



## Week Four Numbers

### Exploring Numbers

#### What's in a name?

The title of this book in the Septuagint is *Arithmoi*, which translates into English as *Numbers*. This name was probably chosen because of the census described in the first chapter of the book, in which the tribes of Israel are numbered (1:1-3).

Note how the book begins, "**The Lord spoke to Moses... in the desert of Sinai**" (1:1). This illustrates the continuity between Numbers and the previous book, Leviticus.

The Hebrew title for the book of Numbers, *Bemidbar*, meaning "in the wilderness," is taken from the first verse. Most of the book describes Israel's 40 years of wandering in the desert wilderness between Mt. Sinai and the plains of Moab.

#### Outline

The book of Numbers is a bridge between the events at Mt. Sinai (Exodus and Leviticus) and Moses' last words to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land (Deuteronomy).

Numbers begins with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. The first part of the book describes their preparations to leave the region (1:1 - 10:10).

God had planned for the Israelites to travel directly to the Promised Land. But instead of trusting God, they feared to enter the land. Because of their lack of faith, they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. All those who left Egypt over the age of 20 died. Joshua and Caleb were notable exceptions because of their faithfulness (10:11 - 21:9).

In the last year of their wandering, the younger generation, now grown adults, arrived in the plains of Moab, east of Canaan. The events of the next few months form the subject of Numbers 21:10 - 33:49. Finally, Moses began to prepare the new generation of Israelites to enter the Promised Land (33:50 - 36:13).

Some of the more significant events of Israel's history in the book of Numbers are:

- The sending of the scouts into Canaan, the Promised Land, and their contradicting reports (13:1-33).
- The refusal of the people to enter the land and God's subsequent judgment of them condemning the Israelites to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (14:1-35).
- The story of Balaam and Balak, which illustrates the futility of opposing God's will for his people (22:1 - 24:25).
- The human failings of such leaders as Miriam, Aaron and even Moses (12:1-15; 20:1-13).
- The rebellion of Korah, showing that God does not allow human beings to usurp the authority of his chosen servants (16:1-50).

## **How to read this book**

One theme dominates the book: God keeps his covenant with his people. He is sovereign over heaven and earth, and he rules over all nations. He bound himself to Israel and he kept his agreement. Balaam, for example, failed to understand that it was impossible to curse the people God had chosen to bless.

However, God will not compromise his holiness. In Numbers, as in Leviticus, God demands his people be sanctified in every aspect of their lives. According to circumstances, God will warn, punish, instruct, commend or bless his people. When the Israelites obeyed, God blessed them; when they disobeyed, God was fair to punish them.

Although Israel's record in the wilderness was far from perfect, God continued his covenant relationship with them. He was always their guide and protector, even as Jesus Christ is ours today (Hebrews 13:8).

Numbers is encouraging for Christians because it reminds us that, in spite of our weaknesses and failures, God remains faithful to his purpose for us, even when we, like the Israelites, are stubborn and self-centered (2 Corinthians 8:6).

## **Learning about God**

One of the most important aspects of God's character revealed in Numbers is his loyalty to his people. On almost every occasion when their faith was challenged, the Israelites lost courage and complained bitterly. Yet God continued to protect and lead them, even when they begged to return to slavery in Egypt (1:18-20; 14:1-4).

However, Numbers also shows us there are some things God will not tolerate. One is rebellion. The book records seven major episodes of rebellion (11:1-35; 12:1-15; 14:1-10; 14:41-45; 16:1-50; 20:1-13; 21:4-6). Israel saw that even though God was merciful, he would eventually punish those who consistently challenged his leadership (14:20-23).

Jesus Christ appears both metaphorically and prophetically in Numbers. Twice during the years in the wilderness God supplied water miraculously from a rock (Exodus 17; Numbers 20). The apostle

Paul understood these events as symbolizing Jesus Christ (1Corinthians 10:1-4), a Sustainer who never fails his people (John 4:13).

The coming Messiah is also prophesied by Balaam in **Numbers 24:1: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."** Jesus Christ is the star and scepter mentioned in this verse, according to the witness of the New Testament. (See, for example, Matthew 2:2 and Revelation 22:16.)

## **What does this book mean for us?**

### **An Example to follow:**

The apostle Paul tells us what we should learn from Numbers. In speaking of the Israelites, he says, **"God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert" (1 Corinthians 10:5).** Paul went on to say, **"These things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did" (verse 6).**

In reading the tragic story of Israel's unbelief, it would be easy to conclude that Numbers serves only as a warning. But the book has many practical and positive lessons that we can apply in our lives today.

### **He is with us even when we lose our way**

There are times when we all feel that we are wandering in a spiritual wilderness, trying to find our way across an emotional desert. During such times, we can derive great comfort from the book of Numbers.

### **A God of faithfulness, grace and power who is always for us**

Although rebellion, self-pity and death fill its pages, Numbers is also a book of hope. It is the story of the ever-faithful God of Israel and his ability to salvage victory out of what often appeared to be abysmal defeat. Christians should be encouraged by Numbers, for here we see God's grace and power overcoming Israel's lack of faith.

### **There is no difficulty, crisis or problem that He cannot deal with:**

However, before we condemn the frailties of the unstable and double-minded Israelites, do we see a mirror image of ourselves in our Christian struggles? We, too need to move away from an overly confident reliance on self, and humbly confess to God our tendency to rebel and complain against him. When we do, Numbers reassures us that God is more than equal to any crisis, problem or difficulty that we may encounter as we try to live a Christian life.

### **God's desire is that we move ever more deeply into the 'kingdom of God'**

The wilderness is a place of testing, where God teaches and trains us. The lessons he taught the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering are the same kind of lessons he wants us to learn today. As he was preparing them, so he is moving us deeper into our promised land – the kingdom of God.