

# A new beginning

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Today's first reading is from Numbers chapter 26 verses 1 to 11 and it can be found on page 160 of the Church Bibles.

Numbers 26 verse 1 to 11. After the plague, the Lord said to Moses and to Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel from twenty years old and upward by their fathers' houses, all in Israel who are able to go to war.

And Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, Take a census of the people from twenty years old and upward, as the Lord commanded Moses.

The people of Israel who came out of the land of Egypt were. Reuben, the firstborn of Israel. The sons of Reuben. Of Hanuk, the clan of the Hanukites.

Of Palu, the clan of the Paluites. Of Hezron, the clan of the Hezronites. Of Carmi, the clan of the Carmites. These are the clans of the Reubenites and those listed were 43,730.

[ 1 : 1 5 ] And the sons of Palu, Eliab, the sons of Eliab, Nemuel, Dathan and Abiram. These are the Dathan and Abiram chosen from the congregation who contended against Moses and Aaron in the company of Korah when they contended against the Lord.

And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up together with Korah. When that company died, when the fire devoured 250 men and they became a warning.

But the sons of Korah did not die. We are continuing in Numbers and moving on to chapter 27.

I'm beginning to read at verse 12 and that's on page 162. Numbers 27 and verse 12.

These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.

[ 2 : 4 8 ] Moses spoke to the Lord saying, Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.

So the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua, son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him.

Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey.

And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation.

And Moses did as the Lord commanded him. He took Joshua and made him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation. And he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses.

[ 4 : 21 ] Well, good morning. My name is Andy. I'm on the staff team here at Grace Church. There's a handout on the back of the service sheet to let you know where we're going. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word that you've not left us in the dark, about your character, who you are, that you speak to us. Please speak to us now this morning. Amen.

I wonder if you know what generation you are. As I look out today, there are different generations represented.

Maybe one at least is in the silent generation, born just or before Second World War. Looking up their characteristics, they are determined, self-sacrificial, hard workers.

Some of us here are baby boomers, born just after the Second World War, brought about those cultural changes after the 1960s. Then there's Gen X, born a couple of decades after the Second World War, apparently more passive than their parents, just going with the flow.

[ 5 : 24 ] Then there's the millennials, my generation, who get the most stick, I think, growing up and maturing at the turn of millennium. They're the first generation of digital natives, completely at ease with computers and mobile phones, but often described in media as wasteful, spending all our money on coffee and avocado on toast when we should be saving for a house.

And we tend to question authority more, apparently. Then there's Gen Z, those born in the late 90s, better behaved, apparently, though I'm not convinced, also known as screen-agers.

They're more risk-averse, but also more prone to stress, anxiety, depression. And now we're into Generation Alpha, those across the car park in Sunday Club.

Who knows what they will turn out like? I wonder what you make of those generalisations when you hear them. There's something to them, I think, but they really go too far, don't they?

They really go too far. Even if there are differences in the generations, what brings us together more is what we have in common, our common flawed humanity, really.

[ 6 : 48 ] We can go through all the generations and just see throughout the Bible that every generation is flawed and marred by sin.

As we look down church history and the history of the world, we see every generation is flawed and marred by our rejection of God. Well, Numbers 26 is a significant moment in the book of Numbers because here is the next generation.

We began in January our series of Numbers with the first census of the first generation that came out of Egypt, preparing to go to the land, the promised land.

But right from the off, grumbling, rebellion, sin, disobedience. And in the end, God's patience ran out.

And what should have been a matter of a few weeks' journey ends up 40 years, so this rebellious first generation can die out. And now it's like we're back to chapter one.

[ 7 : 54 ] We've pressed reset. This is restore to factory settings time. And we've got a new generation. And from chapter 26 to the end of the book, we're focusing on this second generation ready to march towards the land.

What will this generation be like? How will they turn out? How can they have confidence that they actually will enter the land? When the first generation didn't.

And that's kind of the same question for us today. Many generations have passed, and here we are, another generation. Those of us who belong to Jesus, that is, and we are in the wilderness.

Now, having been rescued from slavery, not to Egypt, but to sin, slavery to sin. And we have a promised land of the new God's new creation to come, and yet we are now in the wilderness.

How can we have confidence that we will enter that promised land in heaven? Because we are still dogged by sin. We're still on a journey.

[ 9 : 00 ] Well, God preaches to this new generation through this census. And that message comes down the generations to us here this morning. Now, what is the message?

Quite simply, the broad overview of these five chapters, that we won't look at everyone, is that God is faithful. God is faithful.

