

"WALK THRU THE BIBLE: NUMBERS."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Numbers 14:1-12; I Corinthians 10:9-12

Numbers.

As you read through Numbers you may find yourself asking: "What's with all this math!? What spiritual good is there in knowing there are 46,500 Reubenites? Who would have thought government census documents could be inspired by the Holy Spirit?" Before your eyes glaze over, it will help to have a bit of perspective on this book.

As the name of the book suggests Numbers is about numbers. The most important number in the book of Numbers may be the number two.

Numbers is about two generations of God's people, the generation that left Egypt yet increased in rebellion and became unbelieving, failing to trust God and paid the price of a lifetime of wandering in the wilderness.

They were followed by a new generation that stood on the brink of entering the Promised Land. Would they follow the way of their parents and give in to unbelief or would they embrace God's Word and receive the land God had promised the patriarchs?

Numbers begins and ends with the detail of two censuses, to count the number of fighting men 20 and older who would lead Israel into the conquest of the Promised Land.

Two is also the number of years in the life of God's people that Numbers focuses on, year 2 at Mt. Sinai and year 40 on the plains of Moab on the eastern border of the Promised Land.

Two is the number of faithful spies who urged the people not to be afraid and trust God to give them the land. Two is the number of men from the first generation that were allowed to enter the Promised Land with the second generation, Joshua and Caleb.

But I am getting ahead of the story.

Speaking of stories, Numbers is an amazing mix of narrative stories and history woven in with the giving of instructions and laws. Just when you are starting to fall asleep something dramatic happens.

All of a sudden, after two years, the cloud of God's presence lifts and Israel starts moving, and soon after that manna starts falling out of the sky, and then quail. Then there is a great sibling rivalry and Moses' sister Miriam breaks out in leprosy.

Then there is the great drama of the 12 spies and the great rebellion leading the 40 years of wilderness wanderings which are filled with more grumbling and rebellion, including Korah's rebellion challenging Moses' leadership.

There are staffs that bud, water coming out of rocks, poisonous snakes, a bronze snake that heals you if you look at it, talking donkeys, wars, and all the leaders dying. There is something for everyone here.

Let's back up to get the flow of the chronology clear.

Exodus 19:1-2 On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2 They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain.

Moses is leading God's people and Moses is the one who wrote down these five books as they were given by God. Everything in these books has the ring of authenticity, of the writing of a man who was there and experienced it all.

Numbers 1:1-3 The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, 2 "Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel... every male ... 3 From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war.

At the beginning of Numbers God is ready to move His people to the Promised Land and He begins with a census, from which we are told there are just over 600,000 fighting men.

For the next ten chapters God prepares this people for what is ahead.

The camp is cleansed of sin and uncleanness (5-6).

The tabernacle is consecrated and offerings are made (7).

The Levites are prepared as priests and the Passover is celebrated again (8-9).

The focus is on cleansing, purifying, setting apart the people of God in preparation for their pilgrimage to the Promised Land, a people on the move.

Numbers 10:11-12 In the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month, the cloud lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony, 12 and the people of Israel set out by stages from the wilderness of Sinai. And the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran.

The cloud of the presence and glory of the Lord lifts and leads the people north to Kadesh-barnea, on the southern border of the Promised Land.

But before they even get there, there is grumbling and complaining. They complain about their hardships and lack of food and desire for meat like back in Egypt. Where's the beef?

God strikes them with a punishing fire and then extends grace providing miraculous manna and quail.

In chapter 12 there is sibling rivalry as Aaron and Miriam turn on Moses. We have a beef, they say. Miriam is struck with leprosy as God's judgment, and Moses intercedes for her and she is restored.

The momentous moment arrives. After 400 years the full measure of the sins of the Canaanites have filled up, God is prepared to bring judgment on the land and give it to the Israelites.

At the end of chapter 12 after two years at Mt. Sinai, God leads His people on a two week journey to the southern edge of the Promised Land (10:33; 11:35; 12:16).

Everyone knows the people of God wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, but how many remember why? Chapter 14 is the pivotal chapter in Numbers.

Twelve spies went in to spy out the land. When they come back after 40 days, Joshua and Caleb encouraged the people that with God's help they could take the land. But the negative report of the other ten prevailed, spreading fear through the camp and another rebellion against their leaders.

Most of all they rejected God, disobeyed out of unbelief when God brought them to the brink of victory. God forgives but the consequences of their actions remain. Why? God's holiness and justice compel Him to judge sin.

Especially such presumptuous sin, sin in the face of all God's grace and mercy, starting with delivering from the terrible bondage of oppressive slavery, which they had cried out to God for. Has any people witnessed such incredible displays of divine power as the Red Sea closing over the army of Pharaoh, or stood at the edge of Mt. Sinai and heard and seen the majesty of the holy presence of the almighty God in thunder and lightning and violent shaking?

