

The promised rest awaits

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[0:00] I think it's always a little awkward, isn't it, when you're joining a conversation when! it's in midstream, when someone is halfway through a story and you're struggling to make! head or tail of what's going on. Well, that's me most Sundays, I think, when I float from one conversation to another, and then I annoy you at all by asking you to repeat yourself just for me, which you do of course because I'm the pastor. But if you've joined us in recent times, by which I mean in the last 10 years, then you've joined us in mid-conversation today. Because even though we're starting a new book in Numbers, this journey has been going on for more than 10 years. Because when I first started preaching in Genesis 1, that was to the then 6 p.m. and the 1.30 Word Sunday service at HTD. And some of you I know were there as little kids, teenagers. So you might say it's a personal preaching journey of mine that I've made you come along on, whether you like it or not.

A bit like Numbers, of course, a long journey. But as we shall see, the book of Numbers is part of the five books at the start of the Bible, which we call the Pentateuch. The spelling's on the next slide. And for the Jews, they call it the Torah or the law instead. Now you might be surprised to think of Numbers as being part of the law because a large part of it is just narrative in form, or else lists of people and numbers, like an accounting record. Hence the title of this book.

So what I want to do today is, apart from looking at chapter 1, is put Numbers into its context so that we can get everyone up to speed, if you like. And Numbers chapter 1 verse 1 is actually a good starting point because we're told where we are in Israel's journey. There we hear the Lord spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt. So the place is the desert of Sinai, where the Lord speaks to Moses from the tent of meeting. This puts us in the same vicinity, actually, as the events in Leviticus and second half of Exodus. So really, the people of Israel and we haven't really moved very far physically over the last four or five years that we've been going through these books.

And if you look on the map, you'll see where they are. So they've come from the land of Egypt, which is on the left, and they're headed to the Promised Land, which is on the top right-hand corner.

But you see that actually they haven't taken the shortest route, but they have been led down into the Sinai Peninsula. And right to the bottom, you can probably read it, but that last little tip there, that's where Mount Sinai is taught to be. And time-wise as well, it's only been a relatively short period because it's now the first day of the second month of the second year since they came out of Egypt. Now, freedom from Egypt was a seminal event in their history.

[3:26] Just like you hear some Christians today speaking of their date of conversion as their reference point, for Israel, their freedom from slavery is their reference point to which they calculate time.

And so compare this with Exodus 19 on the next slide, where Israel arrived at Mount Sinai in the desert on the first day of the third month in year one. So really, the journey that they took down to the south was all but about two months. Then if you go to Exodus chapter 14, the end of that book, when the tabernacle was completed and commissioned, it was the first day of the first month of the second year. And during this time in Exodus, Moses had gone up to Mount Sinai, received the Ten Commandments, come down, found the people worshipping the golden calf, which then God punished them. And then Moses goes up again, receives another set of tablets, and when he comes down, they start building the tabernacle. And it takes them that long to build it. So it's not until the second year, the first month of the second year when it was built and commissioned. And Numbers then begins a month after this commissioning. The Tenth of Meeting, which we read in verse 1, is, I think, now the tabernacle, because they had a makeshift one in Exodus 33. But now the tabernacle, also called the Tenth of Meeting, is where the Lord speaks to Moses. And we'll see in coming chapters that actually the tabernacle is an important piece of architecture. It's the centerpiece, in fact, of the community.

And so if Genesis was about beginnings, the beginning of creation, humanity, and the nation of Israel, Exodus about deliverance from slavery, Leviticus about living in God's holy presence and obeying the law, then when we get to Numbers, we find that it is about God preparing Israel to enter into the promised land, or into the promised rest. Now we'll see, of course, that this entry is all but smooth sailing. And you'll come and see why as well. But as we begin the chapter, what we need to realize is that the land that they're about to possess is not unoccupied. Nations are already living there.

There's people in there. So a military campaign is required. The land has to be conquered. Now, I'm not going to dwell too long on the ethics of people being dispossessed from their land by God.

