

"Learning to Live with God"

Numbers 1

Any time we open one of the 66 books in the Bible we have to know who the author was, who he was writing to and where the people were when it was written. Numbers is the fourth book of the Bible, written by Moses to the second-generation Israelites who were the sons and daughters of the generation that came out of the exodus from Egypt. The first 25 chapters in Numbers talk about the first generation that came out of Egypt after God sent the 10 miraculous plagues against the Egyptians when Pharaoh would not let Israel go after Moses appealed to him on God's behalf. And Chapters 1-25 explain why that generation ended up wandering in the wilderness for almost 40 years. Numbers Ch.'s 26-36 and Deuteronomy are Moses' final words of preparation before the Israelites enter the land of Canaan, which God promised them way back when He formed the nation of Israel by calling Abraham out of the land of Ur (modern day Iraq).

So the opening verse of Numbers gives us the time and place and people involved:

The Lord spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.

This tells us that the Israelites have been camping around Mt. Sinai since Ex. 19. They arrived on the 14th day of the third month of the first year, which tells us they have been there for almost 10 months. Doing what? Listening to God tell Moses to build the Tabernacle and learning what God expects from His covenant people, how to live with God. Because this is all new to them. The Israelites only knew about God through what their ancestors told them about God when He made a few appearances or spoke directly to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. And all the ways they learned (along with Joseph and his 11 brothers) how to walk with God. Because for the next 400 years God made no appearance or spoke to anyone until He spoke to Moses (Ex. 3). The Israelites went to Egypt to spare them from a famine and were warmly received initially, but when a new Pharaoh arose and saw that these multiplying Israelites could become a threat, he forced them as slaves to build their cities and monuments to their gods and their Pharaohs. The people cried out to God for years, but not until Moses came along were their prayers answered.

Numbers then is the record of Israel's 38+-year pilgrimage of walking with God, learning about Him and from Him but also disobeying Him as we'll see.

Every portion of Scripture falls under the umbrella of 2 Tim. 3:16-17,

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

So Numbers is God's breathed out words recorded by Moses through the Holy Spirit and these words will teach us, sometimes rebuke us or correct us but always training us to be thoroughly equipped to do God's good in our world.

So when we come to the first verse in Numbers we already learn a major thing about God:

God Wants to Dwell with His People **(1:1)**

We've heard God speak many times in Exodus and Leviticus, but where was He when he spoke? Up on Mt. Sinai. Moses would go up and then would come down and tell them what God said. We read in Ex. 20:18

¹⁸ When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

²⁰ Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." ²¹ The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

To the people, God was distant and fearful, but now after the people built the Tabernacle, God moved where the people were; He came down to them. We'll see next week that God moved with the people. Already, we are taught the most amazing thing about God: He wants to be with us. He wants to dwell with His people. He wants us to know He is with us if we believe in Him. And He gives us His words by which to hear Him. He will still speak through a mediator, Moses. He will still receive sacrifices through mediators, the priests. But God is moving closer to His people and through the sacrificial system preparing them for the day when His Son Jesus will come and not just live with us but become one of us.

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Jesus came to show us God loves us so much He was willing to send His Son to be one of us, knowing most people would reject Him and crucify Him. And yet, Jesus came to die for our sins and rise from the dead to prove He was God's Son and that everything God says you can count on. And if Jesus experienced difficulty as God's Son living in the world, so will all God's people. So God tells Moses to count the men 20+ for what purpose?

² "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one. ³ You and Aaron are to number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army. ⁴ One man from each tribe, each the head of his family, is to help you.

They need an army because entering the land of Canaan and to inherit what God promised them is going to be difficult. What was God doing here?

God was Preparing His People for Life's Struggles **(1:2-19)**

Israel struggled under Egyptian oppression (not of their own choice) and then they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years (because they made poor choices) and now when they go where God says, it's not going to be easy. Life has many challenges; some of which we had no control over, some of which we bring on ourselves. But God doesn't want us to go it alone. Everyone must be counted who is of military age. God shows them here that

They are going to need each other (vv.2-15)

They are listed by their tribes. No tribe is better than others. They are appointed leaders because you always need leaders to help direct you, to keep everyone focused and organized. But they are all the people of God and they are going to need each other in the struggles of life. And when they enter the land of Canaan they will meet the Canaanites and find out they don't live a nice life. God explains why they have to remove the people from the land. Because they worshipped false gods and practiced vile things. In Lev. 18 He warned them about some of the sinful practices the Canaanites did.

18 *The Lord said to Moses, ²“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘I am the Lord your God. ³You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. ⁴You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. ⁵Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.*

And then God lists a whole pile of sexual perversions that His people should not practice because the Canaanites did them. He summarizes it in v.24

²⁴ “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. ²⁵ Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. ²⁶ But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, ²⁷ for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled.

The people of God will need the help of each other to live a life pleasing to God. To encourage us to walk with God we need each other to remind us of what God says, to show us where we are coming short and encourage us when life is hard.
And all this

Requires perseverance and trust on our part (Ex. 23:23-33)

God already told them this about a year ago when they first arrived at Mt. Sinai this would take a while. In Ex. 23:23

²³ My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out. ²⁴ Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces. ²⁵ Worship the Lord your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, ²⁶ and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span.

²⁷ “I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. ²⁸ I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. ²⁹ But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. ³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.

³¹ “I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. I will hand over to you the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you. ³² Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. ³³ Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you.”

God told them it would not happen quickly. He said they would need to multiply and trust Him to do what He says even if they didn't understand it fully. Walk obediently with God and He will show you along the way how we are on the right path.

