

God's Faithful Promises

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 January 2023

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] Lord, your word is sure and true, guiding the heart, and it is sweeter than honey. I pray this morning that we would listen humbly to your word, that we would not just be truth hearers, but that we would grow in our love, knowledge of you, and that we would seek to conform our lives to what we hear this morning.

And I ask this in your precious son's name. Amen. Thank you. So the reading this morning is from Numbers chapter 1, which is found on page 129 in the Church Bibles.

When we get to verse 20, we're going to not read every word, so don't be confused. We'll just list out the names of the tribes and their numbers. So that's from verse 20 onwards.

So Numbers chapter 1, beginning at verse 1. The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head.

From 20 years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company.

[1 : 44] And there shall be with you a man from each tribe, each man being the head of the house of his fathers. And these are the names of the men who shall assist you.

From Reuben, Eliezer, the son of Shediah. From Simeon, Shalemiel, the son of Zerushadai. From Judah, Nashon, the son of Aminadab.

From Issachar, Nethanel, the son of Zerushadai. From Zebulun, Eliab, the son of Helon. From the sons of Joseph, from Ephraim, Elishamah, the son of Aminahud.

And from Manasseh, Gamaliel, the son of Pedazur. From Benjamin, Abedan, the son of Gideoni. From Dan, Ahiezer, the son of Amishadai.

From Asher, Pagiel, the son of Ochron. From Gad, Aliesaph, the son of Juel. From Naphtali, Ahira, the son of Enan.

[2 : 59] These were the ones chosen from the congregation. The chiefs of their ancestral tribes. The heads of the clans of Israel.

Moses and Aaron took these men, who had been named. And on the first day of the second month, they assembled the whole congregation together. So he listed them in the wilderness of Sinai.

The people of Reuben, 46,500. Of the people of Simeon, 59,300.

Of the people of Gad, 45,650. Of the people of Judah, 74,600. Of the people of Issachar, 54,400.

Of the people of Zebulun, 57,400. Of the people of Joseph, 40,500.

[4 : 18] Of the people of Manasseh, 32,200. Of the people of Benjamin, 35,400.

Of the people of Dan, 62,700. Of the people of Asher, 41,500. Of the people of Naphtali, 53,400.

These are those who were listed, who Moses and Aaron listed with the help of the chiefs of Israel, 12 men, each representing his father's house. So all those listed of the people of Israel, by their father's houses, from 20 years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel, all those listed were 603,550.

Good morning, everyone.

Thanks, Vicki, for reading. I think you really deserve a round of applause for getting through all those names. Thank you. One in two people have asked how they can best prepare for our sermon series in numbers with quite long sections, especially over the next few weeks or so.

[5 : 45] I think the answer probably is the same as for any sermon. In other words, it's just so helpful to read it through beforehand. I know a number of people would spend, kind of suspend whatever they're doing through the week for their regular Bible reading.

And on Sunday morning, they would read the Bible passage. Lots of people find that helpful. And I'd love you to do that, especially over these next few weeks when we're going to be doing long passages.

I think it would really help you to kind of follow where we're going. Well, I wonder if you have yet planned a summer holiday. I guess some of us will, while others are perhaps more last minute.

But for all of us, if we're going on a journey, there are certain things we need to know. How are we going to get there? If we're flying, how are we going to get to the airport?

The flight number. Then at the destination, how are we actually going to get to our accommodation once we arrive? Not to mention packing. Which clothes to take? Which clothes not to take?

[6 : 51] Do you need immunizations? What about travel insurance? Journeys require planning. There are things we need to know and to be clear about before we embark.

Well, last week we started this new series of talks in the book of Numbers. If you weren't here, please do catch up online, because last week I tried to help us to get our bearings in terms of where we're going and to see why this is such an important book in the Bible.

Just have a look at chapter 1, verse 1. The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they'd come out of the land of Egypt.

Numbers starts at Mount Sinai, where God had brought his people, having rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Numbers finishes 40 years later, on the edge of the promised land.

It means that the book of Numbers is about that 40-year journey, or odyssey, nothing to do with me, it just happens to be there, so that's handy, isn't it?

[8 : 02] About that 40-year journey from having been rescued to the promised land through the wilderness. And we saw last week that if we are followers of Jesus Christ, we have much more in common with God's people in numbers than we might at first think.

Our spiritual journey parallels their physical journey. We've been rescued from slavery to sin, we're on the journey that is the Christian life through the wilderness, living in this present world, to the promised new creation.