And then every need met along the journey. And after all that, they fall into doubt, rebellion and faithlessness. They forgot God, who God is and what God has and can do. They were actually ready to return to Egypt and slavery.

Numbers 14:19-23 Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now."

20 Then the Lord said, "I have pardoned, according to your word. 21 But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, 22 none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test

these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, 23 shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it.

Numbers 14:31-34 But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. 32 But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. 33 And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. 34 According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.'

Chapters 15 to 20 cover the 38 years of wilderness wandering with just a very few details given.

John MacArthur suggests, "the lack of material devoted to this thirty-seven-year-period, in comparison with the other years of the journey from Egypt to Canaan, communicates how wasted these years were because of Israel's rebellion against the Lord and His judgment."

During this period there would be well over a million funerals. A whole generation of Israelites dies until God in His grace raises up a new generation and moves them from Kadesh-barnea in the south to Moab and the plains of Jordan to the eastern border of the Promised Land.

But in the meantime the test and trials and rebellion and disobedience continue. There is another rebellion over the lack of water (Exodus 17). This time in exasperation Moses strikes the rock twice when God told him only to speak to the rock. This disobedience would cost Moses the opportunity to enter the Promised Land.

This is the second major judgment of God for sin and rebellion and disobedience. God told both Moses and Aaron they had not upheld Him as holy before the people, and therefore they would not be entering the promised land (Num 20:12, 28).

Again the people complain about God's lack of provision and God sends the judgment of poisonous snakes. And again God sends grace, giving Moses a bronze serpent on a pole for the people to look upon and be saved.

Then come several battles with neighboring nations and the failed curses of the prophet Balaam.

Now as the people are ready to enter the Promised Land God orders a new census of the fighting men. It is 601,730, about the same as the first one (26:51).

Numbers is crucial for understanding how God deals with His people and their sin.

God show His unchangeable faithfulness and grace in His care and provision for His people. In the end, nothing thwarts God's promises and purposes for His people. Neither the sin of the people or their leaders, nor the power of the nations that oppose them.

Jesus

The shadow of the coming Christ falls across this book again and again.

The red heifer in Numbers 19 prefigures the perfect unblemished Lamb of God who takes away our sins.

The rock which gives water in Numbers 20 is called Christ.

I Corinthians 10:4 All drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

In Numbers 21 when God sent poisonous snakes as judgment for the complains of the people and many died, Moses interceded and confessed the sin of the people and raised up a bronze serpent for their healing.

John 3:14-15 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Numbers foreshadows how a holy God's demand for holiness in His people can be satisfied.

How can God's holiness and justice allow Him to bless His people whose faith has wavered and whose obedience has completely vanished? Disobedience requires judgment and curse.

Jesus is the only human being who faithfully, unfalteringly, perfectly keeps and fulfills the law and obeys every command.

It is only through Jesus that God's justice and holiness are satisfied, and all His promises can be realized. Jesus suffered the penalty for our rebellion and disbelief and disobedience.

Implications and application.

1 Corinthians 10:6–12 Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. 7 Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." 8 We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. 9 We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, 10 nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. 11 Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. 12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

Don't be like Israel.

Don't be idolaters like Israel was.

Don't be immoral like Israel was.

Don't presumptuously put God to the test like Israel did.

Get me out of this fix, and ...

Don't grumble like Israel did.

We are not to doubt and be filled with fear and unbelief as they did.

Do you see yourselves as grasshoppers in a world of giants? Is your God too small?

We are God's people, the new Israel. We are on a journey through the wilderness of this world, through a dry and weary land. God is with us every step, God provides for every need.

Phil 4:20 My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ.

We are called out of the world to be holy, to be set apart for God. We are called to reject the world as they were called to reject Canaan.

We are a community organized around the Tent of Meeting, around the house of God, where we gather together for worship, for prayer, to hear the Word of God. God is present among us and within us. We are the tabernacle of God.

Notice how the tabernacle figures in to Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Why is so much attention given to it? Because God is the with us God, the Immanuel God, the God who tabernacles with His people, the God who became flesh and dwelt among us, the God who descended at Pentecost and fills His people who are temples of the living God.

Forsake not the gathering together of yourselves.

We are also a community on a journey to a goal, to the Promised Land, eternal glory. The way is narrow and hard, full of daunting challenges. We have a great inheritance, as did they.

In this life you will have afflictions. These light and momentary afflictions will be outweighed by glory. God is good, God is faithful, God is with us always.

We are a community under authority, with leaders who must be submitted to and followed, and where rebellion is a common problem.

The book of Numbers teaches the emerging generation to learn from the faithlessness of the previous generation, but to do so with understanding and without a judgmental attitude. With the humility to say, "There but for the grace of God go I."

All these things were written for our instruction. Learn from it and don't repeat their sin.