

# Introduction and the First Census (Numbers 1-2)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

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## I. Introduction: Why Study the Book of Numbers?

a. Many Christians neglect studying the Old Testament, and especially consider Numbers to be a book that can be neglected. They tend to see it being boring (starting with a detailed census of the people) and having no practical application for Christians today.

b. **Question:** Why should we take the time to read and study this book?

i. **My Answer:**

1. Paul told us that all of the things written in the past (the Old Testament) were for the benefit of us, the Christians. After quoting from **Psalm 69**, in his letter to a church in Rome predominantly made up of Gentiles, Paul wrote:

a. "For whatever things were written before were written *for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." (**Romans 15:4**, NKJV)

2. **Numbers** covers about 39 of the 40 years that the Jews spent in the Wilderness after their exodus from Egypt. In three places in the New Testament, that 40-year period is presented as foreshadowing the Christian life. It contains lessons for us: what it will take for us to make it to the end.

a. Read **1 Corinthians 9:24-10:13**.

i. Paul says *he himself* does not want to be disqualified from eternal life and is concerned about his own vigilance so that he makes it to the end.

ii. Paul then points to the Israelites wanderings in the Wilderness as an example that Christians are to learn from.

iii. We see in the story of the exodus from Egypt and the Wilderness wanderings a map of the Christian spiritual journey. The time in the

Wilderness represents the Christian life: the time between our 'baptism' and when we reach the 'Promised Land'.

1. The sins that led to so many dying in the Wilderness are lessons for us Christians. We should not repeat similar mistakes and risk being disqualified from the goal we seek.
  2. While we take seriously this sobering warning, let us also consider the great encouragement that Paul gives: that *we will not be tempted beyond what we can bear; God will provide a way out of every temptation.* May we never say that it will be impossible for us make it to the end!
- iv. As a young Christian in my early twenties, I took a survey class on the Old Testament where we read through most of the Old Testament. When I grasped the importance of these stories for us, I made the decision (four decades ago) to devote a significant portion of my life to teaching the Old Testament to Christians.
1. I hope many in a new generation of young men will make similar decisions.
  2. Learning the Old Testament really well will have so many blessings and benefits to your life and impact. It also will deepen your understanding of the New Testament.
- b. Jude makes a similar point regarding the exodus journey providing important lessons for us.
- i. "But I want to remind you, though you once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe." (**Jude 5**, NKJV)
- c. Recently in a lesson on **Psalm 95** (see walking-by-faith.org for this lesson and notes), we saw how the writer of **Hebrews**, in **Hebrews 3-4**, challenged the

Christians to learn a lesson from that psalm (and from the example of the Israelites in the Wilderness):

- i. “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’” (**Hebrews 3:7–11**, NKJV, quoting from **Psalm 95**)
  - ii. The **Hebrews** writer points to their (bad) example and admonishes us to make sure we do not follow the same pattern of hardening our hearts and disobeying the Lord. Otherwise, we will not enter God’s rest, either!
3. Jesus and the New Testament writers assume we know the stories and main characters in **Numbers** and refer to them in making important points. If we want to understand the New Testament, we need to know what they are talking about.
- a. Jesus:
    - i. In **John 3**, Jesus gives a prophecy about the crucifixion, referring to the bronze serpent story in **Numbers 21**.
      1. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” (**John 3:14–15**, NKJV)
    - ii. In **Revelation 2**, addressing the seven churches of Asia Minor, Jesus points to a detail in the story of Balaam from the book of **Numbers** to make His point.
      1. Many of these churches are predominantly made up of Gentiles. Note that Paul assumes these non-Jewish Christians understand these Old Testament stories!

2. "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality." (**Revelation 2:14**, NKJV)
- b. Paul and the writer of **Hebrews**:
    - i. As we discussed, they pointed to the exodus journey (most of which occurs in **Numbers**) as foreshadowing our own temptations and testing.
  - c. Peter
    - i. Uses the example of Balaam in **2 Peter 2**.
  - d. Jude:
    - i. In his short letter, he points to *three events* from the book of **Numbers** (including references to Balaam and to Korah's rebellion) to make his warning points to Christians.
4. In this book we will learn about:
    - a. The faithful and unfaithful.
      - i. Let's keep our eye on two groups of people, so we can learn from both:
        1. Joshua and Caleb, the two from their generation who made it successfully into the Promised Land
        2. The 600,000+ Israelites from that generation who fell in the Wilderness, and did not make it.
      - ii. An important question to ask ourselves as we study the book of **Numbers**: What distinguished Joshua and Caleb from the other 600,000+?
    - b. Moses
      - i. About 39 years of his life are covered in this book.

