

Numbers – Part 1

Getting Organized (Numbers 1-10)

Just the title of the Book of Numbers makes us think about counting. In the Septuagint, the oldest surviving Greek translation of the O.T., it is called *Arithmoi*, meaning arithmetic. We all want a life that matters, one which counts for something, and that will help people remember us when we are no longer here. But can we make a difference? Ultimately, the Bible and the Book of Numbers teach that what *we* can and cannot do is of little consequence; it's God who makes the difference! Only He can do all things through us. (Phil. 4:13).

God has hardwired us with abilities we can use for His glory. But He has also given us abilities to make a difference in the lives of others. Some of us can be “Debbie Downers” and feel we are not good for anything; others tend to charge ahead when we want to accomplish something, but many forget the most vital component—God! He wants us to live a life that adds value and significance to our family and our church. He wants us to encourage others and impact the world through us, but that requires us to trust Him. Through Him, we can live a life that counts.

Only one month has passed since the Tabernacle was completed. (Ex. 40:17; Nu. 1:1). God has told them everything they need to know about worshipping Him properly. He has sustained them and will continue to do so until they settle in the Promised Land and can grow their own food. God has given them a clear knowledge of what God expects from them, along with blessings for their obedience and curses for disobedience.

Numbers, the fourth book of the Law and the O.T., continues the story of God's people as they travel through the desert from Mt. Sinai, through the wilderness of Paran, to the plains of Moab, which brings them just outside the entrance to the Promised Land. This journey should have taken about two weeks, but instead of claiming Canaan by faith, they rebelled. Because of their unbelief and rebellion, God caused them to wander in the wilderness for forty years before fulfilling His promise.

Numbers can be divided into three segments based on Israel's journeys and encampments. In chapters 1 through 10:10, Israel is still at Mt. Sinai. In Numbers 10:11, God lifts the cloud from the Tabernacle, and their journey begins. (Nu. 21:35). For the next 39 years, they will wander through the barren desert until they finally reach the plains of Moab where they will prepare to enter the land of Promise. (Nu. 22-36).

Through the trials, battles, and blessings, God will teach Israel to trust Him. Like believers today, they get caught in a vicious cycle: they rely on God, then disobey Him, which results in punishment before they return to Him and start the cycle over again. Even when Israel fails to keep her part of the covenant, God will keep His. His provision is always ready and available if His people choose to use it and obey. Numbers, then, is not just part of Israel's history; it also illustrates our own spiritual struggles in walking with Christ before we can claim our heavenly inheritance.

The book of Numbers may be one of the most difficult to understand in terms of the sequence because there is such a mix of things going on—narrative, additional laws,

census lists, predictions from a pagan prophet—and it may not be easy to see how it all fits together. As you come to abrupt shifts in the book’s narrative, remember that this is God’s Story. The more consistent you are in your reading and attendance, the easier it will be to sort it all out.

I. How Numbers Fits In

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are all part of the Law. God made a covenant with Abraham, promising that through his seed, he would become a great nation, inherit the land of Canaan, and all the world would be blessed through his seed. (Gen. 12:1-3). This promise is in the process of being fulfilled; not even Israel’s reluctance and disobedience can void it. The first stage of fulfillment began when God sent ten plagues against Pharaoh to redeem His people from slavery. (Ex. 1-12).

Now, the second stage of God’s promise is beginning in Numbers. The people are building their relationship with God, learning to completely trust and follow Him. When God gives them victory over the nations that currently inhabit the Promised Land, they must be willing to take ownership. Unfortunately, disobedience and complaints against God and Moses, which began in Exodus, abound throughout the book. Except for a pagan prophet who speaks God’s Word, there is hardly anything good said about Israel. Though their sins abound, it would be hard to miss God’s continued compassion for them.

II. Order from Chaos

As the book opens, God sets the tone for the importance of obedience to His commands and the necessity of organization in the community. He begins with the first of two censuses listed in Numbers. Numbers 1-2 records the number of men aged twenty and older who can fight, “numbered by their armies.” These were the first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt. It is necessary to prepare them for upcoming military confrontations as they travel from Sinai to Kadesh and on into Canaan. The second census, those of the second generation, counted those who will enter, conquer, and take possession of Canaan. (Nu. 26).

