

NUMBERS

1. Introduction

October 6, 2011

I heard that someone said, "Destination is not as important as the journey itself." But in my opinion, the destination of my journey is far more important than the journey itself. Because I want to get there. I think I understand what the person who made that comment meant. I also agree with that person that it is very important how we handle the journey itself.

Let's put that in the aspects of our spiritual journey and destination. Yes, our spiritual life-long journey must be godly that it brings honor and glory to our Lord. But being in heaven as our destination will be far greater than anyone of us can describe.

Over 2 million people left Egypt where they used to be slaves with no rights and no hope for any decent life. They were crying out to the Lord because of their miserable life. God brought Moses as their leader to bring forth ten jaw-dropping miracles one after another. Finally, the Pharaoh gave up and the Israelites marched out of Egypt to go to the Promised Land. That is the story of the Book of Exodus.

The third Book of the OT, the Book of Leviticus contains the instructions that God gave to Moses while the people were encamped at Mount Sinai. It is very detailed and a seemed-very-tedious Book to read. It taught them that the way to God is only through sacrifice which leads to the reason for Jesus' atoning sacrifice.

Then, we studied the final Book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy. Moses gave the Israelites a series of lectures regarding the Law they received from the Lord almost forty years ago. He was reminding them what to do when they enter into the Promised Land.

The Book of Numbers covers the journey of 39 years – starting at Mount Sinai to the edge of the Promised Land.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

The Book of Numbers was written by Moses around 1406 B.C.

B. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

I believe that the theme of the Book of Numbers is to show God's judgment and His faithfulness.

The Israelites had spent a year at the base of Mount Sinai receiving God's Law and building His tabernacle. Now, in preparation for their journey to the Promised Land, God ordered Moses to organize and number the people. The Septuagint, the Greek OT picked up on this theme of numbering and gave the book the name "Numbers." Yes, there are a lot of numbers in this Book. But the Hebrew title, however, "Bemidbar," emphasizes the wilderness wandering and means "in the wilderness."

Numbers is a Book about a tragic pilgrimage where a group of people who knew better did not live better. They suffered the consequences of a bad decision they made at a crossroads of paramount importance in their lives.

The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land should have taken forty days, at the most. Instead, they spent almost forty years just going in circles. Wandering around in the wilderness, because of their own unbelief, not because of God's unfaithfulness which He doesn't have.

They came to Kadesh Barnea, at the entrance to the Promised Land, a few days after leaving Mount Sinai. But the people were afraid to enter the land because of the report from the ten spies who went out to the land and came back. They were afraid of the giants in the land when they had God on their side who destroyed Egypt with His miracles and parted the sea with His power.

What an example and lesson this is for us! God recorded these historical events for our benefit.

1 Corinthians 10:11 Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Every day we face the same choice the Israelites faced in the Book of Numbers. We can believe in the promises of God Almighty who is always faithful to His promises in the Bible and receive the victory that He promised us, and entering into the victorious Christian living; or we can reject His promises, live in unbelief, worries and doubt, and wander around in the spiritual wilderness, griping and complaining, walking in the circle of spiritual immaturity, never entering into His promised rest.

The Book of Numbers mentions the first census in chapter 2. They had 603,550 fighting men which translates that the population of the Israelites in the wilderness was over 2.5 million people. Can you imagine the logistics of moving an entire nation to another country? They had to pack up, dismantle the tabernacle, move, then set up camp somewhere else all over again for thirty nine years.

Then, we will learn that the Lord commanded them to take another census after 39 years in chapter 26. The total fighting men's number was 1820 less than the first census. What happened? The events that transpired between the first and the second census tell us of God's faithfulness and the consequences of His people's unfaithfulness.

C. STRUCTURE

The Book of Numbers can be divided into three sections:

1) Chapter 1-9

- Geographically: The Israelites were at Mount Sinai.
- Chronologically: They were there for several weeks.
- Historically: They were preparing for the pilgrimage to the Promised Land.
- Practically: It was a time for excitement and anticipation, of dreaming of hoping and of being filled with great delight. In short, it was a thrilling period of time.

During this time the people were given specific instruction on how to conduct themselves by faith, how to worship, how to remain pure, how to prepare for battle and how to fight, how to maintain the tabernacle, and most of all how they should walk with the Lord. Yes, this was their basic training course before their journey.