And chapters 1-10 of Numbers are all about being prepared for the journey, telling us what we need to know. And they're such relevant chapters for all of us, whether we're looking in on the Christian faith or whether we are followers of Jesus Christ already.

And all the more so, I think, at the start of a new year, when, you know, so often at the start of a new year, we're looking ahead, aren't we? We're making plans, we're thinking what our goals are going to be.

Well, today we're going to see two things we can know for certain if we are following Jesus Christ. And they're both on the outline, and they're going to appear on the screen as well.

[9 : 20] Firstly, you can trust God's faithfulness. You can trust God's faithfulness. Faithfulness. Because as we just read, at the beginning of chapter 1, the Lord God tells Moses to take a census.

Verse 2. Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head, from 20 years old and upwards, all in Israel, who are able to go to war.

You and Aaron shall list them company by company. It's a census of men, a fighting age, and it's going to be done tribe by tribe. So, we get the results.

In verse 20, the people of Reuben. Verse 21, 46,500. In verse 22, the people of Simeon, who, verse 23, total 59,300.

Each tribe listed by total of the tribe. And then, verses 44 to 45, we get the total.

[10 : 24] These are those who were listed, who Moses and Aaron listed with the help of the chiefs of Israel, 12 men, each representing his father's house. So, all those listed to the people of Israel by their father's houses from 20 years old upwards, every man able to go to war in Israel, all those listed were 603,550.

Now, we didn't read the whole chapter. But I imagine if we had read the whole chapter, I imagine we might have been thinking, can we just speed up a bit?

Isn't all this a bit kind of dull and repetitive? But I want to try and persuade us that actually, for the first readers, far from being dull and repetitive, Numbers chapter 1 would have been thrilling.

Just they'd have been overjoyed to hear it. Because Numbers chapter 1 is testimony to God's faithfulness to his promises. And let's just back up and do a bit of a sort of review of the Bible storylines so far.

In Genesis, at the start of the Bible, God created a good world, men and women, both made in his image. A glorious picture of God's people, Adam and Eve, living in God's place, the Garden of Eden, under the good rule of God and enjoying his blessings.

[11 : 51] But then disaster strikes as they'll decide that actually they'll be the ones who determine what is right and what is wrong in God's world rather than God determining that.

As a result, they are banished from the Garden as they reject God. They are now under the curse of God, under the just judgment of God.

They're no longer God's people. They're no longer in God's place. And blessing has been replaced by curse. And over the next few chapters of Genesis, the problem of sin and rebellion becomes global as mankind multiplies.

That is until Genesis chapter 12. So keep a finger, if you will, in numbers and turn back to Genesis chapter 12. Page 64, Genesis chapter 12.

Page 64. Sorry, it's not page 64 at all.

[13 : 03] I was in the wrong place. Page 10. Genesis chapter 12, verses 1 and 2. Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

And I'll make you a great nation and I'll bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. Notice this promise, how curse is going to be replaced by blessing, how Abraham will become a great nation.

And so in verse 4, he leaves home. The Lord takes him to the land of Canaan. In verse 7, he appears to him again and says, To your offspring, I will give this land.

And then turn over to Genesis chapter 15, where the Lord shows Abraham how this promise is going to be fulfilled. Genesis 15, verse 13.

Then the Lord said to Abraham, Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there and they will be afflicted for 400 years.

[14:19] But I'll bring judgment on the nation that they serve and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. And that is precisely what happens through the rest of Genesis and Exodus.

By the end of Genesis, Abraham's descendants have moved to Egypt. They've begun to grow in number. There are now 70 of them. They continue to multiply. They become a threat to the Egyptian Pharaoh and they are enslaved just as God said they would be.

The rest of Exodus tells the history of their rescue. The plagues on Egypt. The sacrifice of the Passover lamb. The defeat of Pharaoh.

And how then God brought his people to himself at Mount Sinai. As he said to them he declares to them in Exodus chapter 19 you yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

In other words not only rescued from Egypt and from slavery but extraordinarily brought to God to be his people to belong to him.

[15:33] And that's where we pick up the story in Numbers chapter 1 verse 1. Can we begin to see why it is that these census results far from people thinking yeah can we just get on they'd have been filled with delight and joy.

It is a testament to God's faithfulness in his promises. They've multiplied just as God promised to Abraham. The total number 603,550 and that is just the men of fighting age.

Add in everyone else and it'd be over 2 million more numerous than the stars in the sky than the sands on the seashore.

What's more they now belong to God as his people. They are now under his rule enjoying his blessings. And although they're not yet in the land nonetheless as they embark on their journey as they look back to God's faithfulness over hundreds of years why they can have enormous confidence as they embark on this journey and look ahead that he will indeed continue to be faithful that he is trustworthy that he will bring them to their final destination.