He keeps his promises. He will preserve his people, and he will provide for his people. And those are the two big things we're seeing today. Firstly, then, God's faithfulness proved in preservation.

Have a look at verse 1 with me of chapter 26. After the plague, the Lord said to Moses and Eliezer, the son of Aaron, the priest, take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, from 20 years old and upwards, by their father's houses, all in Israel who are able to go to war.

And Moses and Eliezer, the priest, spoke with them in the plains of Moab, by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, take a census of the people, from 20 years old and upwards, as the Lord commanded Moses.

[ 10 : 15 ] Notice how that chapter began. After the plague. That's describing what we saw last time out in chapter 25. The wickedness of the Israelite men sleeping with the Moabite women and worshipping their false gods.

And there was a judgment. A terrible plague. But God stopped it. It was serious. 24,000 people died.

But it could have been more. And in his mercy, God stopped it. And the result is, there is still a people. The story is not over in chapter 25.

There is still hope that they will enter the land. And so the numbers have counted. We read a little extract of the census. But if we had gone through it all, which we won't, we would have seen the numbers counted from every tribe, just as they were in the first census of chapter 21.

And the total is given for us in verse 51 of chapter 26. 601,730. Now for the number bods amongst us, I've put a table on the handouts on the screen.

[ 11 : 29 ] At this point, we could go on election night, couldn't we? And look at all the moves and shakers of this result coming in. The swingometer. Manasseh increasing their majority.

And Simeon being decimated. I suspect that would be terribly dull for most of us, I should imagine. Instead, the big point of comparing these two censuses is to see the remarkable truth that in total, this number largely has been preserved.

At 40 years before, the first census was 603,550. And in the second, we get a reduction of just 0.3%.

They're essentially the same. So despite all the wickedness, despite all the judgments of God, there is still a people of God.

And they're still on the way to the land. God is faithful to his promises. He's preserved a people that are his. As we thought about and start the service, it's Father's Day.

[ 12 : 36 ] Hopefully, I speak for all the fathers in the room when I say, praise God that he is a father unlike earthly fathers. Now, we know what we're like. We know what our fathers were like, even if we had a great relationship with them, if we had a terrible relationship with them.

We praise God that he is a father unlike us. He keeps his words. He never breaks his promises. What he says he'll do, he will do. Now, this is exactly what the first generation said would not happen.

In chapter 14 that we looked at maybe a few months ago, they grumbled against Moses, saying, our little ones will become prey. They didn't trust that God will preserve their children.

They thought they would just fall by the wayside. But Numbers 26 gives proof that God is faithful as he preserves the next generation. And it's the same with every generation that comes after.

And the New Testament opens with that family tree of Jesus, doesn't it, in Matthew chapter 1. And every name on that list represents another generation that has been preserved.

[ 13 : 48 ] We go down the generations until we get to Jesus. And he is the one who said, I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

And so the story of the Bible and the story of church history, really, down the generations, is the story of compromise and sin. And yet, above all, it is the story of God's amazing faithfulness to his promises.

Down the generations, Jesus has always been building his church. He will preserve it. This generation, the next, and the next until he comes.

Perhaps like the first generation, we worry for our children. We can essentially think, well, actually, it's relatively easy when I was their age, where Christianity was kind of an accepted norm, and we're looking to the next generation and thinking, help.

How are they to keep going? Increasingly, teenagers, it's really hard to be a Christian at school. A small minority in a world that is rejecting Christian beliefs and values at a pace.

[ 15 : 02 ] How are they going to cope? Numbers 26, says, remember God's faithfulness. We can trust God with our children. God doesn't promise an easy ride.

He doesn't promise even that every child will be saved in the end. But he does promise that he will preserve his people and that we are to teach them and trust God.

After the plague, still a people. After COVID, still there is a people. After increasing hostility, there is still a people.

God is always faithful to his promises. It's why in chapter 26 they can even divide up the land before they've even conquered it. Did you notice that? If you read the chapter beforehand, they don't have any of the land yet.

They've still got to go in and defeat the people who live there, who don't want them there. But they're even told now to divvy up the land beforehand as their inheritance because God has said they will get it.

[ 16 : 10 ] We're not going to touch on the daughters of Zelophehad. They come up again at the end of Numbers, so we're going to look at them then. But briefly in chapter 27, will they show the trust of this second generation in God's faithfulness?

At verse 3 of chapter 27, their father has died as part of the first generation, but they're so trusting God's faithfulness to preserve his people and get them in the land that they're pleading with God for the share of the inheritance.

