

# Pentateuch: NUMBERS

## INTRODUCTION

Numbers describes the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land after their exodus from slavery in Egypt. The book begins with God asking Moses to take a census of the Israelites (*from within the tent of meeting, so we know Leviticus "worked"*). God gives them instructions for how to live in camps on their journey through the wilderness. The tabernacle, the place where God's presence dwells, is placed at the center of the camp to symbolize that God's presence must remain at the center of His people.

Israel was given a set of laws to follow to keep the camp pure and holy so God could dwell among them. God also requested the Levites be set apart as priests among the Israelite people. The priests were to act as mediators between man and God, offering sacrifices for the sins of the people so sinful man could be in right standing with a holy God.

God's people failed to keep his laws and started to complain about their circumstances. But God still choose to use His people and asked Moses to send twelve spies to investigate the Promised Land. Ten of the spies lacked faith in God and doubted Israel could survive on the land and the people believed them. So, God disciplined Israel by making them wander in the wilderness for forty years until that generation passed away.

Unfortunately, Israel continued to rebel against God. God asked Moses to speak to a rock and bring out water for the people, but instead, Moses stuck the rock, twice, in anger. Consequently, God told Moses he would die in the wilderness and wouldn't get to enter the Promised Land. Later on, God brought venomous snakes to bite the people to get them to repent from their sin. But God is also merciful. He instructed Moses to lift a bronze snake on a pole and said that all that looked to it would be healed. This act foreshadowed Christ's death on the cross for the salvation of all who believe in Him.

Although the people continued to rebel and complain, God showed them His mercy and grace by protecting and blessing them. The old generation passed away and the new generation won multiple battles at the edge of the Promised Land, allowing them to start to settle in the land. The book ends with Moses delivering his final words of wisdom and warning to the Israelites.

Overall, the theme of Numbers is that God desires holiness, but His people are sinful and rebellious. Yet, God still shows them mercy and grace.

## IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Imagine a family taking a road trip across the United States from California to Disney World in Orlando, Florida. The family consists of two parents and five children, all in the same car. The parents give the children everything they need to endure the long journey. But despite the parents' provision, the kids start to grumble and complain about the road trip. They desperately wish to turn around and go back home instead of trusting that their parents are taking them to the most amazing destination. The parents continue to show their ungrateful children grace and mercy by continuing to provide water, food, and protection. And eventually, the family finally arrives at their destination and has a great time!

In a similar way, God was leading his people to a great place—their new home; nonetheless, the Israelites complained the whole way there.

## BOOK ORGANIZATION

NUMBERS: WANDERING

Old Generation (Chapters 1-12)

Tragic Transition (Chapters 13-20)

New Generation (Chapters 21-36)

## JESUS IN THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

The Book of Numbers is a beautiful narrative about how God is a holy God and His people are sinful, rebellious, and ungrateful. For the Israelites to be in God's presence, they must make sacrifices to pay for their sins. This system creates the need for a Greater Sacrifice who can perfectly and eternally pay for the past, present, and future sins of man.

The significance of the high priest in Numbers foreshadows Christ as our Great High Priest. The role of the high priest was to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people so they could be with God. Jesus Christ is our ultimate High Priest who offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins.

The image of the bronze serpent on a pole in Numbers 21 is a foreshadowing of Christ's death on the cross. God commands Moses to make a bronze serpent, place it on a pole, and have the Israelites look to it for salvation from fiery serpents. God would later send Jesus to pay for mankind's sins on the cross and all must believe in Him for salvation.

In Numbers 24, Balaam is a pagan prophet hired to curse the Israelites. Whenever he tries to curse Israel, he's only able to bless them. Balaam prophesies that a star would come from Jacob and a scepter from Israel, possibly meaning the coming Messiah. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was announced by a star. Additionally, at the end of Genesis we learned that a powerful ruler (i.e. scepter) would come from Judah's line—here that prophetic word is to some degree repeated under new circumstances.

Numbers also talks about God providing bread and water from a rock for the Israelites. Jesus is mentioned as the "Bread of Life" in John 6:35 and the "cornerstone" in Matthew 21:42. God was providing for the Israelites' needs while also pointing to the perfect provision of Christ to come.

## BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN STUDYING THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

### OBSERVATION

- Author: Moses
- Location: Sinai Peninsula, Paran, Moab
- Covers: Israel's journey to the Promised Land
- Themes to look for: God's holiness, Israel's rebellion, mankind's sin, God's consequences for sin, the presence of God with His people, God's grace and mercy
- Structure: The structure of Numbers is divided into three parts. Pay close attention to the outline.

### INTERPRETATION

- Literary style: mostly narrative, with some poetic and discourse sections.
- Narrative context: Moses wrote the book of Numbers to the Jewish Israelites during their wilderness journey to the Promised Land. Numbers is part of the narrative storyline of the Old Testament, following the Israelites: God's chosen people.
- Historical context: God promised to give Abraham land, seed, and blessing. Numbers follows the Israelites journey to the Promised Land.

### APPLICATION

- **Resist the urge to rush to the application, "doing something," or moving on from each day's reading. Before you move on, spend some time sitting in silence with the Lord. Enjoy his company.**
- Read in light of Christ.
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a sin to repent from?
- Is there a promise to cling to?
- Is there an example to follow? Or one to avoid?

## PRAYER

- Pray for a willing heart that wants to submit to God's commands.
- Pray for a desire for holiness in your life.
- Pray for gratefulness when you're tempted to complain.
- Pray for a greater appreciation for Jesus' sacrifice on your behalf.
- Pray for an increased awareness that God's presence is with you, even in the "wilderness."

## **CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF NUMBERS?**

"The journeying of the Israelites in the desert is the image of the spiritual journey of the soul toward God. In each stage of their travels, the people of Israel learn something about God, His provision, and their dependence upon Him. This journey reveals both the faithfulness of God and the weakness of human nature." – Origen<sup>1</sup>, 245 AD

"The brazen serpent was a remedy of God's own providing; and so is Jesus Christ the appointed Savior of men." – Charles Spurgeon<sup>2</sup>, 1883



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<sup>1</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), Homily 27, p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The First Setting Up of the Brazen Serpent," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C.H. Spurgeon*, Vol. 29 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1883), p. 394.