It's very topical at the moment. But you need to realize that the international laws that we have today, or things like the United Nations, didn't exist back then. And so conquest of territories was considered and looked at very differently. Even so, when it comes to God, of course, He owns all the land in the world, right? So ultimately, it's His prerogative to do with the land as He will, whether to give or to take.

[6 : 32]

Now, we may not know the reasons or methods of God in each time, but we can be sure that whatever God does, He is still just. Now, in the case of the promised land, we actually have an insight into God's mind, because He revealed in Genesis 15 to Abraham that four generations after Abraham, God will actually bring Israel back into the land. So while the land is being given as a gracious gift of God to Israel, timing-wise, the moment now is actually an act of forbearance by God to the Amorites or to the Canaanites. And then finally, of course, when the sin has reached its full measure, is an act of judgment on them as well. All of which means that this conquest requires an army. And hence, what we have in chapter 1 is a census for enlistment. And we see that clearly in verses 2 to 4, because God says, take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one. You and Aaron are to count according to their divisions all the men in Israel who are 20 years old or more. Why? Because they are able to serve in the army. One man from each tribe, each of them the head of his family, is to help you. So it's men over 20 because they can serve in the army, and they are to be listed by name, grouped by tribe, clan, and family. And then the 12 heads of family are appointed from each tribe, one from each tribe to assist. And we actually have their names here recorded for posterity. You know, you might wonder why. Firstly, probably to trip up the Bible reader. So I'm not going to read it again, because I will trip up. But this list has an order to it. And if you look at the sons of Israel, they are listed, not by birth order, but actually by, firstly, the sons of Jacob's first wife, which is Leah. So you see on the slide, the L, the first of

Leah's sons. Then the sons of Jacob's second wife, which is Rachel, R. And then the sons of Leah and Rachel's maid servants, which is M. Zilpah and Bilhah, their names. And then within the L, R, and M, of course, then they are listed by their birth order. And I put this comparison up because that left-hand column is what we find in terms of wives and birth order. But the second column is what we have here in front of me. And you can see that there are actually some tweaks, because Levi, for instance, isn't in the list. And we will come to that in the coming weeks. Neither is Joseph, but his two sons are, Ephraim and Manasseh. And the reason for that is because Jacob, as Joseph, as Jacob's favorite son, had a double portion of Jacob's blessing. And at the end of Genesis, what we find is, before Jacob died, he blessed both of those sons as though, those grandsons, sorry, as though they were his sons. And so they are recorded as separate tribes. You also see it right at the bottom there, for reasons unknown to me, why the maidservant's sons have been shuffled around. So not sure. But anyway, there you go. But returning to the list then, I think naming these leaders is actually significant because their role is important.

First, they are to assist in the census, as we're going to read, counting their men in their tribe. But then in chapter 2, they also have the job of setting up and decamping for the journey.

Every time they're about to leave, they're going to have to ask everyone and lead everyone in the packing up before they move out, and then the setting up when they stop. Later on, in chapter 7, I think, they have the task of then presenting gifts for the tabernacle, you know, collecting them from their tribe and then presenting it at the tabernacle. So they're handpicked by God, and in verse 16, they're actually named as leaders from the community. They're leaders. But the way they lead is different to Moses and Aaron, all right? Because whereas Moses and Aaron represent God to the people, and even though they're from the tribe of Levi, they intercede to God when they turn and pray to God, they intercede for the whole nation, all 12 tribes rather than their own. These other leaders, in turn, represent their tribes in response to God. Aaron and Moses lead by speaking God's word to the people. But these tribal leaders lead by instructing their tribe to then obey the Lord's commands.

