

“GOING SOMEWHERE”

Numbers 10:11-34

THEME: A successful church.

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What makes a church successful? Size, numbers, programs, finances, successful people, technology, style of worship? Is it even appropriate to think in terms of success? Doesn't God just want us to be faithful—to do our best?

You can massage semantics and make faithfulness and success mean practically the same thing.

But God wants his people who are called by his name to succeed in accomplishing his purpose for his people. In fact, he has given his people everything they need to succeed.

The Apostle Peter wrote: *'His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.'* (2 Peter 1:3)

It's not enough to do our best. Nothing less than what God wants is acceptable.

If I say it like that you can't really argue against it. But do we take it seriously?

- So how do we go about succeeding as a church?

What is God's purpose for his church? Our Mission Statement captures the essence of it: "The mission of First Evangelical Free Church is to bring people into a life changing and growing relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord."

That's what glorifies God. If we really do love God, then we'll be devoted to his will.

God measures our success as a church by our performance against his purpose for us.

- But you may object, "God doesn't measure us by our performance; he measures us by Christ's performance. John, you're confusing grace and works."

I'm not confusing anything. I'm clarifying.

It's true that no one can 'perform' so well that God will say, "Well done. Your deeds have made you successful in my sight."

No! Our right relationship with God is by his grace through faith in his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Christ succeeded for us.

But still, Christ has established an agenda in this world for his church. It's specific and clear. And Christ our Lord measures his church's performance.

- The first 3 chapters of the Book of Revelation contain Christ's performance appraisal of seven churches in Asia. He referred to the churches as lampstands among which he was standing.

In his appraisal of the first of those seven churches he said this, *'I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.'* (Revelation 2:2-5)

That's what our Lord says to all his churches everywhere: "Stick to my agenda as your highest commitment—your first love. My continued presence with you depends on this."

The Book of Numbers shows us Israel's performance alongside the goal God had set for it. At times God dealt severely with his people when they set aside his purpose. We also see a patient God dealing with an infant nation.

Here's just a brief overview Israel's history up to the point where we meet the nation in our text today—Numbers chapter 10.

The people of Israel had lived for 430 years in Egypt, most of that time as abused slaves consigned to heavy labor. After Israel's dramatic deliverance by God's mighty power, they arrived at the desert of Sinai—two million strong.

- While in Egypt the Israelites had practically no knowledge of the Lord God.

The plagues that God inflicted upon the Egyptians to make them let the Israelites go were actually Israel's introduction to the Lord their God. God was so new to them.

Then once again the Lord God amazed the Israelites when he destroyed the Egyptian army in the Red Sea: *'And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.'* (Exodus 14:31)

Believing in the Lord God was brand new for them. They still had so much to learn. They stayed at Mount Sinai for eleven months, learning what it meant to be God’s people. Then it was time to move.

- God had a great plan for his people. He would lead them to their promised inheritance—the promised land. God would give them success if they obeyed him. Camping in the desert of Sinai or drifting through the wilderness was not success.
- What relevance do these events have to First Free Church today? We must be careful not to ‘spiritualize’ the Scriptures and stretch them out to mean something for us that God never intended.

The Apostle Paul said the events in the Book of Numbers do so have a lot to do with the church. He wrote this: *‘Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. . . These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.’* (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11.)

What were “these things” that Paul spoke of here? They were the events reported in the Book of Numbers. These are important lessons for us from the Old Testament experiences of Israel on its way to the Promised Land.

- What is God’s agenda for the church of our Lord Jesus Christ today? It’s to bring his kingdom to people—his reign, his rule, as people acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord.

As God’s people today we give people everywhere the good news that rescues people from the kingdom of darkness and brings them into the kingdom of God’s Son, Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:13)

We are a spiritual invasion force commissioned and mobilized to rescue people from the devil’s evil, dark spiritual domain.

That’s what we’re here for. We’ve got somewhere to go and something to do. Let’s get on with it.

This account in Numbers 10 points out a couple of **simple principles** that will help us to move ahead as a church.

I. ORGANIZE OURSELVES (10:11-28)

For the Israelites, camping at the foot of a desert mountain was not a vacation in paradise. But they were not slaves any more, so life was far better than it had ever been for them. They didn’t have to endure long days of hard labor under cruel taskmasters.

- Nearly fourteen months after their exodus from Egypt and about eleven months after their arrival at Mt. Sinai Israel set out. They had somewhere to go.

They were well organized, and the Lord used a cloud to lead them.

¹¹ *On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the Testimony.*

¹² *Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai . . .*

¹³ *They set out, this first time, at the LORD’s command through Moses.*

¹⁴ *The divisions of the camp of Judah went first, . . .*

Following the tribe of Judah were the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun.

The Levites went next, carrying the tabernacle—the tent of meeting.

Then after another three tribes (Reuben, Simeon, and Gad) the Kohathite clan of the Levites carried the holy things, such as the Ark of the Covenant that were housed in the tabernacle.

After that, three more tribes (Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin) set out, and finally the tribes of Dan, Asher, and Naphtali brought up the rear guard.

²⁸ *This was the order of march for the Israelite divisions as they set out.*

It was a massive project to move two million newly-emancipated slaves to their promised homeland.