So God tells Moses that He has already chosen the 12 leaders from each tribe who will look after counting the troops and we read they do it one-by-one. That would have taken awhile. And when they are done counting [don't worry we're not going to read all this] they have 603, 550 men able to fight. If there's 603, 500 men (20+) that doesn't even count the women or the children! Some suggest the number might be exaggerated by the power of 10 and the real number is 60,350 and the total population is 250,000 not 2 ½ million. But either way the reason why we need to know there were lots of Israelites at this time was because

God Was Fulfilling His Promises **(1:16-46)**

The nation of Israel didn't exist until God chose one man named Abraham and his barren wife Sarah and said in Gen. 12 to leave the land of Ur for a land I will show you and I will make you into a great nation where your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky (15:5), as numerous as there is dust on the earth (13:16) and sand on the seashore (22:17). God repeated these promises to Abraham's son Isaac, then to Isaac's son Jacob and then to Jacob's son Joseph. And when the book of Genesis ends, there are 70 living Israelites who, over the next 400 years in Egypt they grow to be a massive population of people. One of the things God was doing during the hardship in Egypt was fulfilling His promise to make them into a great nation.

And God also promised Abraham back in Gen. 12:3 that He would one day bless the world through a descendant of Abraham and we know that promise is Jesus. Paul wrote in Galatians 3

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." ¹⁴ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

God promised them they would have many descendants, which required the people's involvement by being fruitful and multiplying. And now God promises them the land of Canaan which also involves the people to obey God by fighting them and removing them from the land. God fulfills His promises through His people and they all have a role to play in that. As we obey God, He works and blesses and fulfills His promises. Some of them He fulfills without us but many He fulfills with us. And our main role is to obey the Word of God. Which brings us to

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the Levites who are not counted. Why not? Because they are set apart to look after the Tabernacle where God meets with His people through worship and speaks to Moses who relates the Word to the Levites who then teach the people of God how to live with God. Here through the Levites separation from war and set apart for the Word and worship, we learn

God Wants Us to Grow in Knowing Him More **(1:47-54)**

⁵⁰ Instead, appoint the Levites to be in charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony—over all its furnishings and everything belonging to it. They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings; they are to take care of it and encamp around it. ⁵¹ Whenever the tabernacle is to move, the Levites are to take it down, and whenever

the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall do it. Anyone else who goes near it shall be put to death. ⁵² *The Israelites are to set up their tents by divisions, each man in his own camp under his own standard.* ⁵³ *The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the Testimony so that wrath will not fall on the Israelite community. The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the tabernacle of the Testimony.”*

Now that God had come down from the mountain into the wilderness to be with Israel, the Levites were to protect the people from approaching the Tabernacle on their own. God is holy and set apart and the Tabernacle showed His people that you can only come to God through a blood sacrifice. Since people are sinful *“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins”* (Heb. 9:22). The Levites needed to teach the people about who God is and how to worship Him so they can enjoy life more. Part of this was demonstrated even by where they pitched their tents, around the Tabernacle itself. However, all this again is a picture that we can only approach God through God’s appointed Mediator, Jesus Christ, through whom we can receive forgiveness of sins if we confess we are sinners and place our trust in Jesus. When we do that, His presence (the Holy Spirit) comes to live in us. And now we learn to walk with God. God was laying the foundation here to show His people that He wants to be with us, He wants us to trust His way to get our sins forgiven and to constantly trust Him and obey His Word as we navigate with Him our lives, struggles and all. And the last verse says:

⁵⁴ *The Israelites did all this just as the Lord commanded Moses.*

But as we read further on in Numbers, it won’t always be like this. The Israelites will rebel against God and against his appointed leaders and grumble and complain about the struggles in life. Why? Why do we all grumble and complain and disobey God at times? Because of sin and pride. We think we can live life without God’s involvement and instructions and help. This is how the apostle Paul summarizes Israel’s time in the wilderness in 1 Cor. 10 and he issues a warning for us:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² *They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.* ³ *They all ate the same spiritual food* ⁴ *and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.* ⁵ *Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.* ⁶ *Now these things [most of which are in Numbers] occurred as examples **to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things 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 got up to indulge in pagan revelry.”* ⁸ *We should not commit sexual immorality, **as some of them did**—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.* ⁹ *We should not test the Lord, **as some of them did**—and were killed by snakes.* ¹⁰ *And do not grumble, **as some of them did**—and were killed by the destroying angel.* ¹¹ *These things happened to them as examples and were written down **as warnings for us**, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.* ¹² *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!* ¹³ *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

Paul says the book of Numbers has a lot to teach us about handling temptations and what happens when we become proud and think we know better than God. Right now things were going well for Israel and they will until they start to move out in Ch. 10. Maybe right now you’re doing okay in your walk with God but maybe its because life is good and there aren’t a whole lot of challenges right now. Don’t worry, they’ll come and then we have to choose whether we will walk with God by faith or proudly try and run our life our way.

Paul says learn from Numbers the dangers of pride, of trying to live life without God. We need each other to encourage us to trust God. We need reminders from the Word when we’re slipping. We

need each other to keep reminding us that God is fulfilling His promises but we still have to walk with Him by faith. We all have a role to play.

Back in Num. 1:16-17 God told Moses and Aaron to appoint 12 leaders to organize the counting, we read that *“Moses and Aaron took these men whose names had been given.”* By whom? By God. God knew 12 guys who would do a good job of obeying His Word. Which means He knew everyone by name. He knows all of us by Name among the myriads of 8 billion people in the world. He knows you. He chose you to follow Him. He entrusts you with His truth to walk with Him. He led us to be together to help us learn to live with God. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for He who promised is faithful. [Heb. 10:23]

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If you have any comments or questions about this sermon please
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