So that means that when they hear Moses' instruction, what they do is model obedience and then say to the rest of their tribe, hey, let's do what it says because this is God's word. That's their job, to encourage their tribe to obey the Lord. And so working with the leaders, verse 17, Moses and Aaron call the community together. And on the first day of the second month, each family, I think each head of the family would bring their list of the men above 20, bring it to the head of the clan probably, say, here's my family. Then the clan leader would collect all the names and count them and then go to the tribe leader and say, here, here's my clan. And then the tribal leader would bring it all together and then go to Moses and say, here's my tribe. And so then they tally all that up and the results are given to us in verse 20 and onwards. So beginning with the descendants of Reuben, the firstborn son of Israel, we read, all the men 20 years old or more who were able to serve in the army were listed by name, one by one, according to the records of their clans and families. The number from the tribe of Reuben was 46,500. And all throughout this list, the wording is exactly the same. It's like a formula. The only thing that changes is the tribe name and the number. Hence, you get the table there. Hence, how Yahi read out those verses a while ago. Now, one curious thing to note is that Gad, if you look at the second column, he's right down there as a maidservant's son, he gets promoted up all the way to the list where Levi was meant to be. And again, we'll get to that next week, but there's a reason for that.

[13 : 34] And then all in all, in verse 46, we're given the total of 603,550. And if any of you are tempted to add it up, I've done it for you, it adds up, okay? Some of your mental calculations really probably worked that out. Now, that's not the problem. The real challenge, however, is actually the sheer size of this number. Because what we're talking about here is men over 20. If you add the women and the children, we're looking at a total population that is at least double that.

Okay, so easily more than a million, probably one and a half, you know, maybe even two million. And that's a big number, if you think about it. Just by way of comparison, I did some Googling, by the way. The largest refugee camp today is in Bangladesh. It's where about 900,000 Rohingya people are, you know, the Muslims that have been displaced from Myanmar. And that camp is approximately 13 square kilometers in size, okay? So 900,000 people crammed in 13 square kilometers.

Now, if you're trying to work out what 13 square kilometers sort of looks like, the size of Melbourne CBD is about six square kilometers, okay? The size of Blackburn and Doncaster combined, you know, is 13 square kilometers, okay? So this is like, don't think Doncaster East or, you know, Blackburn North and Blackburn South. This is just Blackburn and Doncaster. But still, it's pretty big, right? Even in Doncaster, right? If you had the tabernacle somewhere in the middle, you're not going to be able to see it, really, on such a huge area. Now, I've done some quick calculations. And to fit, let's say, one and a half million people into 13 square kilometers actually equates to some, and I made a mistake, Tim and Rachel, this morning. The number is not 850. The number is 85 people. I was working with feet instead of meters. But anyway, you actually have to fit about 85 people into your suburban block. So imagine your home that you live, your quarter acre block. It's about 85 people living in there to make it work in 13 square kilometers, right? If, for example, it was a smaller area like six, you just double it. If there were 2 million people instead of one and a half, you know, it's even more again. So we're talking about quite a lot of people in a confined area, isn't it? Now, it's not impossible. I think my conclusion still stands. It's not impossible, but it's highly unlikely.

And so many people have tried to solve this conundrum, because I'm sure one of you would go away if I didn't mention this and work out and come back and go how we fit that many people into the camp.

They've tried to work it out. They've looked at the Hebrew and all that kind of stuff. I don't want to get into it. I did quite a bit of reading on it, and it got a bit lost. But the end result is that most people have concluded that there is no satisfactory answer, all right? Now, that's not to say that the numbers have been made up, because if you look at it, I think the relativities between the tribes look about right. And obviously, there's some rounding going on. But, you know, the totals add up to 603,000. I'm not saying any of this to undermine the authority of Scripture, except to say that for reasons known only to God in His wisdom, some of these mathematical details have been lost in the transmission. And the point really is, we shouldn't be so fixated or bogged down by the numbers, because the exact numbers themselves, they are not important. It's what they represent that is of more importance.

[17:22] Because whether it's 600,000 or 60,000, it shows that God has been faithful to Abraham. Abraham. He had promised Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

And here we are. They are. And what it also means, as we look at those numbers, is that they now have a viable army for a successful conquest. Now, God is still going to win the victory for them, but there's enough, as it were, boots on the ground to do the job, right?