2) Chapter 10-14

- Geographically: The Israelites were on their way to Kadesh Barnea which was located right at the edge of the Promised Land.
- Chronologically: They were there several days.

- Historically: It was the time to head out to the Promised Land they'd been waiting for. The cloud of God moved ahead, the Israelites followed.
- Practically: Numbers 10:11 tells us that the Israelites were marching 20 days after God's conversation with Moses recorded in chapter 1. As the cloud of God moved, they moved out of Mount Sinai. Then the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran. Do you know what it is like in the Wilderness of Paran? Let me put it in the terms we, the Arizonans can understand. It is like the area between Gila Bend and Yuma. Jagged mountains, endless dirt, no living beings, and scorching heat – all the amenities of wonderful desert wilderness living.

Numbers 10:11-12 Now it came to pass on the twentieth day of the second month, in the second year, that the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle of the Testimony. 12 And the children of Israel set out from the Wilderness of Sinai on their journeys; then the cloud settled down in the Wilderness of Paran.

The Israelites began to grumble and gripe about the way the Lord had led them. Sound familiar? Sure we have. We pray to Him, "Lord, you just lead the way for me, I will follow You no matter what." So He leads us. But that is not something we expect. The Lord's way looks so uncomfortable, difficult, and so demanding. What do we do? We complain and gripe just like these Israelites. We will learn more about this lesson later.

What the Israelites did at Kadesh Barnea was the last straw to break God's patience for them. Their unbelief in God brought His judgment to them.

3) Chapter 15-30

- Geographically: The Israelites were wandering around a massive cul-de-sac in the desert.
- Chronologically: They spent over 38 years in the desert wasteland until everyone over 20 years old died with the exception of Joshua and Caleb.
- Historically: The bodies of the first generation of the Exodus buried all over the wilderness because of their unbelief.
- Practically: The Israelites locked themselves in the prison of the Wilderness of Sinai and threw away the key by themselves. You can say that they gave themselves a life sentence without a possibility of parole in the wilderness. The second generation learned about the cost of not trusting God from their parent generation and they learned it the hard way.

Before we get too discouraged or disheartened, we need to know that there is hope at the end of the journey. It was true for the Israelites as well as for us. Chapters 21-36 depict the new generation of people about to enter the land. By the end of the Book the Israelites have grown in trust and are ready to enter the Promised Land. They've learned their lesson and were anxious to follow the Lord in faith.

As never before, the church needs people on whom the Lord can depend. We have too much "cafeteria Christianity" mentality these days, with God's people going from church to church, "sampling" ministry and not settling down to serve the Lord faithfully in the place where He's assigned them. No wonder we're losing so many battles.

Studying the Book of Numbers can help us better understand how God directs His people, why being faithful to Him is important and vital in our spiritual survival, and how we can grow spiritually in the difficulties of life. We don't have to fail as did that first generation; we can be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

Romans 8:37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Complaining is usually contagious.

Complaining seldom stops with one person. The negative report from the ten spies at Kadesh Barnea immediately got the rest of the camp grumbling. Through this episode and others, attitudes of ingratitude, self-absorption, fear, and desperation soon infiltrated the Israelites' ranks. So focused on themselves, they forgot God's faithfulness and goodness and their purpose as His holy people.

Let's remember that a positive trust in God can be equally infectious; and it creates much better results.

2) Doubting is often disastrous.

There's a healthy kind of doubting which I call "honest doubt." We struggle with who God is and He reveals Himself to us in a way that strengthens our faith. Then there's the kind of doubting that's closer to downright disbelief and blasphemy to God.

The Israelites had seen God's power, faithfulness, provision, presence, and leadership. Yet they doubted His faithfulness and feared that He would not continue to protect them. They even thought God had brought them into the wilderness to destroy them. Because of their unbelief, they were judged.

How often must God rescue us, feed us, protect us, and guide us before we're convinced of His faithfulness?

3) Wandering is always humbling.

The Israelites were so close. When they refused to trust the Lord at Kadesh Barnea, they were right at the edge of the Promised Land. They could have entered it in a matter of days. But God didn't want to covenant with a complaining, faithless people. So He made them wander around in the desert for thirty-eight long years, until the old generation died off.

Wandering, though it seems aimless, has a purpose if directed by God. He uses it to break our pride, humble our hearts, and start afresh.