- Much of the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, and early chapters of Numbers detail all the training and preparation that Israel underwent during the year at Sinai.

A huge organizational machine had to be kept running smoothly.

It was a lean machine. There were no “administrivia.” There was no overbearing bureaucracy.

Moses had learned the hard way that he needed to delegate a lot of responsibility and authority to others (Exodus 18:13-26).

God designed every procedure and every regulation, not to keep his people busy, but to enable them to reach their goal—to succeed.

- Experts in organizational dynamics warn us that as an organization gets old most of the decisions and actions go toward just keeping the organizational machinery running (Kharasch’s Institutional Imperative). When that happens the purpose of the organization is practically lost.

First Free Church has been in existence for 123 years. We are reviewing our organizational structure and our governance documents. We have solicited and received many varying proposals.

Let us remember that our goal is not to keep organizational machinery running, but to organize ourselves in the way that will help us most to succeed in our God-given mission.

Organization is important. It’s supposed to help us succeed, not cause us to fail.

[2nd principle to help us succeed]

II. WELCOME OTHERS (10:29-34)

No church is so well organized and focused that it doesn’t need new people with fresh perspectives.

- Israel was well organized when the nation started out for the Promised Land, but there was a need for wise day-to-day decision making.

Moses had a relative by marriage from the time when he had lived in Midian after fleeing from Pharaoh’s palace (Exodus 2:11-23).

This relative, named Hobab, was a man of the desert, gifted with the practical wisdom that would be helpful to the Israelites as they moved toward their promised homeland

Moses wanted Hobab to come along with them.

So Moses tried to talk him into it. *‘Babby, ol’ buddy. Have I got a deal for you. It’s a sure thing. The Lord has promised Israel a fantastic homeland, flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:17). Come along with us and we’ll cut you and the clan in. You won’t regret it.*

What did Babby, or Hobab, say? *‘Wow Mo! You mean it? You really want the whole family to come along? Let me go and pack.’*

No, that’s not how it happened. Hobab said, *‘Thanks. But no thanks. You guys go ahead. We’ll miss you, but we’re going back to our clan to settle down.’*

- Let me read it to you:

²⁹ *Now Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses’ father-in-law, “We are setting out for the place about which the LORD said, ‘I will give it to you.’ Come with us and we will treat you well, for the LORD has promised good things to Israel.”*

³⁰ *He answered, “No, I will not go; I am going back to my own land and my own people.”*

I think Hobab realized how unmanageable the situation was. Did he want to join 2 million refugees roaming through the desert? That was a sure recipe for disaster.

Moses couldn’t bamboozle Hobab. So he had to use an honest approach:

³¹ *But Moses said, “Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes.*

³² *If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the LORD gives us.”*

Moses said: “We need you. Help us as we set out in obedience to the Lord God. Come, be one of us and help us to succeed.”

- Did Israel really need Hobab? Israel didn’t need a desert guide. The Lord’s cloud was guiding them. But there were evidently many ways a desert man like Hobab could help them deal with the uniqueness of the wilderness.

Divine guidance doesn’t rule out the need for wisdom in the particulars.

³³ *So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest.*

³⁴ *The cloud of the LORD was over them by day when they set out from the camp.*

It seems that Hobab responded to Moses’ honest appeal that he needed him. In the Book of Judges we read that Moses’ relatives by marriage were living among the people of the tribe of Judah (Judges 1:16).

Hobab and his family joined the Israelites because he was welcomed and told that he was needed.

- Many good people today are willing to join a church if they believe the church is not just content to keep the organizational machinery running smoothly, but if that congregation is sincerely committed to moving ahead with God’s agenda and making a difference.

I think we do quite well in welcoming people who are new to us.

We must also prove to them that above all we want to succeed in fulfilling God’s purpose for us. We need them if they’re willing to help us in the unique way that God has gifted them.

How much do you care about First Free being who God has called us to be and doing what God has commissioned us to do?

We are to be his people. What does that mean? It means we are not slaves bound up in fear and guilt. We have freedom to live with the fullness of God’s joy and peace that are contagious.

Are we going anywhere as a church? Are we ready to move ahead? We know what it means to live under God’s reign. We’re committed to obeying his will, and we want to invite others to join us.

All around us are people who need our love and compassion. Yes, there’s work to do here in the church, but don’t get so involved here that you don’t do any good out there. That’s where we’re needed.

- If you have people that report to you at work, are you fair? Do you treat them with honor? Are you different enough in your values that Christ’s love can reach them through you?

It’s easy to join a project or program with other Christians. That’s good.

But it’s much more important to ask the tough question: how do you relate to people in the normal routines of living and working. That’s where you can make your biggest impact—by the way you live.

Do you make Jesus Christ attractive to people who don’t know him? Do they see that you have something in your life that they’d like to have?

That’s where we become successful as a church. Out there, not here in this building.

- How about getting on your knees with your Bible open at Galatians 5:16-26 open and asking the Holy Spirit to fill you so that you will live the full life God wants you to live and relate to people in a way that makes Christ attractive to them?

Do your neighbors love you? I didn’t ask if you love them. The proof that you love them is their love for you.

There are lots of people who will join us if they know that we’re not just a religious organization that is only concerned about keeping itself going.

We can show them that they are welcome and we have a place for them where they can fit in and get involved in making a difference in the world.