

ABIDE

DISCOVERING YOUR OLD TESTAMENT



IN THE WILDERNESS

NUMBERS

It's a little bit of an unusual name if you think about it. I mean, we know the purpose of numbers. We know that there are numbers to do math, recall dates, or remember how many kids you're supposed to have when driving back to your house; but why "Numbers" for the title of a book?

Well, this actually has to do with the numbering of those who were ready for battle. And you will further notice as you make your way through this book, that there are two sets of these numbers given. In chapters 1-4, you read the first set of numbers listing the men of war for an older generation, and in chapters 26-27 there is a second set of numbers, representing the men of war for the following generation.

Initially, this book was supposed to be about conquest. God's people were supposed to go into the promised land and possess it. But in order to possess it, they first had to subdue it— and this took a military. Understanding this then, you can also understand that the numbering of these troops was important when attempting to come up with a battle strategy for the various campaigns in which the people were to be engaged.

However, though we find lists of numbers for the soldiers, the actual Hebrew name for this particular book is called, "In the Wilderness" which comes from the first set of words written in the book, "And the LORD spake unto Moses in the wilderness..." And this wilderness, at least at first, was full of potential and possibility. It would either be a place of deeper trust or miserable tediousness; a place to grow in faith or a place of failure.

But even understanding all of this, the book of Numbers is a little difficult to grasp when we're trying to break it down logically. There seems to just be a collection of facts, rather than a flow that would guide the reader safely down the stream of understanding, before safely landing them to a unified purpose.

That said, I think there is a great deal of information to be gained even from this. I think what we are observing when we approach the book of Numbers is the fact it reads like our lives. In your life, you are confronted with decisions, plans, and opportunities. And in all of these, you have successes, struggles, problems, and failures. If you wrote down everything in your life simply as the events came, it probably would not make much sense at all in terms of a unifying purpose. However, what we would have is a collection of facts about your life. That is one way we can look at the overall information given to us in the life of this young nation.

But still the question is raised: Is there any cohesion in this book that would help us in understanding it? Let's find out:

How to Think about Numbers

You can think about Numbers in this way: “God’s people on the move.” And this is really broken down into two different groups. In chapters 1-20, we see that God moved His people in order to set aside a rebellious, older generation, and in chapters 21-36, God moved His people in order to set apart the following generation. Let me show you how this works:

The Setting Aside of a Rebellious Generation (1-20): This is exactly how it sounds. Once again, what once started off as hopeful, turned out to be just sad. Just watch the progression:

What’s the Count (1-4): These chapters, as previously discussed, are devoted to giving an accurate count of battle-ready soldiers so that provisions could be made to sustain the army, and battle plans could be established. Further, information was given here regarding the numbering and role the tribe of Levi would have in all of this.

What’s the Word (5-9): In chapters 5-9 you read various instructions given to the people. You’ll see laws about how to conduct relationships. Laws regarding a jealous husband, Nazarite vows, and blessings. You will also find offerings given by the princes of Israel, cleansing rituals for the priests, and the terms for their service.

What’s the Plan (10-14): Here you can kind of sense a little restlessness from the people which causes several problems. From the outset you start reading about two silver trumpets and the different calls these trumpets were used for, and then, by the time you get into chapter 11, the people started complaining, then Moses started complaining and then starts to question God on a matter. God then answers all of these problems, but more are only created when Aaron and Miriam start to rebel against Moses. Then, after God took care of all of this, by the time we reach chapter 13, the twelve spies are sent to survey the land they were to take, and once we get into chapter 14, the people, except for two, refused to believe God’s promise, and would not go in to conquer the land.

As you can see, in this section there is not a tremendous amount of cohesion, but operates sporadically just like our real life does.

What’s the Consequence (15-20): In these chapters, God basically tells this older generation, “You don’t want to go into the land? Fine, you’re not going.” because that is exactly what He does. God sends this generation on the longest funeral march in history as He had the people march around in the wilderness for 40 years until this rebellious generation had died away. These chapters are dedicated to fully preparing the next generation to do what the older generation should have done.

The Setting Apart of a New Generation (21-36): This entire section is devoted to the preparation of the new generation to pick up where the mothers and fathers left off. This was a new generation and so these individuals get to experience what their mothers and fathers experienced before them.

New Journeyings (21-25): This section is replete with successes and failures as God continued to move His people in the wilderness. You get the sense that not much has changed from one generation to the next.

