

Ready For Launch Numbers 1-10

We are going to start a new sermon series today on a book of the Bible that seems to get a bad rap. Some might say it's "boring," or difficult to read, and while there are some sections that are detailed and monotonous, the book contains fascinating stories about the history of the people of Israel. These stories will give us a lot to think about as we seek to learn about God and what his will is for our lives today.

We will be studying the book of Numbers which is the 4th book of the Bible and part of the first 5 books known as the Torah (Law), or the Pentateuch. It is believed that these first 5 books were mostly written by Moses, and they contain foundational teachings and history that provide the basis of the Bible and the Christian Faith.

I follow somewhat of a pattern in my preaching series, so that we get the big picture of the whole of Scripture. And, having spent most of the past year in the New Testament, I wanted to get back to the Old. I've previously preached through Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus, and want to continue in order, so Numbers is next in line.

The book of Numbers would have been originally been known by a different name – the books of the Pentateuch were often know by the 5th word in them and in this case the name would have been "In the Wilderness," and that is probably a more fitting title. It records the history of the Israelite people during the 40 years that they wandered in the wilderness, after leaving Mt. Sinai, and before taking possession of the Promised Land.

So in this introductory sermon I want to give a little refresher of Israelite history leading up to this point and summarize what happens in the first 10 chapters of this book. And then next week we'll see how the journey from Sinai to Canaan begins.

There are 17 historical books in the Old Testament, and for the most part, they tell the story of one man and his descendants, or if you look at it the other way, it's the story of another man and his ancestors. It's actually both. It's the

story of Abraham and his descendants, but it's also the story of Jesus and his ancestors. And more importantly, it's the story of the God of Abraham and his descendants, the very same God who became a man and was born as a descendant of Abraham in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

The book of Genesis records that this God created the world and everything in it and he created mankind to live with him and worship him with great joy and demonstrate his glory on earth. But man rejected him and turned to sin and ever-increasing wickedness. They went their own way and worshipped other gods and idols instead and soon the God of Abraham was all but forgotten. Spiritual darkness, violence and wickedness settled in and covered the earth and the light of the Truth of the glory of God was being suppressed and hidden by sinful men.

Mankind was doomed to darkness and condemnation, but God had mercy, and he spoke to a man named Abraham and called him to leave his home and his gods and go to a place where he would show him. (Picture) He promised to bless him and make him into a great nation and that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. God entered into a covenant with Abraham and his descendants – he would be their God and they would be his people.

So Abraham went where God led him, which was to the land of Canaan, west of the Jordan River and East of the Mediterranean Sea. (Picture) God promised to give that land to him and his descendants, which is a key to understanding the story of Numbers. He had a son named Isaac, who had a son named Jacob and God carried on his promises to Abraham through them. Jacob had 12 sons and ended up moving to Egypt in order to survive a terrible famine. The book of Exodus tells us that while in Egypt, Jacob and his sons died, but their family grew and the king of Egypt, known as Pharaoh, felt threatened by them and forced them into slavery for a period of 400 years. (Picture)

But God never forgot his promises and everything that happened was for a purpose, and after 400 years he heard their cry and sent a deliverer named Moses. Moses led the people up out of Egypt after a series of 10 terrible plagues that God inflicted on the Egyptians. He brought them through the wilderness to a mountain called Sinai (Picture) where God revealed himself to them and entered into a covenant with the people of Israel/Jacob – the

descendants of Abraham. He would be their God and they would be his people. He revealed himself as Yahweh, “I Am that I Am,” the self-existent one, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all Israel.

He would fulfill his promises to Abraham and take them back to the land of Canaan where he would use them to bring righteous judgment on the wicked nations, devoting them to destruction, and driving them out of the land so that his people could take possession of it. They were to forsake all other gods and walk in obedience to his ways and follow his statutes and if they did, he would dwell in their midst, in a special tent called a tabernacle, and he would bless them. They would have peace and abundance. They would be a light to the surrounding nations who were drowning in their wickedness. And eventually, he would send a Savior to them, through whom all the families of earth would be blessed.

The people of Israel agreed to these terms, they built the tabernacle with all its furnishings. The priesthood of Aaron, Moses’ brother, was established to minister among them and in the tabernacle, and now it was time to go back to Canaan and take possession of the land – fulfill their purpose... hold up their end of the agreement. And that’s where we find ourselves at the beginning of the book of Numbers. It had been about 14 months since they left Egypt. God had been working in miraculous ways, despite a lot of resistance by his people, to fulfill the promises he made to Abraham.

The book of Numbers is about the journey from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land – a journey that should have taken 2 weeks but ended up taking 40 years because of their rebellion along the way. (Picture)

There are 5 stages to this journey that we’ll look at in Numbers:

1. The first stage is the preparation for the journey (still at Mt. Sinai), which is the first 9 chapters. We’ll look at that in a little more detail today.
2. The second stage is the journey north through the wilderness to the southern border of Canaan – a place known as Kadesh Barnea. From there 12 spies were sent to investigate the land of Canaan for 40 days. 10 of the spies brought back a bad report and turned the people against Moses and against God. And because of that, God brought judgment

against that generation and cursed them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until everyone age 20 and older died. (Chapters 11-14)

3. The third stage is the long period of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness south of Canaan. (Chapters 15-19)
4. The fourth stage is the journey from Kadesh Barnea to the eastern border of Canaan, which was the plains of Moab. (Chapters 21-22).
5. And the fifth stage is a time of waiting and preparing while in the plains of Moab before entering the promised land. (Chapters 22-36)

So basically, because of Israel's rebellion, a journey that should have taken a couple weeks, ended up taking 40 years. The Exodus generation (20 and up) would all die in the wilderness and their children would take possession of the land. So for one generation, wandering in the wilderness was judgment, but for the next generation it was more like training.

