

Confidence We'll Get Home

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Date: 13 July 2025

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, it'd be great if you could grab a Bible as well. The two chapters are 88 verses, so I can't put them on the screen.
- We're not going to have time to look at them all. But you would have got a sense of them that the chapters are all about names and numbers and layout.
- That's what the chapters appear to be about, which at first glance doesn't really make for riveting reading, does it? I mean, as I was reading, how many of you were wondering?
- He's not going to keep going for the whole chapter, is he? I mean, I wonder if some of you glanced at the screen to see when I would stop. I tell you what, I was glad when I was able to stop. But it's still God's word to us and it still has things to teach us.
- Encouraging truths for us, which give us confidence that we'll get home. That is not home from church or home from holiday, but home to glory. To our promised land of the new heavens and earth, the world to come.
- [1 : 0 3] But the book begins in the wilderness, which is point one, verse one. And so the Lord spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the desert, or better, the wilderness of Sinai.
- You see, when we think desert, we think all sand, but the wilderness wasn't completely sand. There was some grass, there was rocks, there was mountains, like Mount Sinai, for example.
- In fact, while our English Bibles call this book numbers, based on the numbers of the census in chapter one and chapter 26, the Hebrew name for this book is in the wilderness from verse one.
- But it also says in verse one that it's the first day of the second month in the second year from Egypt, which begs the question, what have they been doing all this time? What's happened before?
- In other words, what's the story so far? In fact, whenever you start a new Old Testament book, it's worth asking that question. What's the story so far? Because as many of you will know, the Old Testament is one big story that finds its fulfillment in Jesus.
- [2 : 1 2] And so when you're kind of plonking in somewhere along that story, it's worth knowing what's happened before. And so many of you will know that in Genesis, God called Abram and made some promises to him, which as I've summarized before by the tennis shot lob, the three big promises, land, offspring, that is descendants, great nation, and blessing, the blessing of being God's people and God being their God and everything else that comes with it.
- But by the end of Genesis, Abraham's offspring or grandson Jacob, who is also called Israel, has grown. He has a family with 12 sons who become the 12 tribes of Israel.
- And the family grew into 70, 70 people. But they ended up in Egypt because of famine in their land with Joseph, which if you've seen the Disney movie, you know, Prince of Egypt, that's what that story is based on.
- But the next book of Exodus opens and his descendants have greatly grown. So the O promise has been fulfilled, but they then are enslaved in Egypt.

And so God rescued them from slavery through Charlton Heston. I mean, Moses, okay, this is the classic Ten Commandments movie, right?

[3 : 35] And by the plagues and ultimately by the blood of the lamb. You might remember the 10th and final plague that God sent on Egypt to force them to let his people go was the angel of death.

But to save his people from that, they sacrificed a lamb and they painted blood on the doorframe. And so when the angel saw the blood, it would pass over that Israelite house, which is where we get the Passover from.

And it would judge only the Egyptian household. And it's that that forced Pharaoh to let God's people go. And this Passover actually kicked off the Jewish calendar. It became the first month of the first year for them.

And God then brought them to Mount Sinai, arriving on the first day of the third month. So just shy of two months later. And there God made a covenant with them to be their God.

And a few verses later in chapter 19 of Exodus, if they fully obeyed him and kept his covenant, then they would be his treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, he gave them this special purpose to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, pointing people to him for his glory.

[4 : 53] And so their salvation was from slavery to Pharaoh. It was accomplished through Moses and it was by the blood of a lamb. And while they had grown in offspring, they'd only just started to enjoy God's blessing.

They'd only just begun being God's people in that covenant. And they certainly weren't yet in their land, were they? And so, you see, at this point in history, their salvation has been accomplished from Egypt, but it's not yet completed in the promised land.

They were still in the wilderness, which is actually similar for us who believe in Jesus. You see, our salvation is from slavery to sin.

It's accomplished through Jesus and it's by his own blood at the cross. And while we have grown as God's people in number down through the ages, and Christianity is still the largest religion in the world, we've also begun to enjoy God's blessings as his people, we don't yet enjoy every blessing God has for us.

And we're not yet in the promised land, our promised land of the new heavens and earth, where there'll be no more suffering or war or sickness or death. We, too, you see, live in the wilderness between our salvation accomplished at the cross and our salvation completed in the world to come.

