

## Second Census and Sons of Korah (Numbers 26)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

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### I. Introduction

- a. We are in the last year or two of the 40 years (or 42 in the LXX; compare **Joshua 5:5-6**) that the Israelites would spend in the desert, before entering the Promised Land.
- b. The Israelites have just finished facing the last major trial in the Wilderness, in which their men were drawn into sexual immorality and idolatry with the Moabite (or Midianite) women, in **Numbers 25**.
  - i. Because of that sin, 24,000 Israelites died. It was only stopped by the bold action of Phinehas. As a reward for his zeal, the Lord granted him and his descendants the “covenant of peace”, the high priesthood.
  - ii. That was one of many purging trials they went through in the Wilderness, the last of those mentioned specifically in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**.
    1. Each of those trials, which resulted in many people dying in the desert, was provided as an example for us. Paul admonished Christians to avoid the same five sins if we want to make it to our own ‘Promised Land’: our eternal reward. Those five sins are:
      - a. Lusting after evil things;
      - b. Idolatry;
      - c. Sexual immorality;
      - d. Tempting (or testing) Christ; and
      - e. Complaining.
  - iii. After this last punishment for sin (and the final mass die-off from the resulting plague), the people are almost ready to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. Before they do, the Lord tells Moses they must conduct a (second) census of the people.
    1. That is the reason why this book has been given the name “**Numbers**”; because of the two censuses that frame the overall book.

2. Many would consider this to be a relatively 'dry' chapter. However, I believe there are some real gems hidden in the text here, that are well worth the effort to explore.

## II. The Second General Census

- a. The book of **Numbers** begins with a general census of the nation, and near the end of the book, there is a second, similar census taken.
- b. The first census had been about 40 years earlier, right before the people broke camp at Mount Sinai.
  - i. The census of the nation was organized by tribe, household and family.
  - ii. Only the men of military age (20 years and above) were counted, "all who were able to go out with the army / all who were able to go out to war" (**Numbers 1:42, 48**).
    1. The total number counted was 603,550 (**Numbers 1:46**).
    2. Therefore, including the women and children, I assume there may have been over two million people.
  - iii. The Levites were not included in that census. Instead, they were counted in a separate census that involved all males over one month old (**Numbers 3**).
- c. Read **Numbers 26:1-7**.
  - i. Now nearing the end of their journey in the Wilderness, Moses and Eleazar, the high priest, are told to take a census of the people.
  - ii. Like the first census, this will count all the males over the age of 20.
  - iii. This is discussed tribe by tribe, starting with the tribe of *Reuben* (the oldest of the sons of Israel).
- d. Read **Numbers 26:8-11**.
  - i. It mentions Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben, who died in a very dramatic way during Korah's rebellion. (**Numbers 16**)
  - ii. Here in the midst of the census in **Numbers 26**, in the discussion about Reuben's tribe, we learn that while the children of Dathan and Abiram perished, the *sons of Korah did not die*. (**Numbers 26:11**)
    1. Read **Numbers 16:1-3**.

- a. Recall that Dathan and Abiram (from the tribe of Reuben), along with Korah (a Levite) and others rose up against Moses and Aaron.
2. Read **Numbers 16:23-35**.
    - a. Korah, Dathan and Abiram were each standing by their tents.
    - b. It says Dathan and Abiram stood there “*with their wives and children.*”
    - c. The earth opened up and swallowed up the rebellious men, their tents “and all with them” alive. Then the earth covered them, and all perished.
  3. In the account of the second census, in **Numbers 26:11**, we learn an important detail that was not mentioned in the **Numbers 16** story of the deaths of Dathan, Abiram and Korah in their rebellion.
    - a. While the children of Dathan and Abiram perished with their father when the earth opened up, the sons of Korah did not undergo the same demise as their famous father.
    - b. The *sons of Korah did not die* in that incident.
- iii. **Questions:** Who was Korah, and why was that detail (his sons not dying with him) so important to mention?
    1. Korah was a Levite, closely related to Moses and Aaron. Korah was a first cousin of Moses and Aaron. His father and their father were brothers!
    2. Therefore, Korah was not only a Levite, but from the Kohathite branch. So while Korah was not from the priestly line of Aaron, he was a Kohathite like all the priests. He was from the honored branch of the Levites reserved for the most honored services in the tabernacle ministry.
  - iv. Regarding the significance of the “sons of Korah”.
    1. There is a popular modern Christian musical group based in Australia called ‘*Sons of Korah*’. Many of us have listened to their songs, which feature psalms put to music.