They're not in the land yet, but they know God is a faithful God. And so this new case law is established, giving them a share. And we are to share the faith of these women.

God is faithful, and he proves it in his preservation of his people. Now, at one level, that's a tremendous encouragement, and we could leave it there.

They're still there after everything, virtually the same number. They will inherit the land, but maybe you spotted in the first reading, there are additions to this census that make it different to the first, because they are warnings.

[17:18] And essentially, these additions are saying, in the midst of encouragement, remember the warnings. have a look at verse 8. And the sons of Palu, Eliab, the sons of Eliab, Nemuel, Dathan, and Ibaram, these are the Dathan and Ibaram, chosen from the congregation, who contended against Moses and Aaron in the company of Korah.

When they contended against the Lord, contended against the Lord, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up together with Korah, when that company died, when the fire devoured 250 men, and they became a warning.

That's a reference to Korah's rebellion in chapter 16 that we looked at. A group of leaders challenged Moses' authority, and what happened? An earthquake came, and fire that consumed the ring leaders.

They became a warning. Maybe you think when you're driving along, thinking of nothing, and your right foot just seems to be doing that, and you don't realise it.

And then you see a sign saying, 20 people killed here in this spot in the last two years. That's designed to get your attention, isn't it?

[18:39] That will make you sit up and notice. You think a little bit more carefully, wouldn't you, with the speedometer and how we're driving. And that's a picture we've got here. In the midst of encouragement of this censor, the writer is saying, don't relax and take God's faithfulness for granted.

As you travel towards the promised land, remember the warning signs. In fact, this census is bracketed with warning signs. Look at the end of chapter 26, at verse 64 and 65.

But among these, there was not one of those listed by Moses and Aaron the priest, who had listed the people of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai.

For the Lord had said of them, they shall die in the wilderness. Not one of them was left, except Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua, the son of Nun.

At the end of a basically encouraging chapter, there's the reminder, yes, there is another generation, but don't forget why you had to wait for 40 years, because the thirst had to die out.

[19:50] We see here both the encouragement of God's faithfulness and yet the warnings of God's justice. And we must hold on to both truths, that God is loving and forgiving and kind when we come to him in repentance and faith, but he's no soft touch.

We started our series by looking at Hebrews chapter 3, 15. I'll put the verse on the screen. As it is said, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.

The New Testament looks back at this book in the Old Testament and says, don't be like that first generation. They're warning. The story goes that 19th century German poet Heinrich Hein was on his deathbed, and he was asked by a priest if he thought he'd be forgiven for not following God and he said this, of course God will forgive me, that's his job.

Of course God will forgive me, that's his job. Perhaps some of us are tempted to think along those same lines this morning. God will forgive me, of course he will, why wouldn't he?

But we are to remember the warnings. God is faithful. He does what he says he'll do, preserving the second generation, but also judging the first.

[ 21 : 22 ] Every one of those men in that first column on the table died out except two. The judgment has been total. We are to see that we don't harden our hearts and turn back, turn our back on entering the promised land land of heaven, through our presumption about what God is like, or unbelief.

God's faithfulness is proved in preservation. But we aren't to forget the warnings. We're moving on to chapters 27 to 30, we're going to speed up, you're happy to hear, and we're going to think the theme of God's faithfulness continues, as we see that God's faithfulness is proved in provision for his people.

So what hope is there for this next generation that they won't go under like the previous? Well, God is faithful, and he provides them with a new leader, a new shepherd.

We know they won't have Moses with them, we found that out in the second reading, Aaron has already died in chapter 20, and 12 to 14 from our second reading picture Moses looking out at this amazing land.

Now this is not God being cruel, saying let's have a look at what you could have won, but a gracious reward, to let him see the land, but that's as far as he's going to go.

[ 22 : 52 ] If that was me, I'd probably be pleading with God, I've come this far, just one mistake, please let me in. But Moses ends really well, he ends by praying for the people.

Verse 16, let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as a sheep that have no shepherd.

shepherd. It's a terrible thing to be a sheep without a shepherd. If you know what sheep are like, then you know that no sheep looks at another sheep thinking they're going to be okay.

They're filled with confidence. It's why Sean the sheep is actually giving sheep a bad name, because they can't hatch plants, they can't organise themselves, can they? They're either upside down, they're stuck in a hedge, or wandering off a cliff.

And back then it's really dangerous to be without a shepherd attacked by all goodness knows what animals. The sheep need a shepherd. And so Moses prays, Lord don't let them wander off without a leader.