Now as some of you know I'm not a great football fan that is not a secret many of you may well have worked that out by now I'm happy to watch a world cup match or something like that but beyond that well that's probably about the limit it's fair to say.

[17:07] But my grandfather absolutely loved it and for most of his life he was either a Plymouth fan and then later on a Southampton fan and a season ticket holder.

And whenever we went to stay at 4.40 on a Saturday afternoon he would be glued to the football results as they came up on the telly and for 20 minutes obviously pre-internet age some will be completely bewildered at this point others you'll be suddenly transported back 30 years to a golden era when every Saturday afternoon at 4.40 for 20 minutes you would have the football results in this kind of melodious sort of tone you know Southampton won Manchester City nil or you know whatever it was.

Now I would just be kind of waiting for the results to finish so I could then do something with my grandfather but he was completely transfixed those numbers actually meant something to him.

Well how thrilling it must have been in Numbers chapter 1 as these census results were read out tribe by tribe. They proclaim the Lord's faithfulness to his promises.

In fact the only clan not listed are the Levites in verses 47 to 54 they don't get to fight because as we'll see next week they have duties relating to the tabernacle so we'll leave them for next week.

[18 : 42] Now there are so many parallels with us if we belong to Jesus Christ. We've been rescued from slavery to sin by the shed blood of the true Passover lamb the Lord Jesus.

We now belong to God as his special people set apart to serve him and although we haven't yet reached the final destination of the new creation we can be confident that the risen Jesus will take us there.

He is faithful. And in the meantime just as the census in Numbers chapter 1 is a census of all those of fighting age so as the apostle Paul reminds us each one of us if we know Jesus we are in a spiritual battle.

I put Ephesians chapter 6 on the outline to remind us as the apostle Paul says for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers against the authorities against the cosmic powers over this present darkness against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

When I was a student this book was a must read it's called The Fight. Now it seems to me that kind of language is rather out of fashion.

[20 : 03] When was the last time you sang Onward Christian Soldiers? We just don't use that language anymore. And I suspect we're in danger of forgetting that actually if we belong to Jesus we are indeed in a spiritual battle and that in the battle we need to hold on to the fact that God is faithful.

Now we're at the start of a new year. I wonder where you need to do that. After all who knows what 2023 will hold.

Life goes up but life also goes down. I hope as a church we can be honest with each other about that. 2023 may be a year of hardship.

Perhaps for some the loss of an elderly relative or perhaps unwelcome health diagnoses. Perhaps the pain of a spouse or child who doesn't know Jesus.

Perhaps disappointments at work. Perhaps a relationship that doesn't work out. Perhaps disappointing exam results. Or perhaps actually 2023 will be a year when things go well and you have lots of encouragements.

[21 : 24] Yet so often of course it's when things go well for us that the spiritual battle is at its most fierce. Whatever 2023 holds each one of us needs to hold on to the fact that God is faithful.

It would be really helpful I think if either over coffee or later on in the day you just thought to yourself where do I need to hold on to that in terms of what's coming up in what situations am I going to need to hold on to the fact that God is faithful to his promises.

Secondly so firstly you can trust God's faithfulness secondly you can be certain of God's presence. Now in my limited experience of camping holidays there are essentially two kinds of campsites there are those this is my preferred kind of campsite there are those where there's just a kind of field and you go and find a bit of field that no one else is on and you just pitch your tent and that is it.

There are others which are much more organised than that where you're given a kind of pitched number and you're told this is where you're going to pitch your tent and the whole campsite is very well organised often around a central feature perhaps a shop or a swimming pool or that kind of thing well Numbers chapter 2 is all about the arrangements of the Israelites camp as they start their 40 year camping trip to the promised lands and it's very much the second kind of campsite it's carefully ordered around a central feature have a look at chapter 2 verses 1 and 2 the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying the people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard with the banners of their fathers houses they shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side now you may think that the arrangement of a campsite doesn't sound very exciting and yet actually this is wonderful because what we're going to see is that all the tribes of

Israel are camping around a central feature the tabernacle which is the place where God is symbolically dwelling with his people now I put an aerial view on the outline it's on the screen as well for those who have very sharp eyesight indeed you don't really need to worry about the names it's more just the kind of arrangements so verse 3 for example tells us that on the east side of the tabernacle is the tribe the tribe of Issach and verse 7 the tribe of Zebulun in verse 10 we're given the tribes set on the south side of the tabernacle in verse 18 on the west side verse 25 on the north side and once again it's a picture of an army because in the ancient world in the center of your camp where you were camping as an army you would have the king's tent in other words here is

