

11 Traits of Those Who Walk with God — Part 3 of 3

Numbers 32–36

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Pastor Trent Eastman | New Baptist Church, Huntington, West Virginia

Introduction

Today is our last message on the book of Numbers, and for me personally it has been a very rich study. We have been in this book since April. Numbers is the story of the people of Israel — recently delivered from Egypt, now moving toward the promised land. A great deal happens in these pages. They dedicate the tabernacle, learn to live in covenant with God, organize themselves as tribes around that tabernacle, and discover what it means to depend on Him for everything. Much of the book is focused either on the journey toward the promised land or on life in the wilderness while waiting to enter it.

That changes when we reach Numbers 26. From that point forward, everything is oriented toward living in the promised land within the covenantal relationship with God. If you have ever read a fairy tale, you know how many of them end with the words “and they lived happily ever after.” Numbers 26–36 is that part of the story — the instructions for how they will live happily ever after. What will the rest of their life look like, lived out in faithfulness?

This question caught my attention deeply. I believe that possibly the greatest weakness of Christian teaching today is the absence of clear, grounded instruction on what it actually means — what it actually looks like — to live daily in Jesus, as a person of God, without sliding off into legalism, antinomianism, or Gnosticism. That is the focus of this series. What are the traits of those who walk with God? What does our happily ever after look like?

And when I say “walk with God,” I mean the ongoing, daily fellowship with God. How does being in fellowship with God change a person? Numbers 26–36 gives us answers. Granted, we live in a very different culture than that of 3,500 years ago, and we are living under the New Covenant, not the Mosaic covenant. There are real and significant differences between us and the ancient Israelites. But there are traits — characteristics, qualities — embedded in these instructions that are applicable to us today as God’s people. That is what this series has been about.

A Brief Review: The First Seven Traits

In our first two messages, we identified seven traits of those who walk with God.

Those who walk with God do so in community (Numbers 26). The Christian faith is lived out in community — both corporately as the church and privately in terms of friendship and fellowship. Those who walk with God trust the Lord daily (Numbers 27:12–14). Following Jesus means trusting Him for our needs, our situations, our strength, our joy — everything. Those who walk with God have surrendered themselves to the Lord (Numbers 27:15–23). They look to His will being done over and above their own. Those who walk with God practice a daily rhythm of praise and adoration (Numbers 28–29). Those who walk with God are generous (Numbers 28–29). Those who walk with God are people of integrity (Numbers 30 and 32). And those who walk with God are victorious (Numbers 31).

Today we look at the final four.

Trait Eight: Those Who Walk with God Do So Through the Righteousness of Christ, Not Their Own

I am drawing this from Numbers 33, which is a travel log of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. Before I make the jump to what I mean by living in the righteousness of Christ, I want first to describe this chapter and its theological significance.

The journey began in Egypt — the place of bondage. We read beginning at Numbers 33:1:

“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. Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the LORD, and these are their stages according to their starting places. 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, while the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, whom the LORD had struck down among them. On their gods also the LORD executed judgments.”
(Numbers 33:1–4)

From there the text traces their travel to the Red Sea — crossing it, then pressing on to Mount Sinai (vv. 5–15). Then come forty years of movement through the wilderness (vv. 16–35), with the locations of the great rebellions conspicuously omitted. Finally, in the fortieth year, they travel to the staging area for entry into the promised land (vv. 36–49):

“And they set out from the mountains of Abarim and camped in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho; they camped by the Jordan from Beth-jeshimoth as far as Abel-shittim in the plains of Moab.” (Numbers 33:48–49)

The journey is over. The remainder of the chapter consists of the Lord’s instructions to Moses regarding how they are to enter the land, drive out its inhabitants, destroy its idols, and settle it by clans. Verse 53 reads:

“And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it.”

The theological importance of this chapter is straightforward. It is a historical reporting of the acts of God that brought a people who were living as slaves in Egypt into a new land that He gives them. “For I have given the land to you to possess it.” The people of Israel escaped bondage, journeyed through the wilderness, and now will possess the land — not because of their might, their power, or their wisdom. They did not escape slavery and arrive at this new land because they unlocked the secrets of the universe, or perfected a theology of God, or discovered some superior technology. They arrived here through the historical workings of God. That is the theology. And it is precisely this theology that connects to us.

