

The Book of Numbers

February 25, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Numbers 1-2

Session Outline

1. Why Numbers? (Numbers 1:1)
2. Counting and Organizing (Numbers 1:2-4)
3. Details Matter (Numbers 2:1-34)

Theological Theme

Although the Israelites sinned against God, He showed them mercy and grace. His plans were always for their best and His glory. He led them into the land He promised because He is faithful.

Call to Action

God is faithful even when we are not. Many people feel that they need to “clean themselves up” before they can approach God. However, it is the opposite. Is there anything in your past that embarrasses you and causes you shame that you need to surrender to the Lord? Confess it, give it to Him, and receive His forgiveness.



Leader Guide

The Book of Numbers

Introduction

Names matter. When new parents pick a name for their newborn, it is a big deal. Not many people arbitrarily pick a name to give their new son or daughter. Instead, parents-to-be often pore over and possibly debating different names until they finally land on the one they want to give their little one.

Many people also have nicknames. This term essentially means “other name” and usually is derived from a specific personal experience or situation.¹ Nicknames may be based on physical features, quirks, random experiences, or pretty much anything else.

The common element with names and nicknames is that they are unique to individuals. Sometimes people will act a certain way depending on their name, label, or nickname. Scripture includes many occurrences where God changed a person’s name or called a group of people to something new by giving them a new name. This reminds us that names and labels are powerful and can end indicate who a person is or what they will do.

- ❓ What is a funny name or nickname you have heard or have yourself?
- ❓ How have you seen the power in naming a person or thing?
- ❓ How have you seen people live in a way to match up to a name or nickname?

Session Summary

The account of the Israelites in the wilderness points out that there are real consequences to our actions. Although the Lord was preparing the children of Israel to take possession of the promised land, they still had to choose obedience and trust. These people had been delivered from their bondage of slavery in Egypt and now were on the brink of their new life in the land God promised them.

Numbers records the story of how the first generation of God’s people traveled to the banks of the Jordan and failed. They believed the circumstances of the world more than they trusted the Lord and the consequences of their sin led to them wandering in the wilderness until the adults died off and a new generation grew up alongside Joshua and Caleb.

From the first of Numbers to the last, we see God is a God of order and organization. He has great plans for His people, and we must choose to trust and believe Him in all things. He commands us to orient our lives to His presence just as He orchestrated the campsites of the tribes to revolve around the tabernacle. When we measure our spiritual walk by other people or things of the world, we will find ourselves facing consequences like the Israelites. When we choose to trust and obey God, even without knowing all the details, we will find He is always faithful and keeps His promises.

1. Why Numbers? (Numbers 1:1)

The book of Numbers begins where Leviticus ended, at the base of Mount Sinai. The Israelites had been delivered from bondage in Egypt and crossed the Red Sea on dry ground. Numbers covers the history of Israel during the wilderness wandering that resulted from their disobedience and lack of faith in the Lord when they arrived at the border of the Promised Land the first time. The Hebrew name for this book literally means “in the wilderness” and these chapters chronicle the journey of how God’s people ended up in the wilderness and how He took them from there to the promised land.



What comes to mind when you think of the book of Numbers? What can make this book challenging to read? Why is it worth pressing through in every portion of Scripture?

Numbers follows different themes of obedience, disobedience and rebellion, and then renewed obedience. There were two censuses taken in Numbers, thus the English title of the book, and each census records the details of two generations. The first generation was made up of those who left Egypt and because of their disobedience had to wander the wilderness for forty years. The second generation is the one that developed as the previous generation of adults died. The second generation eventually went into the promised land and are written about in Deuteronomy and Joshua. At the start of Numbers, the law had been given, the tabernacle had been built, the priests had been given their jobs, and it was time to go forward into the land promised by God himself—a land flowing with milk and honey. Throughout Numbers, we see God’s judgment for sin and His faithfulness despite the sin of His people.

The Lord Spoke

The Lord spoke to Moses is a key phrase in the book of Numbers. It is best understood as a statement of divine revelation and instruction. Many of the approximately sixty-five uses of this phrase within the Pentateuch are complemented by a statement that the recipient of the instruction did exactly what the Lord commanded.