[24 : 40] God himself the king of kings dwelling in the very midst of his people and not just when they're camping but when they're on the move as well so have a look at their marching orders in verse 9 those on the east side set out to march at the front followed verse 16 by those who camped on the south side and then in the middle verse 17 comes the tabernacle followed verse 24 by those who camped on the west and bringing up the rear verse 31 those who camped on the north side and we're given the summary so it's easy to cheat and work out what's going on we're given the summary in verse 34 thus did the people of Israel according to all that the Lord commanded Moses so they camped by their standards and so they set out each one in his clan according to his father's house every day whether it's a marching day traveling day or whether it's a staying at camp day they are reminded that the

Lord is in their midst he is present with them now wonderful though that might have been the truth is that if we know Jesus we have even greater privileges at Christmas across the world John's gospel chapter one verses one to fourteen will have been read at carol services with the climax and the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth the word dwelt there literally means tabernacled Jesus Christ fully God fully man who has humbled himself and came to dwell among us and by his spirit he remains with his people today as the apostle

Paul reminds us 1 corinthians 3 verse 16 do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells within you it's God's presence that was the very goal of the covenant that God had made with his people in fact his presence was more important to Moses than anything else more important than the promises of the land more important than any of the other blessings back in Exodus chapter 3 when the people had broken covenants with the Lord through making a golden calf the Lord threatens not to go with them on their journey to the land the Lord offers instead to send an angel with them to make sure they get there and yet that's not enough for Moses who says this in Exodus 33 if your presence will not go with me do not bring us up from here for how shall it be known that

I found favor in your sight I and your people is it not in your going with us so that we are distinct I and your people from every other people on the face of the earth do you see what Moses is saying who cares about the promised lands who cares about abundant food and drink if you're not with us other nations have wonderful places in which to live palm trees and blue skies and abundant food what makes us distinctive is your presence now I don't know about you but it seems to me wouldn't that be so helpful if actually those of us who know Jesus if we just kept reminding ourselves of that that if we know him we have his presence with us by his spirit who cares about all the other stuff that people around us may chase after and value and prize who cares about that if we have the

Lord's presence can I say as well that if you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian and you're looking on the Christian life please don't miss this because it's how Jesus defines eternal life before I became a Christian whenever I heard the phrase eternal life I just thought it sounded a bit dull just sitting sitting around playing a harp wearing a white nightie who's interested in that but Jesus says eternal life is to know God not just to know about God not just to believe in God but actually to know his presence I hope you can begin to see actually how truly wonderful and how truly transforming that might be while if we do know Jesus it's so easy to take God's presence for granted after all we live don't we in a part of the world which has enormous abundance enormous abundance wealth food drink pleasure lifestyle beautiful homes luxurious cars for many the security of a decent pension fantastic holidays good education we don't all have those things but many of us in this room do have those things and yet

[30 : 37] I guess with them come two dangers firstly we easily forget how wonderful it is to know the living God indeed the greatest privilege of being Christian is to call God our father father father the second danger is that this world and what it offers becomes more attractive to us than Jesus can you see those two dangers in your own heart I can certainly see them in mine and we'll see sadly that's exactly what happens as we go through the book of numbers they forget the blessings and they want to go back to Egypt back to the world because it looks more attractive you see the Israelites came unstuck because they forgot precisely the fact that it's the

Lord who is with them on their journey they take their eyes off him and instead they focus on other things they focus on the food which is monotonous and so they grumble they focus on their leaders who they get fed up with and they grumble they focus on the scale of the task as they trek through the wilderness and they grumble they take their eyes off the Lord and the fact that he is present with them I said earlier that none of us know what 2023 has in store it might be a really hard year for you it might be a really wonderful year for you I guess for many of us something in between whichever it is there will be temptations either way so let's keep our eyes firmly fixed on the one who is with us if we know

Jesus we have his presence with us and we can be confident and certain that he is faithful to his promises let's have a few moments of reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer heavenly father we praise you very much for the extraordinary privilege it is to know the Lord Jesus to have your presence with us and we thank you for this reminder this morning of your faithfulness how you have been faithful to your people in the past how you will continue to be faithful to your people and we pray heavenly father please would you help us this year to keep our eyes fixed on you and the great blessing it is to know the Lord Jesus and we ask it in his name amen what to bathroom angels who are one a one

I around faut to evil