We are not here today because of a common philosophy or a self-help program. We are not here because we share a common culture, or to trumpet the wonderful things we have done. We are here for one reason: the historical working of God in this world through Jesus Christ.

We are here because Jesus is God made flesh. He lived among us as the fullness of God’s being, full of grace and truth. He died a horrible death on a Roman cross — a death that was substitutionary for all of us. It is through His death that our sins are dealt with and we are forgiven. And Jesus rose again — not metaphorically, but literally. The tomb broke open and Jesus stepped out. He met His disciples and many others, and He ascended into heaven, where He now intercedes on our behalf. These are things that happened in history.

And it is by these historical events that we are saved today and enjoy fellowship with God. We walk with God not because we have all the answers, or hold the right philosophy or theology, or because we follow the law perfectly. We walk with God not by our own righteousness — not by anything we do — but by Christ’s righteousness, by what He has done. This is what I mean: those who walk with God do so through the righteousness of Christ and not their own. We rely upon, we depend upon, we live by the historical working of God in this world. And that working of God is the righteousness of Christ.

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” (Philippians 3:8–9)

Trait Nine: Those Who Walk with God Do So Through the Gift of the Holy Spirit

We are not only saved by and dependent upon God’s work through Christ — we are also dependent upon God’s ongoing work in our lives through His Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the gift God gives to all who believe in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, *“no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit”* (1 Corinthians 12:3). One way I find it helpful to think about our God — Father, Son, and Spirit — is this: the Father above, the Son beside, and the Spirit inside.

“And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5)

I connect this gift of the Holy Spirit to the text of Numbers 34. In that chapter, the land the Lord is giving to His people is defined by its boundaries — the southern border, the western coast, the northern extent, and the eastern border. This land was the promise God made to Abraham. It was the promise Moses recalled before the people while they were still in Egypt. The land has been the focal point of all their journeys and is central to understanding what it means to live under the law. The land is the gift God gave to Israel according to His covenant with them — what we call the Old Covenant, the Mosaic covenant.

But through the prophets, the Lord promised something more. He promised a new covenant in which His Spirit — the Holy Spirit — would be poured out upon both sons and daughters. The prophet Joel spoke these words six hundred years before Jesus:

“You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame. And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” (Joel 2:27–32)

The Holy Spirit is God’s ongoing presence and work within us. Just as the land was the covenant gift God gave to ancient Israel, the Holy Spirit is the covenant gift He gives to us. Those who walk with God do so through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Trait Ten: Those Who Walk with God Point Others to Jesus

Numbers 35 introduces us to what are called the cities of refuge.

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment.’” (Numbers 35:9–12)

These cities of refuge are a significant institution. In the ancient world — and even in many parts of the world today — whole communities destroy themselves through cycles of revenge. If someone was killed, that person’s family bore a responsibility to avenge the death. It did not matter how or why it happened; what mattered was that the death be avenged. You can imagine how such a system would lead to communities tearing themselves apart, with each new death requiring yet another act of vengeance. The cities of refuge provided a critical interruption in those cycles. If a death was the result of first-degree murder, the punishment was death. But if the death was accidental, the city of refuge provided a way for the manslayer to escape and live. Six cities were selected across the land, distributed so that no part of the country was unreasonably far from one. If a person who had caused an accidental death could make it to one of those cities, the avenger of blood could not touch him.

As wonderful as this system was, it had an obvious vulnerability: the accidental manslayer had to make it to the city first. This is the stuff that great stories are made of. Imagine a man living in the far southern reaches of the land. The nearest city of refuge might be Hebron — eighty miles away over rough terrain — and the family of the dead man is in pursuit. What did the people of Israel do in response? They kept the roads to those cities in the best possible condition. They maintained the paths, cleared the obstacles, and posted clear markings showing the way. The road to the city of refuge was the best road in the land, because it was the road that saved lives.

Now imagine that you lived in that time, and a friend came to you in a panic. He had been chopping wood when the axe head flew off and struck another man, killing him. Accidental — but the dead man’s family is already looking for him. What do you tell your friend? Do you say, “Come inside, let’s have a cup of tea — don’t worry, it will all sort itself out”? I hope not. I hope you would say, “Run. Get out of here as fast as you can.” And I think you would do everything possible to point him toward that road to the city of refuge. You might even travel with him.

