

# The Book of Numbers



Pilgrims through  
this Barren Land

**Study Book**

## Background

The first 5 books of the Bible form a unit called the “Pentateuch”, composed of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Pentateuch was accepted as God’s Word by the Sadducees of Jesus’ day, whereas the Pharisees accepted all of our Old Testament as God’s Word. The Pentateuch is thought to have been written by Moses. So we might call it a 5-part series revealing God’s dealings with man.

*Genesis* sets the background for God’s gracious rescue mission, and the last book, *Deuteronomy*, takes us to stage when God’s nation is about to enter the land he promised to give them. They will be his people, living in his place, living under his rule - that is the picture of God’s Kingdom. God’s people, living in God’s place, living under God’s rule.

*Exodus*, *Leviticus* and *Numbers* show us how God gets his people to His land.

**Exodus** tells us how God rescues his people from slavery in Egypt and how he brings them to Mt Sinai and declares them to be his holy nation. **Leviticus** is set at the foot of Mt Sinai. It is God’s revelation to His people setting out how sinful people can come into the presence of the Holy God. **Numbers** shows us the people leaving Mt Sinai and arriving at the Promised Land 40 years later.

We could say that

the theme of *Exodus* is *Rescue*,  
the theme of *Leviticus* is *God’s Holiness*, and  
the theme of *Numbers* is *that God is Loving and Powerful*.

*Numbers* explains why only 2 of the adults who left Egypt made it to the Promised Land; *Numbers* shows us that God will keep his promises even when his people reject him. Through *Numbers* we see that God cares for, and provides for, his people, and he calls on them to trust him and obey him. Their disobedience means they may miss out, but God will still keep his promises for his faithful people.

## Numbers for Us

As we experience life God often seems to be distant, remote. It seems that we have much the same problems as the rest of our society and we are left wondering does God really care? Is God really powerful? Is God there at all? What’s the point of prayer?

*Numbers* will help us see that **God** is both **Loving** and **Powerful**. I pray that as we look at this Book, that God will speak to our hearts, giving us a deepening confidence in Him that will strengthen us as we face life in today’s world, and give us deep joy in Him.

The hymn: *Guide my O Thou Great Jehovah*, captures many of the themes and events of Numbers, and sees our life as a journey to the promised land (heaven) and how God is our Guide, the Sovereign Ruler, our Sustainer, our Deliverer, our Strength and our Shield and that he will land us safe on Canaan’s side (= heaven), and so with hearts filled with joy and delight in being with our great God and Saviour, we shall sing songs of praise to Him.

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty;  
Hold me with thy powerful hand:  
Bread of heaven,  
Feed me now and evermore.

Open thou the crystal fountain  
Whence the healing stream shall flow;  
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar  
Lead me all my journey through:  
Strong deliverer,  
Be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
Bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of death, and hell's destruction,  
Land me safe on Canaan's side:  
Songs of praises  
I will ever give to thee.



## **1. Numbers 1-9 - The Army Camp of God's People.**

Chapters 1-9 of Numbers are set at the base of Mt Sinai. The people, lead by Moses, arrived there in Exodus 19. They appear to have stayed in that vicinity for some time. Let's review some key moments at Mt Sinai.

### 1. Read Exodus 19: 1-6

Although the people have walked to Mt Sinai, how does God say they got there? (vs. 4) What is the significance of this?

What commission does God give to this people? (vs. 5-6) To whom do they belong? What task is given to them?

The rest of Exodus 19 details preparations the people are to take before God speaks to them. Then in Exodus 20 God spoke to his nation, and for the first time they heard the Ten Commandments. What is the significance of the Ten Commandments being given at this moment?

Then Exodus 24-31 God calls Moses and some others to come up Mt Sinai so he can give them details for the construction of the Tabernacle (where the Ten Commandments were kept, and the people gathered to meet with God); the ordination of priests and other implements for the Tabernacle.