They left. Remember, they left Canaan in Genesis with 70 people. And now they're coming in with thousands.

And that also means that as they enter and they conquer, they will be able to fully possess the land that God gives them, right? They can populate and fill the land, as opposed to 70 people trying to fill the land of Canaan.

Now, later on, too, there will be a second census. And you will see, too, that there is a message there when we look at the relative change in the number. And we will see, again, that God has been faithful.

[18:42] Now, there's one more thing, pretty obvious to say in this chapter, and it's in verses 47 to 53. Because there, the Lord provides an exclusion or exemption for the tribe of Levi.

They are not to be counted, and they are not to be enlisted in the army. And the reason for that is, in both verse 50, which I won't read the whole section, verse 50 and verse 53, the Levites actually have another job to do.

Instead of going to war with the others, they are responsible for the tabernacle of the covenant law, to take care of it. And again, over the next two weeks, we will see in chapters 3 and 4, 2, 3 and 4, what they are to do and why.

But today, verses 47 to 53 is a mere summary of what will be detailed in the other chapters. So, what happens is that Levi, although he is one of the 12 sons of Jacob, is not part of the 12 tribes of Israel.

And the loss of Levi is compensated, of course, because Joseph now has two sons. Right? So, minus 1, plus 1, still makes up 12. Okay, so that's really the chapter.

[20 : 00] But I want to finish today by just giving you an overview of the rest of the 36 chapters. And so, sorry about any spoilers, but although things seem to begin with such promise, that's not how it will progress.

And I'm sure many of you will know already. Because, firstly, if you think about it, it's only been two months, isn't it? Since it's only taken two months to get to Sinai. So, if they start their journey now, by rights, they should be at the border of the promised land in two months or a little bit more.

Right? And then the conquest can begin. Now, if you haven't read Numbers before, that is what you probably expect. That by chapter 4, they're in. They're going to fight.

But, no, Israel only enters the promised land in the book of Joshua. Another two books away. And for those of you who are coming and staying in this service, probably another seven or eight years away before I start preaching there.

So, let's look at the diagram then and look at what the book of Numbers look like. All right? We will see in the next ten chapters that there will be further instructions for Levites, for purity, for the tabernacle.

[21 : 14] And then they will then start heading out for the battle. Now, these chapters are actually important because it will emphasize that the God who leads them in battle is holy.

And therefore, they too need to be holy. And then from time to time, we will read during these chapters that they did as the Lord commanded. So, we have that right in verse 54 here.

The Israelites did all this just as the Lord commanded Moses. And every time they do that, that's a good thing. So far, so good. They're on the right track. As long as that happens, victory is assured.

The battle is the Lord's. But their task is to obey. Not just in battle, but in all things. But as we head into chapter 11 and onwards, we find the Israelites starting to grumble and rebel.

No food. No water. Grumble, grumble, grumble, grumble, grumble. All right? Even Moses' own siblings, Miriam and Aaron, complain of Moses.

[22 : 20] And then, of course, in chapter 13, when the spies return with a report from the land, bringing all the fruit and all the milk and honey and things like that, they rebel.

The result is 40 years in the wilderness. And, you know, even Moses, right? God's prophet, the leader, he disobeys the Lord himself in chapter 20.

And he himself is barred from entering the land. And so what we see is that everyone, everyone falls short of what God wants them to do.

And so the first generation dies out, and by the end of chapter 25, I think, because what we have in chapter 26 is a second census. And then from there we see the new generation emerge, and they are the ones who will enter the promised land.

And so really, numbers is a cautionary tale of human weakness and failure. All sin and fall short of God's standard.

[23 : 27] Even Moses. All they're asked to do is to hear and obey. Do as the Lord commanded. And even that was too much for them.

And as Paul warns us in 1 Corinthians 10, we are to see that actually we are no different. We're prone to the same mistakes as them.

