

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 8: The Book of Numbers, Part I

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

Between Exodus and Numbers a period of about a month passes and The Book of Leviticus takes place. In contrast, the events recounted in Numbers take about 38 years.

Numbers gets its name from the first census (numbering) in the first chapter and the second census in chapter 26. In Numbers 33 it is called a "roll call." Called Arithmoi in the Septuagint, which means Arithmetic or Numbers, its name carried over to our present translations.

It is interesting to note that the generations numbered at the beginning are not the same as those numbered at the end. Why? Because of the failure of the people of Israel to press on into Canaan and possess the "Promised Land" when God offered it to them.

The book begins with the movement of the camp and Tabernacle from Mt. Sinai and only after 38 years of wandering in the wilderness. This is the journey from Sinai to Moab, on the border of Canaan.

One thing to remember about the Book of Numbers throughout this study is: God had a perfect and direct way through the wilderness to bring His people immediate possession of the "Promised Land." Unbelief robbed His people of that pleasure. From beginning, almost to the end, it is pervaded by a spirit of rebellion which grieved God so much.

Psalm 95:10 -- *"Forty years long was I grieved with this generation."*

This is another chance for us to point our fingers and say: "What stupid people these Hebrews are." God gives and gives and gives, and they gripe and gripe and gripe.

BUT WAIT: Do I walk my daily journey through this "foreign land" listening to and obeying God, or do I constantly try to do it myself? Do I admit that God can meet my needs in the wilderness and also defeat the fortified cities and giants in my life, or do I choose to run?

Whereas the lessons in Leviticus are broad and typical, the lessons in Numbers are clear and practical. And, their impact didn't end there. In Corinthians 10 we are told that these things that happened to them happened as "examples unto us." Their history is an object lesson for us illustrating Gods desires and dealings with His chosen people, old or new Covenant.

Fortunately, Numbers is not just negative. In fact, you notice it ends with a repentant return to Jehovah and a final victory under the great leadership of Joshua and Caleb. But, the question remains:

Why was God so patient with them? He made an unconditional covenant with them:

1. A Special Land; 2. A Special People; 3. A Special Witness

Why is God so patient with us? He made a new covenant with us: *"He that begun a good work in you shall complete it."*—Philippians 1: 6

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Homework:

READ: Finish or re-read the Book of Numbers

THINK: Have I fought God as he tried to move me into new uncharted territory in my life?

APPLY: Can I yield myself to be obedient to what I know God wants to do in my life, even for just one week?

Bible Survey Lesson 9: The Book of Numbers, Part II

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

It is interesting to notice that the distance between Mt. Sinai to Kadesh-barnea is about 150 to 200 miles, about an 11 day journey according to Deuteronomy 1:2. Then they spent 40 years on a journey that should have taken, at most 40 days, ending up back where they started, in Kadesh-barnea. Why? Unbelief! They refused to go in and take the "Promised Land." To me, one supreme message of Number is that unbelief in following God will lead to frustration and lack of progress in our lives. God speaks to Moses in the Tabernacle (vs. 1) and orders a census.

I. OLD GENERATION (CHAPTERS 1-19)

The first part of Numbers deals with a generation of Hebrews who had experienced slavery and oppression in Egypt, but also the miraculous acts of God in escaping from Pharaoh's tyranny. Now God is ready to move these ex-slaves and aliens into a land of their own, a land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In all of these chapters very little is given us about the wanderings portion of Israel's history, probably because it was boring. They wandered aimlessly because they refused to trust God when He offered them a life of exciting challenge. Perhaps, if we are bored, we have the same problem.

A. Fitted (1-9:14)

God is a God of perfect order. The entire book of Numbers will confirm this. The count of the children totaled more than 600,000 fighting men (adult males) which conservatively extrapolates to more than 2 million with women, children and elder adults.

But, this is not a mob teaming across the wilderness in disorder but a highly organized nation moving efficiently and quickly to and into the "Promised Land."

1. Counted and Camped (1-4)

The children of Israel are numbered. Why? They are numbered for the purpose of building an army (vs.3), for the purpose of organization (vs. 4).

Chapters 1-4 Go into details on the organization of the people, where they are to camp and where they will be in the line of march. It also divides their responsibilities and separates the tribe of Levi for the special work of service. These instructions were aimed at preparing the nation (communal).

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2. Cleansed and Consecrated (5-9:14)

Next we move on to the preparation of the hearts of the individual persons for the journey.