Several chapters are devoted to God instructing Moses on how to bring order and structure to the Israelite camp so His purposes can be fulfilled more effectively. God names one individual from each tribe to stand with Moses and Aaron. “These [men] were the *renowned* of the congregation, *princes* of the tribes of their fathers, *heads of thousands* in Israel” (Nu. 1:16). These men had already proven themselves to be worthy of this leadership position.

Systematically, each tribe was counted, starting with the eldest son Rueben and ending with Naphtali. Levi’s tribe was excluded at this time; they would have a special role to play. Joseph was given the birthright and received a double portion. (Gen. 48:20-22). His father Jacob had given his portion to Ephraim and Manasseh.

God told Moses to organize the people into their respective tribes or family groups. By counting each person individually, it shows how God values each one. When the twelve tribes were all counted, there were 603,550 soldiers. From this number, we can

estimate that about two million Israelites had left Egypt. Once the tribes were counted, each had its own location around the Tabernacle, when they traveled, and when they claimed their portion of Canaan.

Each tribe would not need to stand alone against an antagonist because God placed three tribes on each side of the Tabernacle. Each of these groups had a particular tribe and person chosen by God who oversaw the trio of tribes. A standard (flag, banner) signified their identity and fostered a sense of cohesiveness and belonging while contributing to the unity of the whole nation. It was specific to each tribe, and they would rally around it in battle. Judah directed the armies on the east; Reuben on the south; Ephraim on the west; and Dan on the north. By surrounding the Tabernacle, God's presence would be central to their lives.

Even in the wilderness, order and unity under God's leadership and provision resulted in a solid community ready to face the challenges ahead. So, not only was each person important to God, but they were part of a unit where God could use them most effectively. Estimates figure that the nation covered about twelve square miles!

The minute details may seem a little over-the-top, but as a fledgling nation establishing its identity as the children of God, they were extremely important. It's all part of God's history (His story), given for "our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted" (I Cor. 10:6).

III. God's Firstborn

God had not forgotten the Levites. Numbers 3 begins their instructions with an introduction that seems to be taken straight out of the structure divisions of Genesis, "This is the account of [generations of] ..." Like the ten *toledoths* found in Genesis, it transitions us into a new thought, or change in thought, and gets us ready to focus on what will follow. In this case, God defines the Levites' special role in serving at the Tabernacle and why they were separated from the other tribes.

Aaron and Moses are both mentioned here, but the spotlight focuses on Aaron's sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. All were consecrated to minister as priests (Lev. 8), but Nadab and Abihu had offered "strange fire" to the Lord and died. They had no children to take their place, so this left only Eleazar and Ithamar to minister beside Aaron—and this was too much for them to handle alone. Only Aaron's line could be priests forever (Ex. 40:15), so God told Moses to "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him" (Nu. 3:1-6).

Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, the three clans of Levi, were given to Aaron to help him and serve the whole congregation in the work of the Tabernacle. All Levite males over a month old would be counted, but only those 30 to 50 years old would serve in the maintenance, sacrifices, and transporting of the Tabernacle. Gershon's clan was responsible for the outer care of the tabernacle and courtyard, including the coverings, curtains, and hangings. The Kohathites were responsible for the furniture inside and out and vessels related to their use. The Merari clan was to take care of the framework, and everything related to its use—they had to carry the heavy pieces.

Before the furniture could be transported, it had to be covered by Aaron and his sons. These things were holy and couldn't be touched or seen uncovered by the people, or they would die. Staves/Poles were used to carry the furniture on their shoulders. Aaron's son Eleazar was the "chief over the chief of the Levites." He had oversight of

those in charge of the furniture. Aaron's son Ithamar had oversight of the remaining items of the Tabernacle that were the responsibility of Gershon and Merari's clans. (Nu. 4:28, 33). Each person had a purpose in God's plan.