- ii. As Peter pointed out in **Acts 3** and Stephen in **Acts 7**, the prophecy about the Lord “raising up a prophet *like Moses*” (**Deuteronomy 18:15-19**) referred to Jesus. This is also alluded to in **John 1:15, 5:46** and **7:40-42**.
  - 1. In **Numbers**, we will see more unusual details in the life of Moses that correspond to those in the life of Jesus.
    - a. Be on the lookout for those similarities!
- 5. There are some fascinating but little-known prophecies about Christ in this book that can help strengthen the faith of Christians and can be used as evidence to persuade unbelievers.
  - a. One example relates to something I heard in a debate between a Christian apologist and a Muslim.
    - i. The Muslim critic challenged the Christian: “If Jesus was to be so important, *why isn't His name* given anywhere in the Old Testament prophecies?”
  - b. While the Christian apologist in that debate could not answer that question, Justin Martyr would have ‘knocked it out of the park’, by pointing to a passage in **Numbers**, as he did in his *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. We will learn about that in this series.

## II. Name of the Book

- a. The name of the book, “**Numbers**”, is taken from the census at the start of the book while the people are still encamped at Mount Sinai.
- b. Actually, there are (at least) four different censuses taken in this book.
  - i. The major census of the entire nation (except the Levites) at the start of the book.
  - ii. Two are numberings of the Levites in the beginning.
  - iii. A second census of the nation of Israel near the end of the 40 years, in **Numbers 26**.
- c. While I believe there is something important in these censuses for us (especially the first and last ones), they are not very exciting to read.

- i. Many Christians become discouraged by this in the first few chapters of **Numbers** and quit studying the book. Please, don't do that!
- ii. In our lessons we will summarize those parts of the book and not read it. However, I encourage you to read everything in the book on your own.

### III. Overview of the Timeline

- a. The Jewish calendar started with the month of the original Passover and exodus from Egypt. This would become the *first month of the year* (a lunar year).
  - i. Read **Exodus 12:1-6**.
    1. Select the lamb on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the month.
    2. Sacrifice it on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month; and eat unleavened bread for the next seven days.
    3. Depart from Egypt (the exodus) and cross the Red Sea on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month (**Numbers 33:3**).
- b. Two months after departing Egypt, the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, where they encamped for an extended period.
  - i. Read **Exodus 19:1-2**.
  - ii. This is when the Lord descends on Mount Sinai and speaks the Ten Commandments in the hearing of the people.
- c. About ten months after arriving at Mt. Sinai, all the furnishings for the tabernacle have been constructed, and the tabernacle is set up. During those ten months, Moses received the Ten Commandments on stone tablets and all the other laws and ordinances contained at the end of **Exodus** and in **Leviticus** (see **Leviticus 26:46** and **27:34**).
  - i. Read **Exodus 40:1**.
  - ii. Read **Exodus 40:15-17** and **40:28-32**.
    1. The tabernacle is set up and is filled with the cloud of "the glory of the Lord".
    2. This brings us to one full year after the original Passover. All the events from **Exodus 12-40** take place within a one-year period, the first year of the 40 years in the Wilderness.
      - a. Two months from the Red Sea to the foot of Mount Sinai, then

- b. Ten months encamped at Mount Sinai, during which time Moses received the laws and the tabernacle was constructed.
- c. This brings us to the first day of the first month of the second year (after the original Passover).
- d. The book of **Numbers** is not in strict chronological order. However, it picks up right where **Exodus** leaves off.
  - i. Read **Numbers 1:1-2**.
    1. The census of all Israel is announced on the *first day of the second month* of the second year (one month after the events of **Exodus 40**, where the cloud filled the tabernacle).
  - ii. Read **Numbers 9:1-5**.
    1. Here the Lord is speaking to Moses at the *beginning of the first month* of the second year, *a month before* the census announcement of **Numbers 1:1-2**.
    2. While the story from the end of **Exodus 40** picks up seamlessly here in **Numbers 9**, for some reason we have the account of the census presented first.
- e. Near the end of the time covered by **Numbers**, Aaron dies on Mount Hor. Then Moses leads the people to an encampment on the east side of the Jordan River, opposite Jericho.
  - i. Read **Numbers 33:38-39** and **33:49-50**.
  - ii. Aaron, the high priest and brother of Moses, dies in the 40<sup>th</sup> year of the Wilderness journey.
  - iii. Therefore, **Numbers** covers a period of about 39 years.
- f. To complete the chronology of the books covering the exodus journey, Moses gives his 'farewell address' near the end of the 40<sup>th</sup> year, which is in the book of **Deuteronomy**. There he recounts what happened over the past 39 years, including providing some important details not recorded in the prior books. The name of the book comes from 'second telling of the Law'. Moses then issues final warnings to the nation. The book ends with his death and the handoff of authority to Joshua, who will lead the people into Canaan, the Promised Land.
  - i. Read **Deuteronomy 1:3**.

