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Bi 160 (A) – Old Testament Survey Covington Theological Seminary 9/18/08 Numbers

The book of Leviticus covers a period of somewhere around 30 days, as God relays His Law to Moses. In contrast, the book of Numbers chronicles the journeys of God's people over a period of almost 40 years.

The name of the book of Numbers is somewhat misleading. It is taken from the two numberings of the people of Israel, one recorded in the first chapter, and the second recorded in chapter 26. It has been known by various titles such as "the Book of Journeyings" and "the Book of Murmurings", which are more descriptive of its actual contents.

As to its canonical importance, "Is there any need to insist on the importance of all this? Again and again Numbers is referred to in the New Testament. Indeed, the Holy Spirit has called special attention to it in the classic statement concerning Israel's early history, I Corinthians 10:1-12."ⁱ

-J. Sidlow Baxter

Numbers is a historical account with a practical application for our day. The rebellion of God's people, the punishment they suffered, and the perseverance of God with them all relate to us important truths about our relationship with God.

"Numbers is an interesting book. It has thirty-six chapters and can be divided into three basic sections based on geographical setting: Chapters 1-10 are set around Mount Sinai. Chapters 11-16, which record the forty-year wanderings, are set around Kadesh. Then chapters 17-36 are set on the plains of Moab across from the Promise Land."ⁱⁱ

-Mark Dever

As you follow the people of God, as they journey (and wander) from Sinai, to Kadesh, and on to Moab, you learn about how God deals with His people when they both follow Him and fail Him.

Three divisions arise in Numbers. First of all, we have:

I. THE RECORD OF GOD'S PREPARATIONS

It is important to remember that Numbers is directly linked chronologically to the events of the book of Exodus. So, as Exodus closes at Sinai, so Numbers commences there. Exodus closed with God instructing His people in preparation for their journey to the Promised Land. Numbers picks up the work of God preparing His people for their pilgrimage.

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God's preparation of His people begins with:

A. The sorting of Israel's camp

Numbers chapter one opens with the following instructions for Moses, *"Take ye the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, after their families, by the house of their fathers, with the number of their names, every male by their polls."*

Over the next four chapters, all of the males are numbered (for military purposes), the tribes are distributed around the camp, the Levite males are numbered (for Tabernacle service), and the duties of the Levites are laid out.

God put the people in order, numbered, and assigned to different areas around the Tabernacle. These specifications are more than incidental. They were inspired by the Holy Spirit and they reflect the fact that God rules over the existence of His people. Their places within the body and their roles within the family are all a part of His divine prerogative.

The record of God's preparation continues with:

B. The standards of Israel's camp

"The first four chapters have given us the outward formation of the camp. The next five deal with the inward condition of it. The key is chapter five, and verse three – *'That they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell.'*"ⁱⁱⁱ
-J. Sidlow Baxter

Within these five chapters (5-10), various standards and rules are established for life within the camp of Israel. For instance, in chapter five, instructions are given regarding lepers. Chapter six deals with a special vow called the "Nazirite" vow (see Samson). Chapter seven describes the free-will offering of Israel's princes. Chapter nine covers the commemoration of the Passover.

Again, God was getting the people ready for the journey that awaited them. These were people who had spent most of their lives in Egypt. Following God to the Promised Land required a different standard of living.

In Numbers, we have not only the record of God's preparation, but we see also secondly:

II. THE REBELLION OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Every instruction had been given, and every provision had been made for the success and victory of God's chosen people. The armies of Pharaoh could not stop them. The enemies of Canaan could not stand against them. Yet, we find that it was no external foe that hindered the progress of God's people. It was sin.

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Chapters 11-16 chronicle the rebellion and sin of God's people as they made their way to border of Canaan, and there missed their opportunity to inherit the promise.

In Romans 8:31, the Apostle Paul asks, "...*If God be for us, who can be against us?*" Often, as with Israel, it is we that work against ourselves, and our own sin and rebellion prevent us from enjoying all that God would give us.

In Numbers, the rebellion of God's people is recorded, and we see:

A. Their sin

The sins of Israel in the wilderness were manifold, but two areas that are especially clear are *complaining* and *cowardice*.