[ 24 : 15 ] Please provide. And the Lord responds in verse 18, take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him.

Joshua is only one of two of the old generation who will enter the land, and the verdict at the end of the book of Joshua is that he's a good leader, and the people obey God under his leadership.

God is giving the people here what they need, a godly shepherd who will lead them. But the problem is that Joshua dies, and the generations go off the rails in the book of Judges.

every election, think about next year, the focus is inevitably about leadership, isn't it? Who is going to be our leader? Are they going to be a good leader?

Are they going to be a faithful leader? Are they going to lead well? Well, God has been so good to his people that he has provided us a leader, a leader who won't die, and a leader who is not just good, but perfect.

[ 25 : 20 ] And his name is Joshua, or to use the Greek translation of Joshua, Jesus. Jesus.

I tricked a lot of you there. Jesus, who looked out on the crowds, and he saw they were like sheep without a shepherd. He felt compassion to them, and he declared in John chapter 10, verse 11, I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus is going to be that great shepherd, the good shepherd, the true shepherd, who will lead his people into the promised land of heaven, that promised rest.

And he does that first by laying his life down for us, taking on sin, the devil, and death, and defeating them all. God is faithful, he provides a shepherd, and he provides us that perfect shepherd who is always with us through his spirit.

He loves his sheep, who speaks to his sheep, who knows his sheep. We are to keep looking to him, trusting him, and obeying him. Well, lastly, and quite briefly, we see God's faithfulness proved in a continued relationship.

[ 26 : 43 ] Chapters 28 to 30 give new instructions about offerings and sacrifices. Previously, they've been told what festivals to have, but they're not told exactly what animals, how many, and which days, etc.

Now, again, we're not going to wade through them all, we can cheat by looking at the headings. It starts with daily offerings in chapter 28, then Sabbath offerings, monthly offerings, and yearly offerings in the Passover, yearly festivals.

And we get the impression reading through these chapters that this is a lot, this is a lot of sacrificing. One commentator did the maths, and based on these chapters alone, they would have to have offered 113 bulls, 32 rams, 1,086 lambs, a tonne of flour, and 1,000 bottles of oil and wine.

That is a lot, isn't it? Those are not rules for travellers. Those are rules for people in a land with a settled, ongoing, abundant relationship with God.

Because all those sacrifices assumes prosperity, assumes you're going to have that much to give to God. So the point being in all these festivals, all these laws and rituals and things, is that as they stand on the edge of the land, the Lord is giving them detailed instructions about the kind of life they're going to live as they enter, the kind of relationship they're going to have with the living God.

[ 28 : 23 ] An abundant life, a settled people with an ongoing abundant settled relationship with God through these offerings, weaved into the fabric of their national life.

And for us here today, these festivals point forward to the abundance of life that we have in Jesus. And through him we can have a settled ongoing relationship with the living God.

The Apostle Paul writes of these festivals in Colossians 2, these are the shadows of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. We don't have to sacrifice lambs and things anymore because we have Jesus.

the Lamb who gave his life for us. And Jesus himself says in John 10, 10, I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly. The abundant settled ongoing relationship with God that these festivals display are fulfilled in Jesus.

We don't need priests or sacrifices anymore. Through Jesus and the giving his spirit, we have an ongoing personal direct relationship with the living God.

[ 29 : 38 ] just like a child can wander into their father's room at 3am on Father's Day and say they're thirsty. And yet the promised land we enter is even better than they had.

Even better. An abundant life with God in his place without anything accursed by sin. The new creation to come. And all that is left on God's agenda, on his to-do list, is for Jesus to take us in.

All generations may have their differences, their little quirks, but we're all the same at heart. A generation that has turned away from the living Lord, flawed and marred by sin.

How can the second generation in numbers have confidence that this time they will enter the land? God is faithful. And remember God's faithfulness.

Trust the Lord who keeps his promises, who will provide for them. How can we, the nth generation, have confidence God will bring us into this abundant new creation that he has planned?

[ 30 : 53 ] It's the same. Remember the warnings, but remember God is faithful. we are to hold fast to Jesus who will shepherd us in, into that promised land.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father we praise you for your faithfulness that shines through these chapters. You have preserved your people and you provide for your people.

We thank you for the provision of Jesus, the sacrifice for sin that we so desperately needed and that through him, trusting in him, abiding in him, that you will bring us in to the promised land of your glorious new creation to come.

Please help us to remember the warnings and heed them, but remember your great faithfulness. Amen.