

#4. THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

1. Numbers is the fourth book of the Bible, and the part of the Torah (the Law of Moses) which is the narrative of Israel's preparation for entering the Promised Land. After their initial failure to trust God, they were subject to severe correction in the Wilderness, and the next generation prepared to enter the Land forty years later. The Book's name (in Greek it is *arithmai*, which is basically *to do with numbers*) is derived from the fact that Israel's first complete census occurred in the days of this narrative. The old Hebrew name of the book was *In the Wilderness*. The word *wilderness* is used 48 times in the book.

2. **The author is Moses.** This has been established in a previous lesson on Genesis. The date of composition is about 1405BC, probably during the last year of Moses' life.

3. **Key Chapters**
 - Chapters 1-10 deal with the initial preparation to enter the Land of Promise.

 - Chapters 11-14 give account of the failure of the people (complaints and dissatisfaction), the opposition of Moses by Aaron and Miriam, and the rebellion fostered by the pessimistic report of the spies who had been sent out to scout the land. Of the twelve men, only Joshua and Caleb were faithful and true to The Lord.

 - Chapters 15-21 is the dismal account of the forty years of wandering. Additional laws and regulations are given to the people. We also see a substantial rebellion of leaders against Moses. A new generation is learning faithfulness in the wilderness.

 - Chapters 22-36 tell the story of Balaam and warfare with the Midianites, as well as the approach to the Promised Land from east of the Jordan River.

4. Key Verses

- 14:17-23 NASB But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, ¹⁸The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations. ¹⁹Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now. ²⁰So the Lord said, I have pardoned them according to your word; ²¹but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord. ²²Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, ²³shall by no means see the land which I swore to their

fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it.

5. Key People

- Moses – the great prophet and Lawgiver
- Aaron – the brother of Moses who served as Key Priest
- Miriam – the sister of Moses
- Joshua – the general of Israel's armies and assistant to Moses
- Eleazar – son of Aaron and the second High Priest in Israel
- Korah – one of the chief men of Israel (Exodus 6:24). As a Levite, he was appointed for special service in the Tabernacle. He rebelled against Moses by marginalizing the great leader and demanding more honor and responsibility for himself (Numbers 16:8-10).
- Balaam – apparently a priest/prophet sent into the Land to proclaim God's Word before the arrival of the Israelites. The purpose behind this was to give every nation a chance before judgment fell upon the Canaanites (Genesis 15:16 conveys this concept). A mixed message is portrayed by Balaam's failure, and scholars are divided as to whether Balaam was a true or false prophet. The indication seems to indicate that he was a true prophet who went bad because of greed and self-will (see 2 Peter 2:15, 16).

6. Key Places

- Mount Sinai – (*The Mountain of Moses*; Jabal Mūsā) is a mountain in the Sinai Peninsula. It is the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. There is a debate over the identity of the mountain, but its importance to Jews and Christian alike is beyond dispute.
- The Plains of Moab – where Israel disobeyed God and suffered great devastation because of Balaam's error.

7. Key Themes

- **The numbering of the people** - a census occurs twice. The first was to organize the people for an effective common defense (603,550 men). The second time had to do with the invasion of Canaan (601,730 men).

- **Rebellion** occurred against God directly by refusing to believe and obey. It also manifested itself in opposition to Moses, God's appointed leader.
- **Wandering** - the Israelites, though greatly loved by God, camped in the Wilderness forty years while the unfaithful generation died off. Though cared for miraculously, the Israelites would pay a heavy price for their unbelief. The way had to be cleared for the new generation to walk in the faithfulness their ancestors refused.
- **The Promised Land** - this was the place God promised to Abraham over 400 years earlier. The account of the actual warfare for the land is told in detail in the Book of Joshua, but the beginning of the campaign takes place in Numbers.

8. The Contents of Numbers

- Generational Transfer - from Sinai to Kadesh (1-14)
 1. The Census (1-4)
 - o The numbering of adult males Chapter 1
 - o The Tribal Distributions Chapter 2
 - o The Numberings of the Priests Chapter 3
 - o The Duties of the Priests Chapter 4
 2. Holy Living While Preparing for Conquest (5:1-10:10)
 - o True morality Chapter 5
 - o Nazarite Vow; Aaron's Blessing Chapter 6
 - o The free-will offerings of leaders Chapter 7
 - o The consecration of Levites Chapter 8
 - o The Passover and the Presence Chapter 9
 - o The making of the Trumpets Chapter 10:1-9
 3. The Approach to Canaan (10:10-14:45)
 - o God says go forward! Chapter 10:10-36
 - o The people refuse - and lose. Chapters 11-14
 - o The Wilderness Wandering Chapters 15:1-20:29

4. 15 - In this section we see Moses continue to lead Israel, even though he was faced with profound disappointment. God provided miraculously for Israel, but the day of opportunity was gone.
 5. 16-18 - Here we read the report of a rebellion against the Aaronic priesthood. Over 15,000 die in earthquakes, fire, and plagues.
 6. 19 - Deals with the Ordinance of the Red Heifer - a special offering/sacrifice for Israel.
 7. 20 - This passage deals with the death of Aaron, Miriam, and the sin of Moses which was based on his frustration with the people of Israel, disobedience to The Lord's command, and his apparent self-sufficiency.
- The New Generation (21-36)
 1. Victories; sin; The Brazen Serpent Chapter 21
 2. The story of Balaam Chapters 22-25
 3. A New Census Chapters 26,27
 4. Preparing for the Conquest Chapters 28-36
 - o Offerings to The Lord Chapters 28, 29
 - o Concerning personal vows Chapter 30
 - o Avenging the treachery of the Midianites Chapter 31
 - o Requests of Reuben and Gad Chapters 32-33)
 - o Instructions concerning allotment of the land Chapter 34
 - o Cities for the Levites Chapter 35
 - o Laws of Inheritance Chapter 36

Worth noting:

- The inheritance of the Promised Land is central to God's dealings with Israel.

- It is important to realize that some of our victories are totally won by God alone. For instance, we see God leading Israel to victory over Egypt through no effort of their own. Other victories are won with our participation and cooperation. The latter is how God intended to defeat the Canaanites. As Christians, we should expect both types of warfare to be waged.

- There is no victory without struggle.

- A personal favorite passage of mine is Numbers 6:24-26. This is the High Priestly Blessing that Aaron prayed over The Lord's people.

- It is sobering to realize God's zeal for Israel, the excitement of Moses, and the profound failure of God's People occur within a 72 hour period. May God guard our hearts against the evil of unbelief!

- **When reading Numbers**
 - Realize how committed God is to fulfilling His purposes in our lives. He is just as committed to helping us attain victory in life as He was committed to giving Israel the Land of Promise.

 - God is looking for our obedience and cooperation as He works His plan in our lives. Some victories are won by God alone. Other victories are won with our participation and cooperation. As Christians, we should expect both types of warfare to be waged.