

**Core Seminar**

**Old Testament**

**Class 7: Numbers**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Introduction**

Good morning! We’re about a quarter of the way through our study of the Old Testament, looking at every book from a 50,000 foot perspective to understand its message and main themes. And we’re always looking forward into the New Testament to see how the Old Testament teaches us about the Gospel – the good news about Jesus Christ, His Church, and Heaven to come. In fact, as we get into this morning’s study of this fourth book of the Bible, Numbers, we’ll be looking at each of those themes.

**[PRAY]**

**Context**

Let’s start with context. Numbers comes after Exodus, when God’s people, the Israelites, leave Egypt. And they’ve just received the Ten Commandments at Sinai. But we haven’t quite reached the Promised Land, and so we’re still before the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.

In Numbers we’ll see the people of Israel pack up camp from the foot of Mount Sinai and move toward the land of Canaan, the fertile land just east of the Mediterranean Sea. If you look at your handout you’ll see a map of the Israelite journey. The route is only 200 miles, but the narrative will span 40 years, because, as we’ll see, the people don’t go straight into the land. Instead, they around in the wilderness. By breaking the chapters up geographically, we see chapters 1-10 are about packing up at Sinai, chapters 11-12 about the journey to Kadesh where the people rebel, chapters 13-19 explain the wanderings in the wilderness, and chapters 20-21 describe the journey to the plains of Moab. Finally, in chapters 22-36, we’ll see that Israel is camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, looking across the river at the Promised Land [map in handout].

But this book isn’t just about God’s people finding a place to live. If we widen the aperture a bit, we’ll remember that this story fits into the far bigger question of how God’s promises to Abraham will be fulfilled. In Genesis 12 (and in 15 and 17) God makes many promises to Abraham. Let me highlight the four key ones which we’ll track through Numbers:

1. He promises that His people will have a **place**. “All the land that you see I will give to you” (13v15).
2. He promises that the Israelites, His **people**, the offspring of Abraham, will be numerous “a great nation” (12v2), “as the dust of the earth” (13v16) “as stars in the sky” (15v5).
3. He also promises his **presence**. Genesis 15v1.
4. Finally, God promises that through the Israelites, all nations will be **blessed**. “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (12v3).

The book of Numbers is crucial in understanding redemptive history because it is the first time (since Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden) that we’ve seen the possibility of all four of these promises coming true. The **people** of God are attempting to occupy a **place** where they can enjoy God’s **presence** and so be a **blessing** to the nations.

But of course, these four don’t finally come together until Revelation 21. So we know right up front that Numbers, in that sense, is a false start. But what’s significant is *why* these four don’t come together. ***Can anyone answer that question in a single word?*** [Unbelief.]

Right. In short, two thematic ideas are juxtaposed against one another in the book of Numbers.

One is the present problems - the unbelief, rebellion, and disobedience of the people.

Then, over against that are Yahweh’s faithfulness to his past promises – his patience and grace.

And the big question that we face here is, “What’s gonna win?” “Will God’s promises prevail in the midst of disobedience, distrust and unbelief?”

The answer, and a good theme sentence for the book, would be…

**Past promises will prevail in spite of present problems**

OK—that’s what we’re going to see in this book. But to make sure we’re viewing this time as application and not just academic, let’s talk about this a bit. ***Why would we need to be reminded that God’s past promises will prevail in spite of present problems?***

**[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

So—back to Numbers. We’re going to break the book into three pieces based on three major themes that support the summary statement I just gave you.

* In chapter 1 to chapter 10 we see **God preparing** his people for the fulfilment of his promises.
* In chapter 11 to chapter 16 we see **God punishing** his people for their great unbelief and lack of trust in his promises being fulfilled.
* And in chapters 17 to 36 we see **God’s** **patience** with his people. Perhaps most importantly, we learn that his promises will be fulfilled in spite of everything that has taken place.

So first, let’s look at these initial chapters and see how **God’s preparation preserves his promises (1-10)**

At the start of these first ten chapters God’s people are still at the foot of Mount Sinai, ready to break camp. The mood is very optimistic. This was it! They’d received the laws, they’re in covenant with Yahweh, He dwells among them, and now they’re going up to take the land of Canaan. These chapters are full of anticipation. Let’s dive in and see how the first three promises to Abraham are being fulfilled[[1]](#footnote-1).

First with regard to God’s **people** we see God’s promise of a great nation taking form. Chapter 1, we read about a census to count how many men are able to fight in the army. As you can see from Numbers 1 verse 46 (or 2v32) God’s people are becoming a huge nation with “603,550 men able to go to war”[[2]](#footnote-2).

Second, we see God’s promise of a **place** taking shape. Once the preparations have been made we see God’s people on the move.