2. In the Old Testament, it speaks of the ‘sons of Korah’ as being gatekeepers and singers in the tabernacle/temple area, especially in the time of King David.
  - a. “These were the divisions of the gatekeepers among the sons of Korah and among the sons of Merari.” (**1 Chronicles 26:19**, NKJV)
  - b. Since this passage was written during the time of King David, about 400 years after the death of Korah, the expression “sons of Korah” clearly referred to descendants who lived many generations after him, rather than to Korah’s immediate sons.
  - c. King David was the author of many of the psalms, which were written to be sung. Also, David was a strong promoter of music in praise and worship of God. The “sons of Korah” in his day played an important part in that.
3. Eleven of the psalms are attributed to “sons of Korah”. These are found among those numbered in the 40s and 80s.
  - a. Read **Psalm 42** (designated **Psalm 41** in the LXX), the first psalm attributed to the sons of Korah.
    - i. This is a famous psalm where the author speaks of his wonder for the Lord and his fond remembrance of Him.
  - b. Read **Psalm 45:7-8** (designated **Psalm 44:7-8** in the LXX).
    - i. This is a very important passage that speaks of the divinity of Christ, the Anointed One. It is quoted prominently in **Hebrews 1**.
    - ii. Here two are spoken of as ‘God’ (the Father as well as the Son, who is the Christ).
4. In **1 Chronicles 6** it gives some of the genealogy of the Levites. There we learn:
  - a. The prophet Samuel was a Levite and a direct descendant of Korah. The line of descent runs through Elkanah, the father of Samuel.

- b. Neither of Samuel's two sons, Joel and Abijah, were righteous men. (**1 Samuel 8:1-3**, designated **1 Kingdoms 8:1-3** in the LXX)
  - i. That was the reason that the Israelites asked for a king: so that they would have someone to lead them after Samuel departed.
- c. However, Joel's son, "Heman the singer" (**1 Chronicles 6:18**), became a famous singer for the Lord during the time of David.
  - i. "Heman and his brethren" were among those who sang and played instruments when the ark was brought into Jerusalem, in **1 Chronicles 15:16-19**.
  - ii. Read **1 Chronicles 25:1** and **25:4-6**. Heman was "the king's chief musician in the word of God". He had 14 sons and three daughters; all sang hymns with their father."
- v. Things to consider from the descendants of Korah.
  - 1. Even if your father (or some other ancestor) was an unrighteous man, the Lord can still do amazing things in your life and in the lives of your children.
  - 2. Korah, although a notorious sinner and rebel against the Lord, had offspring who included:
    - a. The prophet Samuel;
    - b. Samuel's grandson, who became chief musician for King David, singing and making music before the Lord along with his many sons; and
    - c. The "sons of Korah" who were gatekeepers in the tabernacle and composed 11 psalms which are still moving hearts in worship of God some 3,000 years later.
      - i. Through them, the Holy Spirit revealed even the divinity of Christ, the Anointed One.
  - 3. The sons of Korah, which included Heman and his spiritual, musically inclined descendants, also provide a wonderful

reminder to us of the importance of singing psalms and hymns to God in our families today.