In chapters 11-12, we find the murmuring and complaining of the people. They complained about the hardship of their journey, even though the pains of traveling were surely better than the end of the taskmaster's whip in Egypt. They complained about food. Though heaven catered their every meal, the people whined for the meat and fish of Egypt. There is much to learn from the discontent of these people, and how it offended the heart of God.

In chapter 13, Israel reaches the edge of the Promised Land, and what should have been the place of their greatest faith, instead becomes the place of their greatest failure as cowardice and fear overcame the people of God.

"On bold push forward, and their feet would tread on their inheritance. But, as is often the case, courage oozed out at the decisive moment, and cowardice, disguised as prudence, called for 'further information,' that cuckoo-cry of the faint-hearted."^{iv}

-Alexander MacLaren

The sin of God's people Kadash-barnea was the sin of unbelief. The size of the giants in the land overwhelmed their faith in God, and they failed to take Him at His Word.

In the account of Israel's rebellion, we see not only their sin, but also:

B. Their suffering

In many ways, unbelief handcuffs God, and brings punishment rather than progress to the people of God. In chapter 14, God responds to the people's fearful failure and says, "*Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; Surely they shall not*

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see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it (v. 22-23)."

The sin of the people results in the suffering of the people. Their unwillingness to trust God revealed their unworthiness to inherit the land.

"Oh, friend, consider the seriousness of sin. Think about how much death occurs in the book of Numbers. The punishment should be tailored to the crime, we say. And the suitable result or reward for sin must be death, the most serious of punishments. Rebelling against the author of life kills life; it is dangerous in the extreme. It is spiritually suicidal. Do not underestimate the seriousness of sin or trifle with it, as if you perceive all its consequences."^v

-Mark Dever

Much of Numbers is a tragic tale of missed opportunities and sinful suffering. Yet, these are necessary examples for those of us who follow God today.

In Numbers we find the record of God's preparation, the rebellion of God's people, and finally we find:

III. THE REVELATION OF GOD'S PATIENCE

The story of Numbers is not all tragic. Though at times it appears that God is on the verge of destroying His people, the story continues and we find another generation led by the providence of God and preserved by the mercy of God.

The remainder of Numbers (ch. 17-36) tells the story of God's patient endurance with Israel as one generation perishes and another arises to inherit God's blessings.

In chapters 17-21, we see the patience of God:

A. Through His continued lessons

Unfortunately, the complaining did not stop. As the people journeyed there were still episodes of discontent, and scenes of sin that marred the people. Nevertheless, God continued to speak to His people, and instruct them through His Word and His work.

Accounts and incidents such as the death of Aaron, Moses' smiting of the rock, the brazen serpent, and Miriam's death, are all of significance both historically and typologically.

Yet, overall, it is God's perseverance with a slow and unfaithful people that is most striking in Numbers. His patience is seen not only through His continued lessons, but also:

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B. Through His continued leadership

From chapter 21 to the conclusion of the book, hope springs anew for Israel. In spite of their foolishness, stubbornness, and discontent, God has brought them “through” the wilderness, and they find themselves on the plains of Moab, looking over into the land that was promised to their fathers, and will be given to them.

Before they entered the land under Joshua’s leadership, there were several things that had to transpire. In chapters 26 and 27, there is a second numbering of the people. This numbering ends with Moses handing over the leadership of God’s people to Joshua. The book closes (28-36) with a reiteration of instruction regarding offerings and feasts. The Law of God must be repeated in order to be revered and remembered.

The end of Numbers is a testimony to the longsuffering of God. His grace and mercy are the tracks upon which Israel made it from Egypt to Canaan.

“In Numbers we see the *severity* of God, in the old generation which fell in the wilderness and never entered Canaan. We see the *goodness* of God, in the new generation which was protected, preserved, and provided for, until Canaan was possessed. In the once case we see the awful inflexibility of the Divine justice. In the other case we see the unfailing faithfulness of God to His promise, His purpose, His people.”^{vi}

-J. Sidlow Baxter

ⁱ Baxter, J. Sidlow, Explore the Book, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1966), p. 159

ⁱⁱ Dever, Mark, The Message of the Old Testament, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2006), p. 132

ⁱⁱⁱ Baxter, J. Sidlow, p. 168

^{iv} Baxter, J. Sidlow, p. 178

^v Dever, Mark, p. 141

^{vi} Baxter, J. Sidlow, p. 162