Meanwhile Exodus 32 takes us back to the base camp and the people are becoming unsettled because Moses has been away for some time. The priest Aaron builds a golden calf and the people begin to worship it in a drunken frenzy. God's judgement falls heavy on them. But Moses pleads for God to have mercy on his people. God re-affirms the Ten Commandments, and gives further instructions for the Tabernacle and ceremonies in Exodus 35-48.

As Numbers opens, the Israelites are still at the foot of Mt Sinai. It's time to get moving.

*If you have not read these chapters yet, read Numbers 1:1-4 and 44-54.*

2. Who is in charge of the Tabernacle? (vs. 50)

3. If someone else approaches the Tabernacle what penalty were they to receive? (vs. 51)

4. Numbers 2 describes the arrangement of the tribes around the Tabernacle when the people stopped and camped (see illustration). When the people set up camp, what was to be at the centre? (Numbers 1:53). Why does God place them in this position? (vs. 53)

5. What do these rules tell the people about their relationship with God?

6. Read Hebrews 10:19-22. God has not changed, so why is it possible for Christians to stand before the Holy God without such a fear?

## **Learning from Numbers Today**

\* It's easy to take approaching God for granted. What does this study reveal to you about the privilege you have in being able to approach God?

\* What is the most obvious way you could express your gratitude to Jesus for making it possible for you to approach God?

\* Think of a song we sing at church which expresses these truths. (e.g. Jesus, Thank You) How could you sing this song with more meaning and expression?

## **2. Numbers 10-12 - Serious Grumbling**

*If you have not read these chapters yet, read chapters 10-12*

1. As the Israelites finally started moving out to the promised land, Moses conveyed his certainty that God would fulfil his promise to Abraham. Yet God hadn't given Israel victory over any of the peoples in the promised land at that stage.

a. At that stage of Israel's history, what reasons did Moses have for trusting in God's promises? (Consider what he knows about God's dealing with Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, as well as his own experience.)

b. What reasons do we have at our stage of salvation history to trust in God's promises to us?

2. What does God provide to sustain, encourage and strengthen us, as we 'journey' to our promised inheritance? In what ways do we take for granted God's provision for us? How could we avoid doing so?

3. Why are Israel's complaints so deserving of God's judgement?

4. Why do the Israelites look back to Egypt with longing (11:4-6)? What are they forgetting? Do you sometimes envy the comfort of the non-Christian life? In these times, what are you forgetting?

5. Read Philippians 2:14-16. In what areas of your life and ministry are you tempted to be like the Israelites, wailing and complaining against God, and what could you change?

6. What did Moses despair over his role of leadership (11:10-15)?

### **Learning from Numbers Today**

7. If you are a husband, or father, then God has given you a role of being a leader in your family. If you are a single parent then God has given you a role in leading in your family. In your work you may have a position of leadership. At church you may be leading in a ministry, or Growth Group, etc.

a. If as leaders we feel like giving up on leadership, what should we do instead?

b. If I have problems with the one who is leading me, what should I avoid? What steps could I take that would be helpful?

### **3. Numbers 13-15 - The Insult of Reason**

*If you have not read these chapters yet, read 13: 1-3, 16-33.*

1. What is the report of the land that the spies bring back (13:26-29)? How does it compare with what God previously told the Israelites about the promised land? (see Exodus 3:7-10)

2. Why are the 10 spies so discouraging (13:28-29, 31-33)? How do Joshua and Caleb assess the situation(13:30; 14:5-9)?

3. Why do you think the people followed the advice of the 10 spies?

4. What had they forgotten, or lost confidence in?

5. In response to Israel's rebellion, God resolves to destroy them, and to start over with Moses (14:10-12)

a. How does God view their refusal to go in to the land? (14:11)  
What story does this remind us of? (see Exodus 32-33)

b. How does Moses respond to God's proposal? (14:13-16)

c. In the light of Numbers 14:10-22 and 27-35, how would you describe God's attitude to sin?

d. How do these events help you grasp the enormity of Jesus taking your sin and paying its penalty?

e. What does this show us about how the love and justice of God meet at the cross? As well as God's anger and mercy?