- ii. This book starts with Moses giving an address near the end of the 40<sup>th</sup> year.

#### IV. The First Census of Israel

a. Read **Numbers 1:1-4** and **1:17-19**.

- i. This was a military-type census.
- ii. All males age 20 and older are counted.
- iii. This census did not include women or children under 20.
- iv. The census was organized by tribe.

b. Read **Numbers 1:45-46**.

- i. The total number of men of fighting age is a very specific number: 603,550.
- ii. Note that **Exodus 12:37** says, “600,00 men, not including the mixed multitude (non-Israelites who joined them)”.
  - 1. I assume that figure was a ‘round-number’ estimate.

c. Read **Numbers 1:47-54**.

- i. The tribe of Levi was not included in this census.
- ii. The Levites are set apart for special service, for ministering to the tabernacle.
  - 1. The priests were not involved in fighting in the military.
  - 2. **Just a Thought:** Since Christians now are members of “a royal priesthood” (**1 Peter 2:9**), might this exemption of priests from military service be foreshadowing the fact that God’s ‘priests’ would not participate in war in the future?
- iii. The Levites will encamp closest to the tabernacle, to guard it most closely.

## V. Encamped Around the Tabernacle

- a. **Questions:** Why did the Lord call for this first census at the beginning of their journey? Was this military-type related to fighting enemies? And why did the Lord then call for a full census again near the end of their journey?
  - i. Perhaps this first census was for military reasons. However, there would be few battles against enemies in the desert over the next 39 years.
  - ii. **One Possible Reason:** All of the men captured in this first census (except Joshua and Caleb) were among those who fell in the Wilderness, as Paul references in **1 Corinthians 10**.
    1. Think about it. A man who was 20 years old at the time of this first census would have been only about 60 years old at the end of the Israelites' time in the Wilderness, forty years later. That is not that old! However, all the men in that situation (except for Joshua and Caleb) would have died prior to the Israelites crossing the Jordan River into Canaan.
    2. Perhaps God wanted it to emphasize in the Scriptures that of the 603,550 adult men who were counted at the beginning of the journey, *only two* of these made it to the end!
    3. To me, this underscores the seriousness of the point that Paul is making in **1 Corinthians 10**: that we need to take the lessons from the Wilderness seriously if we want to make it to our 'Promised Land'.
- b. It seems to me that this first census also was (at least in part) for organizing the tribes to encamp around the tabernacle. The picture here is the tabernacle is at the center of the community with the Levites closest to it and guarding it, with the other tribes organized around it. From **Numbers chapter 2**:
  - i. Encamped on the *east side* of the tabernacle (under Judah): tribes of Issachar and Zebulun.
    1. 186,400 men.
    2. These will break camp first.
  - ii. On the *south side* (under Reuben): tribes of Reuben, Simeon and Gad.
    1. 151,450 men.
    2. These will break camp second.

- iii. On the *west side* (under Ephriam): tribes of Ephriam, Manasseh and Benjamin.
  - 1. 108,100 men.
  - 2. These will break camp third.
- iv. On the *north side* (under Dan): tribes of Dan, Asher and Naphtali.
  - 1. 157,600 men.
  - 2. These will break camp last.
- c. Note that although Reuben was the oldest son, the first honor goes to Judah (from whom later the line of kings from David, as well as Jesus, would come).
  - i. This was foreshadowed by Jacob in the prophecy of **Genesis 49**, where he blesses all of his sons, with his greatest blessing going to his fourth son: Judah.
  - ii. Dan is listed last; some early Christian writers believed, based on the **Genesis 49** prophecy, that the antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan.
- d. Also, note that Judah's group would be stationed on the east side (the direction of the rising sun).
  - i. "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be." (**Matthew 24:27**, NKJV)
  - ii. For this reason, from ancient times, the Christian custom was to *face east when praying*, and even to orient their church buildings accordingly.
    - 1. From Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 195 AD:
      - a. "And since the dawn is an image of the day of birth, and from that point the light which has shone forth at first from the darkness increases, there has also dawned on those involved in darkness a day of the knowledge of truth. In correspondence with the manner of the sun's rising, *prayers are made looking towards the sunrise in the east.*"
        - i. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, book 7, chapter 7; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 535)

2. From Tertullian, writing c. 197 AD:
  - a. “Others, again [*pagans who are confused about the Christian faith*], certainly with more information and greater verisimilitude, believe that the sun is our god. We shall be counted Persians perhaps, though we do not worship the orb of day painted on a piece of linen cloth, having himself everywhere in his own disk. The idea no doubt has originated from *our being known to turn to the east in prayer.*”
    - i. (Source: Tertullian, *The Apology*, chapter 16; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 31)