The book begins by telling us God spoke to Moses. These words were not from man but from the Lord Himself. The plan for the Israelites was directed by God and was not the orchestration of any person. Moses led the people and spoke the words from the Lord. No matter what we think should happen in life, we are reminded that doing things God's way and trusting Him is always the best plan.

- ❓ Why is it important that all these words came from the Lord not Moses? What difference do the origin of words—from God or man—make in your life?

The first ten chapters of Numbers cover the time Moses organized the people for the march toward Canaan. Many things occurred along the way that God used to develop and grow the Israelites into people suited for the promised land. There was much to be learned along the wilderness journey and God used it to grow His people just as He uses the circumstances of our lives to do the same for us today.

- ❓ Application: What circumstance might God be using right now to shape and grow you for His purposes?

2. Counting and Organizing (Numbers 1:2-4)

When Moses met with the Lord in the tabernacle, God commanded him to take a census of all the males who could go to war. Remember this nation of people was not in the habit of fighting wars. They had been engaged as slave laborers in Egypt and God delivered them without any kind of physical battle taking place. So, it is interesting that God called them out as an army.

- ❓ God was preparing His people for what was to come. How has God prepared you in advance for things He knew were ahead for you but that you might not have seen at the time?

This was a military census to determine how many warriors were available. God knew what was ahead for them when they came to the promised land, and He began to prepare them as an army. Sometimes God calls out characteristics in people that He desires to develop in preparation for an upcoming encounter. As a first step in preparing to take the occupied land of Canaan, God told Moses to identify those who would be available in taking the land.

- ❓ When has God called you to a task you felt unprepared for? How has He provided in the areas where you were lacking?

Entrance into the land should have been only a few weeks from the taking of this census, not years. The census was conducted so that the people could get ready for what was ahead. Notice the Lord instructed the count to be made according to families. This reminds us that the strength of a nation is dependent on the strength of the individual families that make up that nation.

The inventory of potential soldiers was not to imply that the Israelites could win the upcoming battles simply as a superior force. It was never about man's strength; the promised land would be delivered to the Israelites by the hand of God. The people had to be willing to obey and follow God even when it became physically tough or dangerous. Their faith was not to be in their own power but in the power of God at work on their behalf. Many battles believers fight are not against flesh and blood but spiritual enemies. We can learn from the Israelites about the necessity of taking inventory of where we are spiritually so that we do not face the enemy unprepared.



Application: How do you need to assess your spiritual inventory (and more importantly your needs) so you are better prepared for the spiritual battles coming your way?

3. Details Matter (Numbers 2:1-34)


The twelve tribes, excluding the Levites, camped in four groups of three tribes each, a different group on each of the tabernacle's four sides. The priests and the three clans of Levites camped on the four sides of the tabernacle but closer to the sanctuary than the other tribes. This arrangement placed God at the center of the nation geographically and reminded the Israelites that His rightful place was at the center of their life both personally and as a nation.

God is a God of order and organization. If you were to combine the census numbers while adding in woman and children, you would get between two and three million people. Imagine traveling with a couple of million people and camping each night. Most people struggle to get their immediate family organized enough for a road trip to stay in hotels. With this large number of people traveling together, God knew order was important. He described to Moses exactly how the tribes should set up camp along the journey, creating order out of potential chaos.




What are some other examples you can think of where God created order out of chaos in Scripture? How has He done this in your life?

The arrangement of the tribes also reminds us that God designs things according to His wisdom and not ours. It wasn't about the size of the tribes or the popularity of individual leaders. God had a reason for the way He ordered the campsites. Though we don't always know why He orchestrates things the way He does, we can always trust that His way is best.

 What ways do people tend to base decisions on worldly wisdom instead of on the Lord's plans? When are you tempted to do this?

God positioned the tribes in relation to His presence. The tabernacle represented God's presence with the people, and it was at the center of everything. Everything was ordered in relation to the tabernacle. Too many times in life believers get off track with the Lord because they start comparing their lives to others. They make decisions in relation to how other people act instead of centering everything on the Lord. We should never measure ourselves against the world but are to keep the Lord as our focus.