[6 : 19] And so this book can certainly teach us how to live because it takes place in a similar setting in the wilderness. But if they arrived at Sinai on the first day of the third month, as we saw before, but verse one of our Bibles today in Numbers say it's actually the second, the first day of the second month of the next year.

If I've got my maths right, that's 11 months, including the whole months. What have they been doing for that time? Well, they've largely been building the tabernacle. I mean, that takes time to produce coloured cotton and sew curtains and make the Ark of the Covenant and so on.

And that was the rest of the book of Exodus. And they've also been setting up their sacrificial system with all the laws about sacrifices and the priests, plus getting other laws to help them be a holy nation.

That's the book of Leviticus, the one that just becomes before Numbers today. And so now when we reach Numbers, they're almost ready to head off to their promised land, which they are going to do in a month's time in chapter 10.

But here's the question. How can they be confident that they'll get to their promised land, that God will bring them there? Well, because of the census in chapter 1.

[7 : 38] So we're at point 2, verse 2 to 4. So God said to Moses to take a census of the whole Israelite community. And in this census, it was of the men in Israel who are 20 years old or more and able to serve in the army.

You see, this census is to work out how many fighting men Israel has. And to help Moses and Aaron do the counting, God tells them to use a leader of each tribe, the tribes of Jacob's 12 sons.

And so in verses 5 to 15 in your Bibles are the names of those leaders, the names that I messed up before. And the order here highlights the birth order of Jacob's sons.

All the ones from his first wife, Leah, whom he didn't actually love, sadly, then listed first in order. And then all the sons from his second wife, Rachel, whom he did love, are then listed and then from the maid servants as well.

But Levi is not counted here since his tribe became the priests. So to keep 12, the number 12 tribes, if you look in verse 10, Joseph's tribe is split into two after his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

[8 : 57] But the point is, verse 16, these are the men appointed from the community, the leaders of their ancestral tribes, the sons of Jacob, and they were the heads of the clans of Israel.

And so in verse 17 to 19, Moses and Aaron are called together the whole Israelite community and they start to count. So if you pick it up in verse 20, from the descendants of Reuben, the firstborn son of Israel or Jacob, remember he had two names, 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 of the tribe of Reuben was 46,500. And on it goes. Now at this point, we switch off, don't we? But not for them. You see, different numbers or statistics appeal to different people.

If you follow sport, then the sports statistics of that particular sport or team will appeal to you, won't they? If you're really into cars, then the statistics of an engine will appeal to you.

Or when a baby is born, many of the women amongst us are keen to hear the numbers. You know, how much did they weigh? How long are they? How many hours was the labor? Whereas most of the guys, we're just glad that we've remembered the gender, right?

[10 : 08] You see, different numbers appeal to different people. And so while these numbers are boring to us, it would have been exciting for Israel. Remember, they're on their way to their new home in the promised land.

And while God would fight for them, he would also fight through them. That's often how God works, isn't it? He often works through his people. And when you have to fight, you want a big army, don't you?

And so in verse 21, the tribe of Reuben, hearing that they had 46,500 men, would have caused a cheer. And then in verse 23, the number for the Simeon tribe was 59,300.

Yes! And then verse 25, the number from the tribe of Gad was 45,650. Yes! Verse 27, the number for the tribe of Judah was 74,600.

Woo! You get the idea, don't you? This would have been encouraging for them. But even more exciting and encouraging was knowing that God had kept his promise to give them these large numbers.

[11 : 17] Remember, they went down to Egypt with only 70 people in the whole nation. And now you skip over to verse 46, because the total number of fighting men was 603,550 plus women and children.

That's a lot of people, isn't it? So many, in fact, for that time in history, that scholars think these numbers can't be real.

And admittedly, even the book itself makes it a bit hard, because in chapter 3, verse 43, it tells us that there are 22,273 families. That's the number of firstborn, and so the number of families.

And so if you want to work out how many fighting men are in each family, do the mass, divide it, and it comes out, each family on average would have to have 27 fighting men each.

That's a lot of sons for every mother to give birth to, right? Not to mention daughters as well. Now, it's possible God can do anything, and usually we just take God's word at face value.

[12 : 22] But even back then, there was a practice of using hyperbole. Jesus did it himself. You know, if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Did he literally mean that?

No, no. He was using hyperbole to get us to take sin seriously. And so perhaps that's what God is doing here. There's still big numbers, but he uses hyperbole.