It is not difficult to see how these cities of refuge are a profound image of Jesus. A person escapes sin and death by finding refuge in Him. He is our city of refuge — not only for our accidental failings, but for the sins we knowingly commit as well. *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.”* He is our Savior, and He says to you and to me:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25–26)

He is our city of refuge.

Now imagine that a friend comes to you and says, “I feel so lost. I have no purpose. I am weighted down and broken by the things I have done. I am hurting, I am alone, I am afraid, and I don’t know what to do.” What do you say? Do you offer tea and empty reassurance? No. You say: run to Jesus. He is the city of refuge you need. You point your friend to Him.

And pointing to Jesus does not only happen in moments of crisis. Just as the ancient Israelites maintained the roads and put up signs showing people the way, so are we to do. We are to keep the roads that lead people to Jesus clear, well-marked, and free of obstacles. I do not have time today to unpack all that imagery fully, but I will say this: I think the greatest obstacle we must remove is our habit of making the signs point to ourselves. If we are always pointing to ourselves — our programs, our cleverness, our achievements — we are not pointing people to Jesus. We are not the solvers of problems. We are not the cities of refuge. We don’t fix people. Jesus does. Those who walk with God point others to Jesus.

Trait Eleven: Those Who Walk with God Guard the Treasure Entrusted to Them

And now we come to the eleventh and final trait of those who walk with God, drawn from the closing chapter of Numbers.

“By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.” (2 Timothy 1:14)

The treasure entrusted to us is the gospel of Jesus Christ — the message we have heard, the truth we hold, the life we have been given.

The book of Numbers ends with a problem. Back in Numbers 27, the daughters of Zelophehad — Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah — came to Moses with a petition. Their father had died leaving no sons, and they requested that they receive his inheritance. The Lord affirmed their request: they were right, and Moses was to give them their father’s inheritance. But in Numbers 36, the final chapter, the leaders of the clan of Manasseh raise a difficulty. If these women marry men from another tribe — say, the tribe of Judah — then their sons will inherit the land through their fathers’ tribe, and land that had belonged to Manasseh will effectively transfer to Judah. The problem is stated plainly in verse 3:

“But if they are married to any of the sons of the other tribes of the people of Israel, then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our fathers and added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry. So it will be taken away from the lot of our inheritance.” (Numbers 36:3)

They bring this concern to Moses because they are protecting what has been given to them. The solution was for the daughters to marry whomever they wished — but within the tribe of Manasseh. And if you are concerned that this placed an undue restriction on them, you may recall that the census of Manasseh recorded 52,700 men above the age of twenty. They would do just fine.

What a remarkable way to close the book of Numbers — with the guarding of an inheritance.

If you are in Christ, you are entrusted with the greatest treasure this world knows. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe this treasure includes the Word of God, the Bible — and we are to guard it, which means above all else treasuring it in our hearts. It includes the church, our community of faith — and we are to guard it. It includes the message of salvation through faith in Christ and not by works — and we are to guard this message, and to push back whenever we hear the whisper of legalism. And we are to guard this treasure by entrusting it to the generation that follows us. We are to give it to the young, making sure they know the road that leads to the city of refuge — so that they, too, may lay hold of the hope set before them.

Conclusion: How Shall We Live Happily Ever After?

So here, drawn from the last eleven chapters of Numbers, are the eleven traits of those who walk with God.

Those who walk with God do so in community. Those who walk with God trust the Lord daily. Those who walk with God have surrendered themselves to the Lord. Those who walk with God practice a daily rhythm of praise and adoration. Those who walk with God are generous. Those who walk with God are people of integrity. Those who walk with God are victorious. Those who walk with God do so through the righteousness of Christ and not their own. Those who walk with God do so through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Those who walk with God point others to Jesus. And those who walk with God guard the treasure entrusted to them.

This is what our happily ever after looks like. Not a life of ease, but a life of faithfulness — lived in community, in surrender, in dependence on Christ's righteousness and the Spirit's power, pointing others toward the city of refuge, and guarding the inheritance we have been given.

Amen.