6. While the people are forgiven by God (14:20) in what way will they still bear the consequences of their sin (14:21-23)

7. Why did God respond to Joshua and Caleb differently? (14:24-25)

### **Learning from Numbers Today**

8. As you reflect on this passage, what does it tell you about God?

9. On what basis can you trust God will keep his promise to bring you into his heavenly kingdom?

10. What are the sort of situations you find yourself in that cause you to become overwhelmed? In what area of your life are you finding it too difficult to trust God's power? How can you change?

#### **4. Numbers 16-17 - Respect for Leaders**

*If you have not read these chapters yet, read Numbers 16-17*

1. Who formed the group which challenged the leadership of Moses & Aaron?

2. What crisis of confidence has developed? Why might the leaders have accused Moses and Aaron of “going too far”? Consider Numbers 14, and 15:32-36.

3. What steps did Moses take to deal with the rebellion? (Numbers 16)

4. What was God’s response to this challenge? (see Num 16:23-35) Why did God take this matter so seriously?

5. Yet, the grumbling against Moses and Aaron did not stop (16:41). How did God deal with this continuing rebellion?

6. What was Aaron’s role in ending the plague? (Numbers 16:46-50) What does this show us about Aaron’s role as priest?

7. What steps did God take in Numbers 17 to demonstrate that he had called Aaron’s tribe (the Levites) to be priests?

#### **Learning from Numbers Today**

8. Chapters 16 & 17 make it very clear that people cannot approach God on their own terms, but need a mediator of God’s choosing.

a. Do Christians need a priest? Why, or why not? (See Hebrews 2:17, 4:14, 7:26-27; 10:12-14)

b. Can a parish priest, or the pope, or Mary or saints mediate before God on our behalf? Why or why not? (see 1 Timothy 2:5-6)

c. Who is mediating before God on your behalf according to Hebrews 7:23-25, Romans 8:34?

9. In Ephesians 4:11-13 Paul writes that Christ himself gave (or appointed) pastors and teachers, evangelists to serve His people. What do the following passages say about how we should treat those who preach, teach and lead in our churches today?

1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

1 Timothy 5:17-20

Hebrews 13:17

10. Consider God’s response to grumbling by his people. What steps can we take to eradicate grumbling from our way of dealing with problems - especially problems with leaders at church? Instead of grumbling to others, what should we do?

## 5. Numbers 18-19 - The Gift of God

*If you have not read these chapters yet, read Numbers 18*

1a. Who bears responsibility for offences and sin? (vs. 1-4)

1b. In what ways does 1 Peter 2:24 show how Numbers 18:1-4 points us to Christ and is fulfilled by Him?

2. Complete the table regarding gifts.

	What is the Gift	Who gives the Gift	Who is the Gift given to?
vs. 7			
vs. 8-10			
vs. 21-24			

Why do you think God describes the priests as his 'gift' to them?

### Learning from Numbers Today

3. When we give money to church should it be called 'tithing'? Why or why not? How is giving to support gospel ministry described in Philippians 4:18?

4. Read 1 Corinthians 9:3-14. Paul gives 7 reasons why Christian ministers (and families) should be supported financially. What are the reasons he mentions? Have you considered your giving in the light of these reasons?

*If you have not read these chapters yet, read Numbers 19 now.*

God is 'holy' and cannot tolerate sin, or anything associated with sin, including death (which came as a punishment because of Adam's and Eve's sin). People are generally 'clean' or 'unclean'. This is not about hygiene, but whether it is appropriate for us to enter God's presence. The 'normal' state for people is that we are 'clean'. Death is a reminder of sin, so death and dead bodies feature in this passage.