And now I want to give a quick summary of the first 9 chapters which contain the preparations for leaving Sinai, and next week we will start with their departure.

In a few short weeks some of us will be sending our kids off to college, and for some of them, it's the first time they're leaving home. They're leaving the nest. It's a big step and if you're like us, there are still a lot of things that need to happen for them to be prepared. There's shopping, and packing and planning, figuring out what they need in their new room, figuring out how they're going to get there, if they'll take a car, how they're going to pay their bill. They've got to get their class schedule and books and figure out a lot of stuff.

And that's kind of what the first 9 books of Numbers is like. It's the final preparations for leaving Mt. Sinai and heading home. They had been there about 11 months while Moses spoke with God on the mountain. During that time they entered into the covenant with Yahweh. They built all the different parts of the tabernacle and the garments for the priests. They had the first day of atonement where the priestly system was set in motion along with the rules for worship. And now it was time to head for Canaan. But there were a lot of things that had to be ready for that trip.

This was a big group of people who had a whole bunch of livestock. They would be traveling through dangerous territory and would need protection. Aside from personal possessions, they also had to pack up, carry, and set up a huge, multi-layered tabernacle with articles that had been anointed with the glory and holiness of God and had to be treated with utmost care. They were traveling through the wilderness with rough terrain and had wagons, children, elderly. How was all this going to work?

Well, Yahweh had chosen them and made a covenant with them and he wasn't just going to leave them to try to figure it out on their own. He had a plan for everything and that's what we see in these first 9 chapters...

In Chapter 1 he tells Moses to have them take a census of every male, 20 years old and upward who was able to go to war. They did this and recorded the numbers for each tribe and Numbers 1:45-46 says, "*So all those listed of the people of Israel, by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel—⁴⁶ all those listed were 603,550.*" That's a huge army! And it also gives us some idea of how large the whole community was. If you figure an average of one woman and one child for every man, you're looking at about 1.8 million people! Now, there was also one tribe who was exempted from the census, and that was the tribe of Levi. They were assigned to guard and carry all the materials and furnishings of the tabernacle so it would be protected.

So, there was a huge hoard of people that had to move through the wilderness and set up camp every evening. But rather than mass chaos and confusion, chapter 2 tells us that the God had assignments for every tribe. Every tribe had a certain order they would march in and a certain place where they were to set up camp. It all started with the tabernacle, which was always at the center of the camp. The Levites would camp around it. Then, beyond the Levites on every side would camp 3 tribes of Israel – north, south, east, west. The tabernacle would be completely surrounded with about 150,000 soldiers on every side.

When they set out on a march, the ark of the covenant and the priests would go first. Next would be the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun in order. Behind them would be 1/3 of the Levites carrying the larger structures of the

tabernacle. Then would come the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad. Next would be another 1/3 of the Levites carrying the interior furnishings of the tabernacle, followed by the final 1/3 carrying the smaller parts of the structure. Behind them would be the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin in order. And finally, the tribes of Dan, Asher, and Naphtali would establish the rear guard. So whether they were in camp or marching across the desert, there was order to everything and military protection all around.

In chapters 3-4 God gives more detailed instructions to the priests and Levites for setting up, taking down, and transporting the tabernacle, as well as where to set up their camp. Chapters 5-6 go over some commands related to removing defilement from the camp and a special vow of dedication to Yahweh, called the Nazirite vow. In Chapter 7 God commands each of the tribes to provide animals, wagons, and other supplies for transporting the tabernacle and for all the different sacrifices that were to be made. In Chapter 8 he gives instructions for how the Levites were to be purified so that they could handle the holy things of the tabernacle.

Chapter 9 tells that one of the last things the Israelites did at Mt. Sinai before leaving for Canaan was to celebrate the Passover for the first time since leaving Egypt. Then, it tells how God even prepared the people to know when to leave and where to go and set up a new camp – a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night would rest over the tabernacle and when it lifted, it was time to go until it stopped again. And so, God led the way.

The final part of preparation is in the beginning of chapter 10 that describes how they were to use two silver trumpets to communicate simultaneously with all the people. Different trumpet blasts would signal different things: the times for each tribe to depart, summoning the congregation for assembly, an alarm for battle, and to signify different feasts and celebrations.

God did everything to prepare his chosen people to go and fulfill his purpose for them. He chose them, delivered them, entered a covenant with them, and prepared them to enter the Promised Land. And the encouragement I want us to take away from this today as we begin this series is that God has done and will do the same for you. He's chosen you, delivered you from slavery to sin,

entered a covenant with you, and given you everything you need to fulfill his calling and purpose for your life.

You and I are to be a light in the darkness - a witness and testimony to the people around us, revealing the glory of God and spreading the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. He's given us a new heart and a new spirit, making us spiritually alive. He does is transforming us and given us his word and a church family. Are you living out God's calling and purpose in your life?

The story of Numbers is tragic and depressing on one hand because of the resistance and rebellion of the people. They didn't trust Yahweh or do what they promised to do. But it's also a hopeful and encouraging one because despite Israel's sin, God never failed. He carried out his plans and purposes and never abandoned his people.

God was faithful then and he always will be. He will never leave us or forsake us. As we go into a time of Communion, let's recommit ourselves to him. As we remember Jesus's death on the cross to save us from our sins and give us a new life and a future, let us give thanks and dedicate ourselves once again to carrying out his calling and purpose in our lives.