The Levites were given a special place in God's sight. "And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel *instead of* all the firstborn that opens the matrix among the children of Israel: therefore, the Levites shall be Mine; *because* all the firstborn are Mine; *for* on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto Me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I AM the Lord." (Nu. 3:12-13).

During the final plague that caused Israel to be released from slavery, God slew all the firstborn of the Egyptians. This was the price of redemption for Israel. But then, God said, "Sanctify unto Me all the firstborn...both of man and of beast: it is Mine" (Ex. 13:2). For this to satisfy God, all firstborn males from every tribe would have needed to be given over to the service and maintenance of the Tabernacle. But now God clarifies this, "Take the Levites *instead of* the firstborn...and the cattle of the Levites *instead of* their cattle: the Levites shall be Mine. I AM the LORD."

This way was better. Each family wouldn't need to redeem their firstborn or give them as servants to the priests. Having a whole tribe serving together, rather than multiple families, was less chaotic and easier for the families. It made sense to use the entire tribe of Levi since the priests were of this tribe and had a connection to them; they would readily serve them. The Levites had also stood true when the others had turned to worshipping the golden calf, proving themselves suitable for this service through their firm and faithful defense of God. (Ex. 32:26-28). They were also the smallest tribe, almost half the size of Manasseh, the next smallest, and would best serve in this capacity, balancing out the required number of firstborn males that God claimed.

The Levites were given a special place to pitch their tents within the nation and in their travels. God assigned them to surround the Tabernacle; the other tribes remained further away, outside of their tribe, around the Tabernacle. This would protect God's chosen "firstborn" (Nu. 3:12) from danger, and they would be closer to where they served. And the people all did what the Lord commanded Moses.

III. Spiritual Authority

Peace and order within the nation was one thing, but the purity of it must be kept just as carefully. The camp had to be cleansed. Every polluted Israelite had to be separated from the camp. All spiritual authority begins and ends with God, and He has outlined requirements over all things in these first four chapters of Numbers. God has the right to do with us and work through us in any way He sees fit. Now, God deals with the condition of the people within the camp. (Nu. 5-6).

Because God is holy, He wants the congregation to be holy. Certain people were to be put out of the camp, not because they were immoral but because they were unclean. Those with leprosy must be kept out as a safety measure because of the extreme contagiousness of the disease. Other things, like touching something dead may require only temporary exile, but it still was meant to keep impurities out of the camp. This ensured that whether a person was physically unclean or ceremonially impure, they were not polluting the residence of Israel's King. Sins and trespasses required offerings to be sacrificed and sometimes restitution to be paid to a person who was wronged.

Numbers 6 describes a Nazarite, a person who voluntarily chooses to have a closer walk with the Lord. This person, male or female, could choose to take the vow of a Nazarite for a certain period or commit for a whole lifetime. It required three things: 1) Not to drink wine or strong drink—their joy and fulfillment were to come from the Lord (Eph. 5:18); 2) Not to shave their head or cut their hair—a man's long hair was considered shameful—we must be willing to bear shame for Christ (I Cor. 11:14); and 3) Never to touch a dead body, but to be separate from the world. The Lord was to have first place in their life over even when a loved one passed away. (Mt. 10:37). If the person breaks any part of the vow, they were expected to bring a peace offering to renew their fellowship with God. God does not require a vow, but if we make and faithfully keep it, He will bless us.

Numbers 7 is the next-to-longest chapter in the Bible; only Psalm 119 is longer. It is rather monotonous to read. The repetitiousness of these 89 verses, with only a name change to differentiate who is being talked about, can become mind-numbing because all the princes gave an identical offering to God. But through it, we can learn that God notices and cares what we give; He even records it! Do you tithe or just give a small amount because that is all you can give? God sees what you give. He knows when it stretches you thin or causes you to pass up something non-essential to give more to Him. He wants to bless you because you are faithful and willing to put Him first.

After the gifts from the princes of each tribe were presented (Nu. 1:16), God had Aaron light the seven lamps of the candlestick in the Holy Place (Nu. 8). Then, the Levites came for cleansing so they could begin serving. This was necessary before God could use them. Standing before the lighted candlestick to cleanse themselves they could see what imperfections needed to be removed so their service would be accepted by God.