 Application: Where do you need to center your life on the Lord instead of other people or your circumstances?

Conclusion

In the book of Numbers, God had a perfect plan for His people to move into the promised land. They were being prepared for this new life along the way in the wilderness.

God revealed more to them about Himself in the way He brought order and organization to the journey. There was purpose in the way that the tribes camped and centered themselves around the tabernacle. We should follow that example by remembering God is to be our focus. The goal is to orient ourselves to Him and stop measuring ourselves according to a worldly standard.

Although the people had the presence of the Lord with them, they still failed to honor God with their trust when they came to Canaan. Because of their unbelief, they were not permitted to enter the promised land. The Israelites were sentenced to wander in the wilderness until that generation of adults died off, excluding Joshua and Caleb. Numbers records the journey they took around that wilderness until they came back to the banks of the Jordan river with the next generation ready to step into the land God promised.

- ❓ How is God working in your life to prepare you for something now?
- ❓ How have you seen God as faithful to keep His promises in your life, even and especially when you have not been faithful to Him?
- ❓ How can you seek gospel conversations with others by sharing about the book of Numbers?

Prayer of Response

Praise God for being faithful to you and keeping His promises. Ask for wisdom to see how you can better center your life on Him and not the world.

Memory Verse

The Israelites did everything the Lord commanded Moses; they camped by their banners in this way and moved out the same way, each man by his clan and by his ancestral family. - Numbers 2:34

Additional Resources

- *Be Counted* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Numbers* by Jay Sklar
- *The Message of Numbers* by Raymond Brown

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Numbers

Purpose

Numbers shows us how God responded to the unbelief of the Israelites. There are consequences to our disobedience, but God's grace remains and his redemptive plan and desire for us will not be stopped. The book of Numbers underscores for us the importance of obedience in the life of a Christian, and Paul reminded us of the value of learning from the way God has worked in the past (Rm 15:4; 1Co 10:6, 11).

Author

Christian scholars have traditionally held that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, which includes the book of Numbers. As with the other books in the Pentateuch, Numbers is anonymous, but Moses is a central character throughout. Moses kept a journal (33:2), and the phrase "The Lord spoke to Moses" is used over 40 times. It is possible that a few portions were later added by scribes, such as the reference to Moses's humility (12:3) and the reference to the "Book of the Lord's Wars" (21:14). Moses remains the primary writer.

Setting

Numbers continues the historical narrative begun in Exodus. It picks up one month after the close of Exodus (Ex 40:2; Nm 1:1), which is about one year after the Israelites' departure from Egypt. Numbers covers the remaining thirty-nine years of the Israelites' stay in the wilderness, from Sinai to Kadesh, and finally to the plains on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

Special Features

The English title "Numbers" derives from the Septuagint name "Arithmoi," based on the two military censuses in chapters 1 and 26. The Hebrew title, Bemidbar, "In the Wilderness," describes the geographical setting of much of the book—from the Wilderness of Sinai to the arid Plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho.

Extended Commentary

Numbers 1-2

Taking the Promised Land (1:1–10:10)

The covenant with Israel had been concluded at Sinai. And its social, political, and religious stipulations had been outlined (Exod. 20–40; Lev.). Then the Lord commanded His people to leave the holy mountain and to make their way to the land of promise.

Organizing for War (1:1–2:34). The census of the men of military age revealed a fighting force of 603,550, excluding the Levites. God had fulfilled His promise to Abraham of numerous descendants. With such an army Israel was well equipped to take the promised land. To facilitate moving and encamping such a vast force, explicit instructions as to tribal, clan, and family organization became mandatory.

The Israelite camp was organized with God’s dwelling, the tabernacle, at its center. The Levites and priests camped nearest to the tabernacle, the priests guarding the entrance on the east side (3:38). The “lay tribes” camped somewhat farther away, with Judah occupying the position of leadership, again to the east. Such organization lays stress on preserving the purity of the tabernacle. The Levites were responsible for the movement and care of the tabernacle and so remained outside the military census.²

References

1. Daniel Costa, “Nickname,” Britannica, September 6, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nickname>.
2. Eugene H. Merrill, “The Pentateuch,” in *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 53.