Between those two periods of census (chapters 1-4) and setting out (chapter 10), we also see God’s people being primed for the fullness of his **presence**. As we saw in Exodus, the people cannot draw near to God unless they are clean. So in chapters 5 and 6 we see the camp being cleansed; in chapter 7, the tabernacle is consecrated; and in chapter 8v5, we see the priests being inducted into their roles.

However, chapters 9 and 10, also, centre on God’s presence with his people when they move. In chapter 9 we see God’s presence in the form of a fire and a cloud over the tabernacle. Look with me at Numbers 9v15-17:

**15**On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. **16**So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. **17**And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped.

And as we see in chapter 2, the camp is designed so that the tabernacle, and its accompanying cloud or pillar of fire, is always right in the middle. So the people are always reminded that Yahweh is dwelling with them in the very centre of their camp.

I guess it’s easy for many of us to feel somewhat envious of how close these people lived to God’s visible presence. “If only I could live with that fiery cloud always in view!” But of course, we need to remember that as Christians we don’t live in a camp that’s indwelt by God; we *ourselves* are indwelt by his Spirit. We have his very Word in our hands. We are far more blessed than they were.

**[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

So in summary, this is all exhilarating stuff! Everything looks good. The numerous people are obedient, and they have Yahweh visibly guiding them to His land.

But then suddenly, starting in chapter 11, things change.

**God’s punishment preserves his promises (11-16)**

“Complain” is the word that appears in nearly every one of the next six chapters. In spite of reason for great optimism, God’s people are grumbling. In chapter 11v1 they complain about their ”hardships”. In chapter 11v13 they complain about their food. In chapter 12 Miriam and Aaron, Moses’ own brother and sister “talk against him” (v.1). Finally, in chapter 13, we come to the worst transgression, for it’s here that God’s people show that they do not trust that God will give them the land.

In this famous chapter, Yahweh has instructed Moses to send spies into the land. Twelve spies went in. On their return, here was their report (verses 27-28):

“We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.  However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.”

That wasn’t exactly the report that Moses was hoping they’d bring back. Caleb’s report in verse 30 is more like it:

But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.”

Those are the words of faith, and trust in God’s promises!

But of the 12 spies, only Caleb and Joshua responded in faith. The ten other spies complained that victory was impossible. And, sadly, it wasn’t only the spies who lacked faith. Listen to the response of the people in chapter 14:

**1**Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. **2**And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! **3**Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” **4**And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

Ok so it’s mutiny! And worse, they want to return to slavery! As Moses and Aaron are quick to point out their rebellion is against the Lord (14v7). They don’t want to be a separate people, they don’t want a separate land, they don’t want to bless the nations, they don’t want God’s presence!

Now, it’s worth pausing here to reflect on the roots of their sin and often our own sin. Notice the constant connection between their dissatisfaction and their sin. Complaining reveals an underlying spiritual state. The people are given supernatural food they don’t have to work for. They’ve been miraculously rescued from Egypt without having to fight a single battle. They have a faithful leader. They have God’s law. It’s easy to see how they’ve been blessed and how inappropriate their complaining is. But how often do we have a similar attitude? Sinful dissatisfaction tells us more about our souls than our circumstances. Beware of discontentment.

So, back to Numbers, what are results of all this discontentment? Well, when it’s complaints at hardships God sends fire to burn the camp (11v1); when it’s complaints at food God sends a plague (11v33); when it’s Miriam complaining, God sends leprosy (12v10); but when it’s a total lack of trust in all God’s promises, well, Yahweh is having none of it! His wrath is kindled. Look at how He protects Moses and pronounces His sentence against the people, chapter 14v10-12. Listen for God’s anger with their lack of faith:

**10**Then all the congregation said to stone them [that is, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb] with stones. But the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.

**11**And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? **12**I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

And so, just like with the golden calf in Exodus, Yahweh is ready to blot them out.

A long way from the first ten chapters, don’t you think? What a tragedy! And it’s because of their lack of faith in God’s promises.

But it’s here that we have another opportunity to see the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, as Moses again prefigures and foreshadows Christ by what he does next. Moses pleads for the people (verses 13-19), basing his appeal in God’s desire for his own glory and fame. As a result, God forgives them, verse 20, and doesn’t destroy them.

But the people’s unbelief is serious. As a result there are real punishments for God’s people. Look at the next few verses in 21-23:

“I have pardoned, according to your word. **21**But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, **22**none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, **23**shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it.

Ok, so what connection is there between this punishment and God’s promises? On the surface it seems as though God’s punishment is breaking his promises. But we need to remember that God, back in Exodus, declared to these very people that they would only be blessed if they kept his covenant and obeyed. If they didn’t, they would be cursed. So God is in fact keeping his promise. God had promised to punish their lack of faith.

But what about the Abrahamic promises. Where are we in relation to these?

