

February 2

Numbers Overview

As I mentioned yesterday we are going to do something a little different today to avoid repeating material we have already discussed. In the sequence of Old Testament books you may know that Leviticus comes after Exodus. However, since we are going through the Bible chronologically, your Daily Bible has organized passages a little differently based on the timeline of events. For example, on tomorrow's reading you will read Lev 8-10 whereas for February 4th you will read out of the book of Numbers. Because the first half of February is predominantly Numbers, I thought it would be beneficial to share a brief overview of the book with you today.

The following material I will be using is taken directly from "The Bible for Blockheads" by Douglas Connelly. Yes, you heard that correctly, the book is called Bible for Blockheads...I have found it to be excellent resource...just goes to show that even pastors can identify with blockheads at times.

Well let's get started:

Some people avoid the book of Numbers because they think it has something to do with math! Don't panic – no story problems at the end. Instead, the book of Numbers traces the travels of the people of Israel from Mount Sinai (where they received God's law) to the edge of the land of Canaan. God has promised the land to Abraham more than five hundred years earlier. Numbers also records one of the worst spiritual disasters ever to come upon God's people – and a whole generation of people died without seeing the fulfillment of God's promise. (The book gets its name, by the way, from two census reports, or counting of the people, recorded in chapter 1 and chapter 26.)

As you read the book of Numbers, you will discover that the writer switches back and forth from story (narrative) to God's rules for his people (law). As new situations arose in Israel's experience, God gave them his direction and expanded his law.

PHASE 1: From Mount Sinai to the Land of Promise (Numbers 1-12)

In the first ten chapters of Numbers, the clans, or tribes, of Israel were organized and counted. More than two million people were camped at Mount Sinai. God cared for his people by preserving their clothes and shoes (no Mount Sinai Wal-Mart) and by providing water to drink and manna for food.

The camp was organized around the tabernacle, or tent of meeting. Three clans camped on each of the four sides of the worship complex. The leaders of Israel's worship, the tribe of Levi, camped closest to the tabernacle. Eleven months and five days after Israel's arrival at Mount Sinai, the cloud that stood over the tabernacle as a sign of God's presence with his people rose up and began to move. That was signal for Israel to pack their belongings for another transition. The people

had been organized, the priests had been set apart as God's servants, the law had been given, and the place of worship had been constructed. Now God was moving his people north to Canaan, to the Promised Land.

Phase 2: Refusal to Enter the Land (Numbers 13-14)

God led Israel to Kadesh Barnea, an oasis on the southern twelve men to go into the land and check things out. They came back after 40 days with an interesting report. They all agreed that the land was beautiful and productive. They all said that the cities were strong and well protected. And they all testified that giants lived in the land! They were divided, however, on what to do next. Ten of the spies said, "We can't do it. We'll never defeat these people." Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, had a very different perspective. The said, "We should go up to and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it...Do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, the Lord is with us..."

The people of Israel, in very democratic fashion, took a vote – and the "no" votes won! God's judgment was quick. Since the people refused to believe his promise to give them the land, they would wander in the desert areas of Sinai for a total of 40 years. Furthermore, the whole generation who refused to follow the Lord would die in the wilderness. Everyone who was 20 years old or older when the Israelites left Mount Sinai would be buried in the wilderness rather than in Canaan. Only two exceptions were made. Joshua and Caleb, the two courageous spies, would live in the Promised Land.

Phase 3: Wandering in the Wilderness (Numbers 15-36)

At that point, Israel began a 38 year period of wandering (40 years total from when they left Egypt). Their experience is referred to as "wandering", but mostly it was "camping" God was simply waiting for the unbelieving generation to die. Every day at least 85 people died. Every funeral was a vivid reminder of their disobedience to God.

Very little is recorded about these years in the wilderness. It is not a particularly bright time in Israel's story. The years were marked by complaining, rebellion, judgment, and death. Twice God threatened to wipe out the whole nation and start over, but each time Moses intervened and God spared his people.

You will read some interesting things in these chapters, however. You will read about God providing water from a rock. The Israelites receiving healing by looking at a bronze snake. Or how about God choosing to speak through a donkey!

This generation of God's people missed an incredible opportunity! They had seen God deliver them from Egypt. They had walked across the Red Sea on dry ground. They had heard God's voice at Mount Sinai. Then they had stood on the threshold of the land. But because of their fear and lack of trust in God, they drew back and missed God's blessing. We remember them for their failure, not their faith.

I wonder if we did the same thing. We come to the brink of seeing God do some great things in our families or in our churches but draw back in fear. I wonder what future generations will remember about us. Will they see us as men and women who courageously followed the Lord – or will we be remembered as the generation who *could have seen* God but who stepped back in unbelief?