

This is a review and brief rehearsal of the travels of the children of Israel through the wilderness. It was a memorable history and well worthy to be thus abridged, and the abridgment thus preserved, to the honour of God that led them and for the encouragement of the generations that followed. Observe here,

I. How the account was kept: *Moses wrote their goings out*, **#Nu 33:2**. When they began this tedious march, God ordered him to keep a journal or diary, and to insert in it all the remarkable occurrences of their way, that it might be a satisfaction to himself in the review and an instruction to others when it should be published. It may be of good use to private Christians, but especially to those in public stations, to preserve in writing an account of the providences of God concerning them, the constant series of mercies they have experienced, especially those turns and changes which have made some days of their lives more remarkable. Our memories are deceitful and need this help, that we may *remember all the way which the Lord our God has led us in this wilderness*, **#De 8:2**.

II. What the account itself was. It began with their departure out of Egypt, continued with their march through the wilderness, and ended in the plains of Moab, where they now lay encamped.

1. Some things are observed here concerning their departure out of Egypt, which they are reminded of upon all occasions, as a work of wonder never to be forgotten.

(1.) That they *went forth with their armies* (**#Nu 33:1**), rank and file, as an army with banners.

(2.) Under the hand of Moses and Aaron, their guides, overseers, and rulers, under God.

(3.) *With a high hand*, because God's hand was high that wrought for them, *and in the sight of all the Egyptians*, **#Nu 33:3**. They did not steal away clandestinely (**#Isa 52:12**), but in defiance of their enemies, to whom God had made them such a burdensome stone that they neither could, nor would, nor durst, oppose them.

(4.) They went forth while the Egyptians were burying, or at least preparing to bury, their first-born, **#Nu 33:4**. They had a mind good enough, or rather bad enough, still to have detained the Israelites their prisoners, but God found them other work to do. They would have God's first-born buried alive, but God set them a burying their own first-born.

(5.) To all the plagues of Egypt it is added here that *on their gods also the Lord executed judgments*. Their idols which they worshipped, it is probable, were broken down, as Dagon

afterwards before the ark, so that they could not consult them about this great affair. To this perhaps there is reference, **#Isa 19:1**, *The idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence.*

2. Concerning their travels towards Canaan. Observe,

(1.) They were continually upon the remove. When they had pitched a little while in one place they departed from that to another. Such is our state in this world; we have here no continuing city.

(2.) Most of their way lay through a wilderness, uninhabited, untracked, unfurnished even with the necessaries of human life, which magnifies the wisdom and power of God, by whose wonderful conduct and bounty the thousands of Israel not only subsisted for forty years in that desolate place, but came out at least as numerous and vigorous as they went in. At first they pitched *in the edge of the wilderness* (**#Nu 33:6**), but afterwards in the heart of it; by less difficulties God prepares his people for greater. We find them in the wilderness of Etham (**#Nu 33:8**), of Sin (**#Nu 33:11**), of Sinai, **#Nu 33:15**. Our removals in this world are but from one wilderness to another.

(3.) They were led to and fro, forward and backward, as in a maze or labyrinth, and yet were all the while under the direction of the pillar of cloud and fire. He led them about (**#De 33:10**), and yet led them the right way, **#Ps 107:7**. The way which God takes in bringing his people to himself is always the best way, though it does not always seem to us the nearest way.

(4.) Some events are mentioned in this journal, as their want of water at Rephidim (**#Nu 33:14**), the death of Aaron (**#Nu 33:38,39**), the insult of Arad (**#Nu 33:40**); and the very name of *Kibroth-hattaavah--the graves of lusts* (**#Nu 33:16**), has a story depending upon it. Thus we ought to keep in mind the providences of God concerning us and our families, us and our land, and the many instances of that divine care which has led us, and fed us, and kept us, all our days hitherto. Shittim, the place where the people sinned in the matter of Peor (**#Nu 25:1**), is here called *Abel-shittim*. *Abel* signifies *mourning* (as **#Ge 50:11**), and probably this place was so called from the mourning of the good people of Israel on account of that sin and of God's wrath against them for it. It was so great a mourning that it gave a name to the place.

Ver. 50. thru Ver. 56.

While the children of Israel were in the wilderness their total separation from all other people kept them out of the way of temptation to idolatry, and perhaps this was one thing intended by their long confinement in the wilderness, that thereby the idols of Egypt might be forgotten, and the people aired (as it were) and purified from that infection, and the generation that entered Canaan might be such as never knew those depths of Satan. But now that they were to pass over Jordan they were entering again into that temptation, and therefore,

1. They are here strictly charged utterly to destroy all remnants of idolatry. They must not only *drive out the inhabitants of the land*, that they may possess their country, but they must deface all their idolatrous pictures and images, and *pull down all their high places*, **#Nu 33:52**. They must not preserve any of them, no, not as monuments of antiquity to gratify the curious, nor as ornaments of their houses, nor toys for their children to play with, but they must destroy all, both in token of their abhorrence and detestation of idolatry and to prevent their being tempted to worship those images, and the false gods represented by them, or to worship the God of Israel by such

images or representations.

2. They were assured that, if they did so, God would by degrees put them in full possession of the land of promise, **#Nu 33:53,54**. If they would keep themselves pure from the idols of Canaan, God would enrich them with the wealth of Canaan. Learn not their way, and then fear not their power.

3. They were threatened that, if they spared either the idols or the idolaters, they should be beaten with their own rod and their sin would certainly be their punishment.

(1.) They would foster snakes in their own bosoms, **#Nu 33:55**. The remnant of the Canaanites, if they made any league with them, though it were but a cessation of arms, would be *pricks in their eyes and thorns in their sides*, that is, they would be upon all occasions vexatious to them, insulting them, robbing them, and, to the utmost of their power, making mischief among them. We must expect trouble and affliction from that, whatever it is, which we sinfully indulge; that which we are willing should tempt us we shall find will vex us.

(2.) The righteous God would turn that wheel upon the Israelites which was to have crushed the Canaanites: *I shall do to you as I thought to do unto them*, **#Nu 33:56**. It was intended that the Canaanites should be dispossessed; but if the Israelites fell in with them, and learned their way, they should be dispossessed, for God's displeasure would justly be greater against them than against the Canaanites themselves. Let us hear this, and fear. If we do not drive sin out, sin will drive us out; if we be not the death of our lusts, our lusts will be the death of our souls.