- a. At the Last Supper, the apostles and Jesus sang a hymn before departing for the Mount of Olives. (**Matthew 26:29-30**)
- b. In prison in Philippi:
  - i. “But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” (**Acts 16:25**, NKJV)
- c. Paul admonishes Christians to sing to the Lord:
  - i. “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, *speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord*, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.” (**Ephesians 5:15–21**, NKJV)
  - d. “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*” (**Colossians 3:15–16**, NKJV)
4. **Challenge:** Consider the examples in the Old Testament and New Testament, as well as the admonitions throughout the Scriptures to praise God and encourage one another in song.
  - a. If you are not already doing so, put these things into practice in your own life and in your family!
- e. After starting with the tribe of Reuben, the census continues through the other tribes that will inherit land. The tribe of Naphtali is discussed last.
  - i. Read **Numbers 26:51-56**.

1. The total number counted in this census, including all tribes (except the Levites), is 601,730.
  - a. This is close to the number in the prior census, about 40 years earlier.
2. **Question:** What was the *reason* for this second census?
  - a. **Answer:** To find out the number in each tribe, so that the land allotments could match the size of each group, after they entered the Promised Land.
3. Note that many years later, David confessed that he had “greatly sinned” by numbering the men in Israel, for which the Lord brought severe judgment on His people. (**2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21**)
4. At the end of Israel’s journey through the desert, it was appropriate to number the people for two reasons:
  - a. God told them to do so.
  - b. Note that sometimes God tells people to do something once (like Moses striking the rock) or for a limited time (like divorcing a wife, killing your enemies, taking oaths, or getting circumcised). However, those requirements were superseded later (for example, after Jesus ushered in the New Covenant).
    - i. In this case, the census was conducted for a good reason: to allocate the land properly.
5. **Open Question:** Are we in the church supposed to be ‘numbering people’ today? Does God have a problem with that?
  - a. **From My Own Background:** Several years ago, I was in a church that was very numbers-driven. The leaders were constantly tracking the statistics on the number of members, attendance at events, church events, growth, baptisms, etc.
    - i. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? What do *you* think?
    - ii. Justifications I heard regarding why it was ‘good’ (or at least acceptable) to keep track of the numbers included:

1. The Bible mentions specific numbers related to church growth in the beginning, with 3,000 being baptized in **Acts 2:41**, and 5,000 men in **Acts 4:4**.
2. However, there is not much in the way of numbering members of the church after those two examples!
  - iii. It seems to me that we should be very careful with numbers, only using them when needed.
- f. The Levites are numbered separately, all males over one month old.
  - i. Read **Numbers 26:62**.
  - ii. Total = 23,000 males.
- g. Read **Numbers 26:63-65**.
  - i. **Question:** If you compared the lists of names on the two censuses, taken about 40 years apart, how many names (out of over 600,000) would appear on both lists?
    1. **Answer:** Two.
  - ii. **Question:** On this second census, how many men would there be who were *over the age of sixty*?
    1. **Answer:** Two. This would be the same two as in the prior question: Joshua and Caleb (again, not including Moses, who had not yet died).
  - iii. **Question:** Why only these two?
    1. This was in fulfillment of what the Lord said about 40 years earlier at Kadesh, when the 12 spies were sent out, and the people rebelled, in **Numbers 13-14**.
    2. Read **Numbers 14:1-4** and **14:26-35**.
      - a. The people were sentenced to 40 years of wandering in the desert, during which time everyone over the age of 20 would die. However, their children would be able to enter the Promised Land.
- h. Lessons for us:
  - i. God always keeps His promises. This applied both ways: to the righteous and to the unrighteous. I believe that grasping this aspect of

God's character (that He is a faithful God who always keeps His promises) is an essential part of a healthy spiritual foundation. Regardless of what others may do or may have done to us (church leaders, parents, friends, etc.), God ALWAYS keeps His promises. Sometimes the fulfillment may take a few years, but He will deliver without fail. Always.