That is exaggeration to make a point, to emphasize the point. Well, we do it ourselves. I mean, how many of us said this morning, it's freezing today. Is it literally zero degrees?

No, of course not. It's not literally freezing. Does everyone think we're being deceptive? No, of course not. Everyone knows we're just using hyperbole. It's still cold, but we're using hyperbole to make a point.

And so maybe that's what is happening here. Either way, it's still large numbers, which shows us that God is faithful.

[13 : 20] That's what the census shows us, that God is faithful. He has kept his promise of offspring and grown this nation with its fighting men. And so they can be confident, if he's been faithful to his promises already, that he'll be faithful to his promises in the future about the land.

And so here's our first lesson for us this morning. In our wilderness, remember God is faithful. So we who believe in Jesus can be confident he'll keep his promise to bring us home to our promised land.

In fact, we have even more reason to be confident than Israel because God has already made us part of Abraham's family and already given us the blessing of being his people and him, our God.

But to do that, it cost him his only son, Jesus, didn't it? Jesus had to die to pay for our sins so that we could be forgiven and then brought into God's family to enjoy the blessing of having God as our God, our heavenly father.

And if God was willing to keep his promise to bless us, all nations, including us here in Melbourne, at the cost of his only son, then we can be even more confident he'll keep his other promises to bring us home to our promised land, you see?

[14 : 34] It's like a Beryl from my old church. I was speaking with her one day and she said she was certain God would keep her in the faith in this life and bring her home to heaven in the next.

She said, when I asked why, she said, he's been faithful to me in the past, especially in his son, so I can be certain he'll be faithful to me in the future. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, he will also keep you firm.

He, that is God, will keep you firm to the end so that you'll be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ when he brings us to the promised land. Why? God is faithful. And what's more, he is also with us to keep those promises to us, which is what we see with the tabernacle, point three, verse 47.

I'm not going to read through these verses, but it talks about how the Levites were not counted in the census because they had an almost more dangerous job than fighting. They had to look after the house of a holy God, which you need to take seriously, don't you?

But the word tabernacle comes up seven times in this passage where it talks about what the Levites are to do. You know, whenever the tabernacle is to move, the Levites are to take it down.

[15 : 46] Whenever the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall do it. It's repeated all the way through these verses. And the tabernacle, of course, was where God dwelt, wasn't it?

It was God's holy house. And so the point is that he is present with his people. God lives with them, not just to be with them, but to keep his promises to them.

Because three times the tabernacle is called the tabernacle of the covenant law. You see, in the tabernacle, there was this golden box called the Ark of the Covenant.

And in that box was the covenant stone tablets. You know, the two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments on it? It was inside that box. And God dwelt just above that.

And so the covenant was always before God, always in his sight, if you like. It was to remind Israel that he would never forget his covenant promises, but he would keep them.

[16 : 52] And so he has more confidence they will get home to their promised land. And God is with them, not just to hang out with them, but to keep his promises to them. Imagine you go hiking out in the wilderness and you get lost.

And a park ranger comes along and saves you and then leads you back to the path. Then the ranger says, look, if you follow the path down this way, I promise you, you'll get back to your car and get home safely.

Now, the ranger has already proved faithful because he's already saved you and led you back to the path. And so you already have confidence, you know, that he will deliver his other promise.

But imagine he then says, look, I'll even go with you to ensure what I promised you will come true. And then he walks with you down the path, back to your car, so you can go and get home.

You see, being with Israel gave them even more confidence that God would keep his promises to them of bringing them home to their promised land. And it's the same for us, but in an even greater way.

[18 : 01] But God doesn't just dwell amongst us, he dwells in us by his spirit, doesn't he? Who helps us. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians this time, it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ.

He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us and put his spirit in our hearts as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. God is with us to ensure he will keep his promises to us, which gives us even more confidence we'll make it home.

This covenant law had a flip side. God would keep his promises to them, but they would also have to keep the covenant law with him. They were to obey God as their holy king, which is what the camp layout reminds them of, that God is the holy king.

So last point, point four and chapter two, verse one and two. God then says to Moses, look, tell the Israelites to camp around the tent of meeting, but some distance from it.

You notice that? Why? Well, because God is holy. And so they were to treat him as holy by not getting too close. In fact, the priests were to camp between God and them to prevent them getting too close for their own good, actually.