5. What does this chapter say about:

- How a 'clean' person becomes 'unclean' (vs. 8, 11, 14-15,
- How is the 'unclean' person made 'clean'? (vs. 7-8, 12, 16, 17-21)
- What if an 'unclean' person ignores these instructions? (vs. 13) If you lived at that time, would this matter?

6. What does the 'red heifer' ceremony teach us about God?

### Learning from Numbers Today

7. Why couldn't the Old Testament sacrifices cleanse the consciences of the Israelites from their sins? - see Hebrews 9:14. Why does the death of Jesus actually cleanse our conscience?

8. Read Hebrews 10:1-12. How should we understand Numbers 19 now as Christians?

## 6. Numbers 20-21 - Desperate Measures

1. What do you learn from the complaint stories in these 2 chapters about:

- \* Israel,
- \* Moses and
- \* God?

2. Why do you think Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land? (Hint: note God's judgement on Moses and Aaron in Numbers 20:12 - what reason did God give for not allowing them to enter the land? Now think about who made the water come from the rock and read Numbers 20:10 carefully, and note what Moses said - according to his words who made the water come?)

3. a. What is significant about the place of Israel's first victory (Numbers 21:1-3)? (see Numbers 14, and espec vs. 45 - note the place name!)

b. Why is this a turning point in the Book of Numbers?

4. Although God gave them a very significant victory, yet their troubles are not over. What happened in vs. 4-5 as they travelled towards Edom?

5. What was God's response to their complaints? (vs. 6-9)

## Learning from Numbers Today

6. How might we 'test the Lord' like the Israelites did (1 Corinthians 10:9)? Can you think of past examples when you have grumbled against God or leaders he has appointed? How can you avoid doing so again?

7. What was God's way of saving people from death from the snakes?

8. By looking at the snake, the people weren't just seeing the snake, what did their 'looking' reveal about them?

9. Jesus speaks of his own death as being like Moses 'lifting up the bronze snake' (John 3:13-15). Instead of 'looking' at the cross, what does Jesus call on us to do?

10. What response have you made to Jesus' death for your sin?

11. Like the Israelites in Numbers 21, God has given us His Holy Spirit as a downpayment guaranteeing our future victory. Why do you think God wants you to know that our future victory (over death) is guaranteed? What is the connection between Jesus' victory on the cross and the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:32-33 and 38-39)?

## 7. Numbers 22-24 - Unstoppably Blessed

We think of a 'curse' as a spell in witchcraft, and so on. But the idea of 'curse' in this chapter is the opposite of 'bless'. A blessing is a prayer to God for your good; a curse is like an appeal for God to judge and condemn you.

1. God in his sovereignty can speak a message through the mouth of a donkey, and through a pagan sorcerer. How does God speak to people today? (see Hebrews 1:1-2 and 2 Timothy 3:14-17)

2. Why is Balaam unable to curse Israel? What what does he prophesy about them, and how does this relate to God's promises to Abraham (especially Genesis 12:1-3)?

3. How does Numbers 22-24 show that once God has blessed his people **nothing** can reverse that blessing?

### Learning from Numbers Today

4. a. What blessings do we have today as Christians? (Consider Ephesians 1:3-12)

b. What blessings are yet to come?

c. What response to you have to this?

5. Read Romans 8:37-39. What blessings has God given you in this passage? How do you feel knowing these blessings are given to you?

6. Why do we doubt God's blessings when we travel a hard road in life?

7. Numbers 22-24 demonstrates that nothing can stand in the way of God's promises. God promises to raise us from the dead to be with him forever. What would be some differences between someone who had assurance that God will keep his promises, and someone who did not? How would these differences be seen:

- in their attitude to prayer?

- in their desire to live a godly life (not drink much, lead family, cut out swearing, ...)?

- in their passion and excitement for Christ?

- in their generosity to gospel ministry?

- in finding their joy and delight in God or the things of our world?