1. He promised that Joshua and Caleb would enter the Promised Land. They did.
  2. He promised that the rebellious generation (adults over the age of 20) would all die in the Wilderness, and not enter it. That happened, exactly as the Lord had promised.
    - a. He promised that their children would enter and inherit the Promised Land. They did.
  3. It took 40 years to fulfill this promise, but the Lord did exactly what He said He would do.
- ii. The second reason that the Lord ordered this second census (in my opinion): to make it absolutely clear, for all time, that *only two* out of the original 600,000+ men made it into the Promised Land.
1. Consider the point Paul was making in **1 Corinthians 10**, from this story of the journey through the Wilderness. The Israelite nation represented the church, those who had been baptized and were drinking from the rock (Christ), going through a time of trials and testing on the way to their goal: the Promised Land.
  2. "Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness." (**1 Corinthians 10:1-5**, NKJV)
  3. That statement "*with most of them*" may be one of the greatest understatements of all time! Consider:
    - a. Of the original 600,000+ in the first census, *only two* made it. That comes out to 1 in every 300,000+!

- i. By my calculation, that comes out to only *3 ten-thousandths of one percent* making it to the Promised Land.
    - ii. And these are from those who have been “baptized”, from those in “the church”.
  4. This highlights the utter foolishness of the idea that everyone in the church will be saved on the Last Day. While we must have disciplined churches where sin is addressed, and the wicked are expelled, we will never be able to do a perfect job of ‘policing’ the church.
    - a. Paul *warned the Christians* who were in the church in Corinth, based on this example:
      - i. “Therefore let him who thinks he stands *take heed lest he fall.*” (**1 Corinthians 10:12**, NKJV)
      - b. As Jesus said, the kingdom of God is like a dragnet that will have *both good and bad fish in it*. The sorting-out will take place by the angels on the Last Day. (**Matthew 13:47-50**)
  5. One of the hardest things for Christians to grasp: only a few will be saved. However, the Lord has repeated this message over and over again.
    - a. Consider the following warnings from Jesus:
      - i. “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (**Matthew 7:13-14**, NKJV)
      - ii. Read **Luke 13:22-30**.
        1. Jesus calls us to “strive to enter through the *narrow gate*”.
        2. We need to do whatever it takes. Yes, only a few will be saved.
    - b. Consider the stories that foreshadow the Last Day.
      - i. Noah and the Flood: only 8 were saved.

- ii. Sodom and Gomorrah: only 3 were saved.
  - iii. Tenth Plague (Passover): death came to every household except those protected by the blood of the Passover lamb.
  - iv. Wilderness wandering: only 2 out of 600,000+ adult males made it into the Promised Land.
  - c. While this may be hard for us to accept, the Lord has made it abundantly clear throughout the Scriptures that *only a few will be saved!*
6. However, we MUST keep in mind always, in light of this, the following:
- a. “[God] *desires all men to be saved* and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4, NKJV)
    - i. The Lord is on our side in this spiritual battle and wants each one of us to be saved.
  - b. He is full of mercy and happy to forgive even the most wicked who turn back to Him.
    - i. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we see that in the nature of God. He wants to forgive those who repent and turn back to Him.
    - ii. He revealed that aspect of His nature to Moses at Mount Sinai.
      - 1. “And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin....” (Exodus 34:6-7, NKJV)
  - iii. David spoke about this, as well.
    - 1. “The LORD is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us." (**Psalm 103:8-12, NKJV**)

- iv. We also see this in **Ezekiel 18, Ezekiel 34**, and in the story of God forgiving the wicked men of Nineveh who repented, in **Jonah 3**.
  - v. Jesus taught extensively about God being merciful and delighting in forgiving the wicked who repent. This was especially illustrated in the stories of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Lost Son, in **Luke 15**.
- c. Let us remember one more *great promise of God*.
- i. "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." (**1 Corinthians 10:13, NKJV**)
- i. **Closing Challenge:** Let us walk in the footsteps of Joshua and Caleb, imitating their example. They show us the way. While it is a difficult way, every one of us here can make it with God's help, if we give it our best and recommit ourselves to the Lord when we stumble.
- i. "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;" (**Philippians 2:12, NKJV**)
  - ii. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (**1 John 1:6-9, NKJV**)
  - iii. Also, we should not be surprised, and our faith should not be shaken, when we see others fall to sin along the way. That may even includes prominent leaders. Consider how we have seen the same thing happen even in the Wilderness journey, in **Numbers**.