[19 : 19] That's what we saw back in chapter one, verse 53, where the Levites, however, just set up their tents around the tabernacle of the covenant law so that my wrath will not fall on Israel.

You see, God wants to dwell with his people, but like oil and water, sin and holiness just do not mix. And so if a sinful people came too close and contaminated his holy tabernacle, then he'd have no choice but to judge.

But God doesn't want to do that. And so he says, look, make the priests camp around him to prevent others getting too close so I don't have to pour out my wrath because I don't want to do that.

And so what follows in the rest of the chapter is how they're to camp. The layout looks like this. It's hard to see, so it's on the back of the outline. So if you want to pull that out, this summarizes the whole chapter of chapter two.

You'll notice there that the tribes are grouped into three, and the Israelite tribes form an outer ring, and then the inner ring are the Levites, and then right in the center is God.

[20 : 25] This is how armies in history would camp around to protect their king. In other words, this layout shows that God is their holy king. Got the priests there because he's holy, and he's in the middle because he's king.

He is the one, yes, he's the one who would keep his promises to them, but they are also to keep obeying him with reverence. As their holy king. And to put it differently, they were to keep God at the center of their lives, just as he was at the center of their camp, honoring him, obeying him as their holy king, much the same way we are.

And so the third lesson for us is, in our wilderness, we are to keep God at the center of our lives. After all, he has saved us from sin and made us his treasured possession, all by grace.

And he is faithful to us, and he is with us. And so how can we not keep him at the center of our lives? That is revolving all our priorities around him.

I remember when I started a 4 p.m. afternoon service here at Holy Trinity some years ago, a visitor came and they said they'd love this service, and I said, oh, why? And this is what they said.

[21 : 43] He said, because you can enjoy your whole weekend without any inter... And then he stopped. He was about to say interruption. And then he changed and said, and you can come to church at the end. But do you see what he was really saying?

He could put church around his weekend rather than his weekend around church. Who was at the center of his life, you see?

Not God. Contrast that to an elderly member of our church who changed the time their cleaner would come from a Wednesday to a Thursday simply so that they could come to the Wednesday afternoon service.

See, revolving the priorities around God. For Israel, keeping God at the center also meant following Judah in the order that God gave them.

Judah, you see, was named first in verse 3, not Reuben, the firstborn. Again, I'm not going to have time to read through these verses because we're running out of it already.

[22 : 44] But this is a difference between the first census. In the first census, Reuben was the firstborn. He's named first, but now it's Judah. And the order that they listed in chapter 2 is the order that they'll march.

So verse 9, all the men assigned to the camp of Judah according to their divisions, number 186,400. That's the three tribes' numbers joined together. And they will set out first.

They will set out towards the promised land first. And so there's an order here and they're all to follow Judah. Why? Well, because of God's promise back in Genesis that the scepter will not depart from Judah, that the ruler's staff not will depart from between his feet until he to whom it belongs shall come.

In other words, Judah will produce the king. And they did, King David. But who do you think he to whom it belongs? Who do you think the ultimate king from the tribe of Judah is?

Starts with Gs, ends in us. Yep. Jesus, yeah. And so the way they had to keep God at the center was by following Judah. And the way we had to keep God at the center is by following Jesus, you see.

[23 : 56] And the great news that so far, at the end of the chapter, is that Israelites did everything the Lord commanded them. So far, so good. But spoiler alert, this first generation doesn't keep obeying.

And so they don't all make it to the promised land. God is forced to judge them instead. But it's not quite the same for us.

Yes, if we forsake Jesus and turn away, then we won't make it to our promised land either. But God will ensure we won't. Because we live under a new covenant, which comes with ongoing forgiveness every time we disobey.

So we don't have to be judged. And it comes with God's Spirit who helps us to stand firm and obey. And so we can have even more confidence we'll get home to our promised land.

We live in the wilderness between salvation accomplished at the cross and salvation completed in the world to come. But we can be confident we'll make it home on the day of Jesus because God is faithful, even though it costs him his son.

[25 : 04] And God is with us by his Spirit. Indeed, because of Jesus, we have ongoing forgiveness. And because of God's Spirit, we have like a live-in helper to help us stand firm.

And so we can be confident that God will bring us home. As it says in our second reading, Paul says, being confident of this, that he, God, who began a good work in us, will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ.

Christ. And so is that not more reason to give him thanks and keep him at the centre of our lives? Let's pray.