Conclusion:

God knows each one of us by name and values each of us individually. Each of us has a purpose in His plan. Order and structure can help us fulfill God's purposes more effectively. Just as the Israelites were organized for their journey, we must be spiritually prepared for the challenges that are sure to come. Like the Levites, we are called to be set apart for God's service, dedicating our lives to His purposes.

Four steps were needed before the Levites would be clean enough to serve. These same things represent the need for us to be cleansed before we can effectually serve God too. They must:

- 1) Be sprinkled with the water of purity; confess our sin to cleanse our souls
- 2) Shave all their flesh; the Word of God, which is "sharper than any two-edged sword," must be used to remove anything from your life that causes you to sin
- 3) Wash their clothes; outside things that are hurting your testimony must be removed
- 4) Offer a sin offering with the burnt, grain, and peace offering; ask forgiveness for known and unknown sins by remembering all that Christ has done for us

Give God the glory because nothing we do for God is effective unless we walk in the Light of His Word and are cleansed by His work.

One phrase that is repeated multiple times in this first section of Numbers is, “All that the LORD commanded Moses, [they] did.” Can you say that? How does your service look? Are you performing it in the Light of God’s Word with a pure heart, or are you serving for the laud and praise of others? The Living Water is nearby for cleansing when God reveals to us our sin. If you and I are going to live lives that count for Christ, then we must do what God says to do. We must obey Him, follow Him, love Him, and stay in His will as you serve Him.

As we’ve seen in the cycle of faith (obedience, disobeying, punishment, return to obedience), there are many steps in our walk. Are you where you need to be to count for Christ? God sees who you are and what you are giving to Him!

“If we walk in the Light, as He [Jesus] is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin” (I Jn. 1:7).



The Cloud is Lifted (Numbers Part 2)

- 1) Read Numbers 10-15. On your Journaling of the Israelites wandering chart, fill in what occurred at the places you are reading about (#10 and #12).
- 2) How long has it been since Israel left Egypt? What had they celebrated? (Nu. 9:1-5)
- 3) Describe the order that Israel would have marched in, including what took place between each group. (Nu. 10)
- 4) What were the people complaining about in Numbers 11 and what did God do about it?
- 5) Who was complaining in Numbers 12 and what did God do about it?
- 6) What happened in Numbers 13-14 and what was the result? What is God trying to tell us about complaining?
- 7) How were Joshua and Caleb rewarded for their report of the land?

Conclusion:

Some were ready for this adventure, but many were filled with fear—and this led to failure! Their unbelief caused them to rebel. God's answer to them, given by an ungodly prophet, becomes one of the key verses of Numbers. "God is not a man that

He should lie; neither the son of man that He should repent: hath He said, and shall He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?” (Nu. 23:19). God always keeps His promises even when we rebel and don’t obey!

God had already taken the Israelites through the wilderness of Shur where they traveled for three days without water before finding the bitter, undrinkable waters of Marah. After leaving there, they traveled through the wilderness of Sin on their way to Mt. Sinai where they encountered a shortage of food, and God provided manna. Now they have been in the wilderness of Sinai for nine months receiving the Law and building the Tabernacle. These wildernesses, or deserts, are places with no sustenance, harsh, and unforgiving. They set the stage for what is to come, giving them no choice but to depend upon God for everything—food, water, and guidance.

God’s rules should not be looked at as harsh and given to us because God doesn’t care. Instead, we repeatedly see a God who dearly loves us and gives us gifts out of wisdom and how He has bountifully provided for us. He wants us to learn to trust that He has our best interests at the forefront. Just as gold is refined by fire, the Israelites were refined by their experiences in the desert. The trials and challenges they experienced were meant to purify their faith and cement their commitment to God, just as our trials and challenges are meant to help us. Spiritual growth often comes through hardship; God’s Word guides us as we navigate through these tough times.

Hard times are never easy, but when we get to the end of the tunnel, there truly is a bright light awaiting us. “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations [trials]; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (James 1:2-4).