First they must put out everything that is unclean from their camp. Lepers, persons with issues of blood (unhealed wounds, natural period or after birth)--Physical purification

Guilty who have unconfessed or unforsaken sin (sacrifices made with a broken, repentant heart)--Spiritual purification

Why? vs. 10 -- "to restore fellowship with God." They were to separate themselves unto God by: 1. Required sacrifice and worship 2. Special Nazarite vow (Ch. 6) Heb.=to separate Aaron's benediction explains God's desire: He will bring happiness and security; grace and favor; land and rest if they will just put Him first ("be His people"). Moses cleanses and consecrates (sets apart) the Levites

Finally: They observe The Passover as a final reminder of God's redemption and it's cost.

B. Forward (9:15-10:36)

The host has been numbered, organized, sanctified, celebrated NOW . . .

1. God Leads (9:15-10:10)

If, up to this point, there has been any question of who will lead the nation, God gives them a miraculous visual aid: An evidence of His presence looking like a cloud by day and a pillar of fire in the night.

God led the people personally, Numbers 9:18 and 21 "At the Lord's command the Israelites set out, and at His command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp . . . Whether by day or night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out."

2. People Follow (10:10-10:36)

Visually, by the movement of God (The Cloud) and with a system of signals sounded on two trumpets, they could make or break camp, move into position or (two trumpets) gather all the people at the "Tent of Meeting."

C. From Sinai (11-12)

The theme of the following chapters could be "The Continued Complaining of God's Children." They do complain and God does get fed up with them. (vs. 1) But, it could have been a time of testing that built faith in, and love for their God which would have saved them the later grief. If they had learned their lessons here, they would have responded differently when they came to the promised land.

1. Life of Faith vs. Life of Doubt (11:1-9 and 31-35)

Every time the people complained, God showed himself to them trying to draw them back into a relationship of trust. He spoke, He pleaded, He disciplined, He got angry (just like any parent).

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Was there a cause beyond the usual tendencies? Yes! (11:4) -- "The rabble (mixed multitude) with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost--also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. . .'"

Who were the rabble or mixed multitude? They were Egyptians, unrighteous Jews, sinners, mostly products of mixed marriages in Egypt. These marriages were not forbidden, but having idols was, and this was an on going problem and cause difficulties for Israel from now on.

God provided all their needs for this "short journey." They had no hunger, no thirst, no worn-out clothing and no disease. They had enough . . . to be content. (Quail incident.)

2. Delay of Blessing (14 and 15)

Final act of disbelief brings final judgment to all unbelievers.

Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb plead with the people and plead with God but the children won't yield until the ten spies die of plague(14:40) but it is too late. Judgment is pronounced. None of the generation that rebelled will enter the Promised Land except Joshua and Caleb (men of faith). They will wander for forty years as shepherds until only the descendants are left (vs. 32-33).

Chapter 16 is the preparation of the people through reinstatement and clarification of sacrifices, laws and Sabbath.

E. Fussing (16-19)

Do the people of God learn their lesson? Do they repent in sackcloth and ashes? NO! The rebellion against Moses and Aaron, and through them, against God increases to a load crescendo. By 16:11 Moses is saying, *"It is against the Lord that you and your followers have banded together."* Who is you?

1. Leadership questioned (16)

Korah, a Levite, along with 250 princes (well renowned community leaders) of the tribes, said they didn't need human leadership any more because:

1. We are holy and . . .

Jehovah is with us. Why do we need you? (vs. 3)

God's response to Moses is immediate: *"Separate yourself from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once."* God separates the rebels/God separates the earth.

Moses was right when he said, *"God will choose the one who is holy."*

2. Love of God vs. Love of Self (11:10-25 and 12)

The confrontation by Aaron and Miriam seems righteous enough. After all, Moses married a Cushite woman (12: 1). They are from tribe of Levi. They have served beside Moses. They have spoken for God. They deserve to be co-leaders. The problem is pride, so God's response is harsh.

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Read numbers 12:6-8

(vs. 3) -- "Moses is a very humble man" and He alone will lead.

Deserved curse and disgrace, healing grace and restoration.

D. Failure (13-16)

This brings them to Kadesh-barnea and their biggest test of faith. Big faith comes from being close to God and obeying in the little things. (Episode of Jesus in boat in storm. "Oh, you of little faith.") Our faith is built in times of stress so we are ready for the real trouble. Too bad they didn't learn because faith will be necessary to "face this final challenge."