And so Paul says, I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that all our ancestors were under the cloud, and that they all passed through the sea. That is the sea, the Red Sea. They were all baptized into Moses, in the cloud and in the sea.

They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them.

their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. You see, on the surface, these were the chosen ones. Every blessing of God, promised to them, they were due to enjoy.

[24 : 36] And yet, most of them did not enter the land. They were scattered in the wilderness. And so likewise, as Christians, that is our danger, isn't it?

That we can have all the trappings of a Christian. We can come to church. We can be baptized, like Kai is today, infant or adult. We can sing the right hymns, say the right prayers, have the right theology, that is the right understanding of the Bible.

And yet, if our heart is not right, find that God is not pleased with us. And so in verse 11, Paul cautions, these things happen to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful.

He will not let you be tested or tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. So brothers and sisters, just like in Numbers, we are prone to be deceived, to think that we're standing and yet be exposed to the danger of falling into temptation.

[26 : 04] when we grumble against God, when we don't serve Him wholeheartedly, when we go through the motions and then secretly, our heart is far away, disobeying Him.

Numbers has been given to us as we go through it over the coming weeks and months to help us see those mistakes and not make the same ones. You know, it's a bit like if you have an older sibling, seeing them punished for the wrongdoing.

If you're smart, and I know most of you are, and you see what kind of punishment they get, you don't follow along, do you? You learn and you avoid the same mistakes they make. We're meant to do the same.

See ourselves in the lives of the Israelites instead of go, be humble, recognizing that, you know, we're no better. We could suffer the same fate if we're not careful.

But more positively though, Numbers is also an encouragement for us because through it we will see that we have a God who remains faithful even when humans fail.

[27 : 09] That even when they grumble, God still provided, gave them water from the rock, gave them quail and manna from heaven. Even when they rebelled, God still persevered with them.

And then wiped them out but sustained them for 40 years in the wilderness. So, how much more for us is God's faithfulness?

Because our rock is Christ Himself. You know, unlike Israel, we don't have to go in and conquer any land, do we? Christ has already done that through His death on the cross.

Our enemies of sin and death has already been won. And as I said just during the baptism, what we are to do is put our trust in Jesus. Persevere in that.

And yet, like Israel, you know, we haven't entered completely the promised rest yet, have we? It still awaits us either when Jesus comes again or when our life ends.

[28 : 12] And so, we're in that same in-between, right? We've left Egypt, almost as it were, freed from sin, but we're yet to get into that complete rest. And so, our instruction from Numbers is to respond to God's faithfulness by standing firm.

And, you know, incidentally, that's what we saw last week in Ephesians, isn't it? Stand firm, put on the full armor of God in the power of the Spirit. Because we want to be like, and here's another spoiler, we want to be like two who didn't make it, Caleb and Joshua.

Right? Paul said most of them didn't make it, but actually, two did. Their names are Caleb and Joshua. And friends, we want to be like Caleb and Joshua.

We want to be the ones, even though we're more than 20 years old or less, we want to make it into the promised land. Okay, so that's my aim today, just to whet your appetite into what's coming in the next few weeks.

So do read ahead, if you want. Familiarize yourself with the list. It's a fascinating reading. Hopefully, I haven't given away too much by way of spoilers. And if you're visiting us, you're more than welcome to come back again.

[29 : 22] I will pick up the pace as we go, a couple of chapters rather than one chapter at a time. But for today, let us just remind ourselves that the God we worship is faithful to His promises.

But as a consequence, let us then heed the lessons and warnings that will be given to us in numbers and do as the Lord commands us.

Put our faith in Jesus, keep trusting in Him, and then following that faith by obeying His commands until our promise rests. Let's pray. Father, thank you for your faithfulness, which we pray you will reveal to us more and more in the coming weeks as we look in numbers.

Humble us to know that we are prone to fall. Help us not to be overconfident and fall into the sin of pride as well. Guide us by your Spirit so that we will enter the promised rest that you have given to us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.