New Numbering (26-27): Once again, the objective is taking the land God had given. That said, in these chapters, you’ll find a second numbering system as Israel prepares to do exactly this.

Renewed Instructions (28-36): Before these people were to enter Canaan, just to put everyone on the same page, God gives some final instructions to clear up any confusion in regard to how they were to conduct business when they became established in the land.

What to Look for in Numbers

There are several major narratives to look at and study. However, you run into the same problem in regard to how the book was designed— it's simply hard to grasp to capture what and when everything is happening. That is just not how our minds like to think. We like to think of things in order and in progression. If this doesn't happen, our tendency is to bypass that information quickly until we can find something that does make sense.

However, if order is what we need so that these larger narratives make more sense, then it is probably best to look at these events in the context of where they occurred. After the people were led out of Egypt by way of the Red Sea, God took them to a place called Sinai. This is where we want to start if we're following the Children of Israel through the wilderness. And if we do this, we will be able to see a pattern that is very easy to follow as we move through the book of Numbers in order to start taking in and processing these major events.

Major Events at Sinai (1:1-10:10): It was at this location that the people were numbered and the tribe of Levi was given instruction as to what exactly they would be doing. We also spoke about the additional instruction given in chapters 5-9, and the silver trumpets used as a form of communication to let everyone know what was going on at any particular moment. There were signals for worship festivals, the call to gather the people to make public announcements, and warnings that the camp was under attack.

Major Events at Kadesh (10:11-20:21): After Sinai, God moves His people to a place called Kadesh, which was near the border of the land they were going to be instructed to conquer. Needless to say, there are some huge events that take place at this location. This is where you find Moses' need to have some pressure taken off of him and God allows authority to be delegated to 70 elders. You also find God's miracle of sending quail to His people after they were complaining of food and Miriam and Aaron's rebellion against Moses.

However, no doubt the biggest event that you need to see in Numbers is the sending of the spies and the failure to believe God because of their fear. As a result, God punishes His people and denies all but two of this generation entrance into the Promised Land (13-14).

Another major event that happens in Kadesh is the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram against Moses (16). A drastic drama occurs here as God's people prove themselves to be so rebellious that God declares that He is ready to destroy His people.

Major Events at Moab (20:22-36:13): From Kadesh to Moab, you're immediately taken to a battle, another judgment of God against His people (which is where you see the narrative of the "brass serpent", and another battle with the Amorites. But perhaps the most famous narrative in this section occurs in chapter 22, when we see that curious story of Balak, Balaam, and Balaam's talking donkey. God's people are starting to build a reputation for being a very capable and formidable foe, and the surrounding nations start to fear them. This section takes up a full three chapters as Balak tries his hardest to have Balaam curse God's people, but God simply will not allow it.

You should notice also how the game has changed for the Moabites. nearly 40 years earlier it was the Israelites who looked at the Moabites and thought they were giants. Now, as the Moabites look at the Israelites, it is God's people who look like giants.

Lastly, the rest of the book is devoted to final instructions given to God's people before entering into their battle campaigns.

What to Gain from Numbers

When you are reading the book of Numbers, understand first of all, that you are reading a book of failure. Out of an entire generation, only two made it to see the Promised Land— Joshua and Caleb. Not Aaron, not Miriam, and not even Moses were able to enter. It is sad to think about. This journey could have been completed in eleven days, yet their rebellion cost them 40 years with no forward progress. That said, this book leaves some staunch warnings for believers today.

For instance, the writer of Hebrews actually used these people as a warning for us in chapters 3 and 4 about the dangers of hardening your heart against God. In Hebrews 3:7-12 the Bible says this,

“Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, they do alway err in their heart; and have not known my ways. So I share in my wrath, they shall not enter into my rest.) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.”

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, used the history given to us in this very book in order to explain to them the importance of holy living and belief in God. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11, that these people, despite seeing the mighty hand of God work in their life, still lusted after evil, were idolaters, and committed fornication. Therefore, Paul’s conclusion to these people was this:

“Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” 1 Corinthians 10:9-11

What all of this is saying is that whenever you are reading the book of Numbers, don’t shake your head and say, “How dare they... I can’t believe they would do such a thing.” Instead, you should think, “I need to pray for God’s grace so that I make sure not to make the exact kinds of mistakes these people did.”

Remember this lesson from the rebellious generation’s forty-year wandering. You can choose not to follow God, but sometimes it is impossible to regain what you lost. Not in terms of forgiveness; but in terms of having God’s rest.



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