1. Sent Twelve Spies (13-14)

Send out a reconnaissance party of one man from each tribe. Goals:

1. What is the land like? (bleak, wooded, desert, fertile)
2. What are the people like? (strong, weak, cruel)
3. What are the cities like? (open camps, fortresses)

Reports come back in 13:25-29: Ten say we can't do it! – FEAR, TWO SAY DO IT! -- FAITH (our God can deliver.)

After all the acts of kindness and supernatural strength God showered on His people they, in mass, refuse to believe. (14:1-4)

2. Priesthood re-affirmed (17-19)

God provides a back-up object lesson for the remaining leadership. 12 tribes, twelve rods--rod that buds belongs to the leader. Aaron's rod buds, blossoms and produces fruit.

Duties of priests and Levites and their offering portions reaffirmed and assigned. Institution of the sacrifice of "The Red Heifer" and "Water of Cleansing" ceremonies.

II. NEW GENERATION (CHAPTERS 20-36)

This section includes the death of Miriam, Aaron, and the sins of Moses and Edom, but it also marks the end of the wandering in the wilderness as the new generation finally sees the Promised Land.

A. Rehearsing the Past (20)

The nation of Israel ends up back where they started, at Kadeshbarnea. God has kept His promise to sustain them but withheld His blessing because of their parents unbelief.

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1. Murmuring and Miracles (20:1-20:6)

For the seventh time they gripe. Couldn't they be more creative? No water = people oppose Moses. "If only . . ."

2. Moses' Mistake (20:7-29)

Read Numbers 20:1-12 What do you think Moses' sin was? Anger? Striking Rock instead of speaking (disobedience)? vs. 12 -- "You did not trust in Me enough to honor Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, . . ."

B. Grasping the Present (21-27:11)

Chapter 20 brought us to the end of the wilderness wanderings. Wandering is over and warfare will now begin. We will see their first victory and experience their last griping.

1. Physical and Spiritual Victories (21-25)

The king of Arad captured some Israelites in a token battle. This time the Hebrew children asked God for help. He delivers them and the Canaanite cities are completely consumed.

Israel leaves Mount Hor to circumvent Edom (21:4) and find the route difficult. With no bread (manna) and water they gripe again. God brings a plague of fiery serpents. This time they admit their sin quickly (growing) and God provides a quick solution.

A brazen serpent is made and all they have to do is look at it for healing. In this case we don't have to guess at the symbolic meaning. Jesus told Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so shall the Son of Man be lifted up: that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life, etc., etc." -- John 3:14-16

From here there is a succession of victories and even an attempt (22-24) to have the Prophet Balaam, a soothsayer from Mesopotamia, curse them turns into a blessing from God. Midianite and Moabite women came to the Israelite camp and enticed men to worship Peor with feasts, rituals, and prostitution. This resulted in the impaling deaths of the leaders and seventy-five of the men and an order to annihilate the Midianites. This was a bloody mess with 24,000 men dying here.

2. New Census, New Hope

The next chapters relate the preparation for "E Day," the entering of the Promised Land under their new leader General Joshua. A new census is taken to determine the apportionment of the land to each family including a provision for families with only daughters for heirs.

Finally, after 40 years, the children of Israel are ready to enter.

C. Previewing the Future (27:12-36)

The time of fulfillment of the judgment of Moses for his sin at Meribah is now at hand. God took him up on Mount Nebo overlooking the Promised Land. We will see that scene in detail in Deut. 32-34. Moses shows his true heart by asking God to bless Israel and not leave them, "*like a sheep that have no shepherd.*" (v.17)

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1. Leadership (27:12-23)

God chooses Joshua to carry on for Moses. *Read Numbers 27:18-23*

Moses is still in prime condition at 120 years of age, but God took him home. Did he ever set foot in the Promised Land? Yes, at the transfiguration.

2. Laws (28-30)

The Laws of God are finalized to govern the physical and spiritual lives of the New Nation in the New Land. There are Laws of Offerings, Laws of Feasts, and Laws of Vows.

3. Land (31-36)

Just before crossing the Jordan River into Canaan Israel decimated Midian as ordered by God in 25:16-18. This harsh punishment was:

1. Judgment for sin of the Baal-Peor enticement.
2. To protect the Israelites from future temptations

There were two separate allotments of land:

1. Reubenites and Gadites saw the land of Gilead from the Dead Sea on the South to the Sea of Galilee on the North as perfect range land for their cattle. They ask special permission to stay. Moses was nervous about it but allowed them to return after they served in the army to conquer the Promised Land.
2. Each tribe inherited a land to be kept perpetually. (They build Cities of Refuge.)