Well, in relation to the promise of God’s people—it seems that God’s people are no more. Not one of them “shall see the land I promised to their forefathers” verse 23 said. Nevertheless, if we jump to down to verse 31 of chapter 14 we can see that God is still going to achieve the promises to his people. Verse 31 says – “But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected.” What irony! And with this there is still hope.

With this in mind, the promised **place** is still just about in sight. But the land would not be not be inherited by the faithless. In fact in verse 25, of chapter 14, we get perhaps the most depressing verse in the whole of Numbers. “turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea”. In other words “Go back to where you came from!” So the promise of a place would wait for another generation because of their lack of faith.

Hebrews 3 applies this tragedy directly to us. I’ll read it to you:

**16**For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? **17**And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? **18**And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? **19**So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Hebrews tells us to take the experience of Israel as a very stern warning to us. Just like them, we’ve heard the gospel—but we’ve heard it so much more clearly. You can be exposed to much grace, much Biblical teaching—and still miss God’s place. And of course, missing God’s place may have cost the Israelites the promised land; it would cost us heaven. You must have faith, and you must persevere in faith until the end. Don’t let sin and unbelief deceive you and lead you to make shipwreck of the faith. Don’t play with fire; you’re not in heaven yet; persevere in faith!

So that’s all about place. But thirdly, it’s worth noting that God’s **presence** is still with them. God hasn’t left them. He continues to speak to Moses in chapter 15, and in chapter 16 verses 41-42, in spite of continued grumbling, God reveals himself in glory to them in a cloud.

In this section, we see little interaction with other people, although it is noteworthy that the because of the Israelites’ sin their ability to be a **blessing** to the nations is quite diminished.

**[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

Ok, on to our final section. So far we’ve seen how God **prepares** the people for the fulfilment of his promises in chapters 1-10. Then, in chapters 11-16, we saw how the people fail to trust and therefore how that they are **punished** in keeping with God’s promises. However, in the final chapters we see God’s **patience** with his people in order that his promises might prevail.

**God’s patience preserves his promises (17-36)**

We may have thought that God’s punishment and justice would have been enough to quell the rebellion and dissatisfaction in the Israelite camp. However, as we start this new section it’s quickly apparent that God’s people continue in their sin and disbelief. In chapter 17, the people misrepresent what God says. In verse 13, the people cry, “Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die!” which is clearly not true.

Then in chapter 20, we discover that not even Moses is immune to the sinful dishonouring of Lord, since he, in a fit of anger, strikes a rock rather than speaking to it as God had told him to do (verse 8-12). And so Moses receives the same punishment as this generation of Israelites.

In Numbers 21, we are back to the heart of their discontentment. Let’s start reading at verse 4.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”

There they are again grumbling against Yahweh and His appointed leader, Moses. And as always, this sin cannot go unpunished. So in verse 6, God sends venomous snakes into the camp.

What happens next? The people repent, and seek an intercessor—Moses—to go to the Lord to plead for mercy.

Are you noticing the pattern here that is throughout the book of Numbers?

The people sin; God displays his right anger; there is a need for a mediator, there is need for God’s patience.

Well how will this example show God’s patience? Let’s look on at verses 8-9 The LORD said to Moses,

And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”So Moses made a bronzeserpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Now, clearly what’s going on here in Numbers 21 is a miracle. Yahweh in his great patience is supernaturally healing these people. But look at the grounds upon which He does it. “Looking” at the snake is the act of obedience that comes from faith in what God has provided. That is to say, if God has given this bronze snake as the means to the cure, then just merely looking at it, as they are told, is an act of trusting in God’s provision for the healing and forgiveness of sins.

In the same way, we are called again to trust in God’s provision for salvation. The cross of Jesus Christ was God’s idea. It was God’s design. It was given to us as the one and only way to be saved from our sins – the disbelieving and distrusting and disobeying that we are guilty of all the time. If you seek some other means of salvation, it won’t work. Only belief in what God has provided, His Son dying for your sins, will suffice to rescue you from hell. And in that way Christ is a greater Saviour, the way of salvation that God has provided for all who would believe.

Just listen to what Jesus says in John 3:14-15, the verses before one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible... “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

So, the Lord’s promises continue to prevail in the midst of present problems. Indeed from this point onwards we see God’s incredible patience with his people, which enable his past promises to Abraham to be fulfilled. Let’s look again at those four key promises and track them through the remaining 15 chapters.

With regard to **people** we see that God’s patience enables God’s people to prosper and grow in size. Through the strange account of Balaam in chapters 22-24. God’s people are promised future blessing, even against a backdrop of shocking idolatry and immorality at Moab, in chapter 25. In fact by the time we reach chapter 26 we see that God’s people, in spite of plagues, fires, and war, are still a considerable nation. This second census reveals (verse 51) that there are “601, 730” men which is almost exactly the same number that we had in Numbers 1.

Secondly, we see that patience with his people results in God’s **place** being reached. In chapter 27, we discover that Joshua will lead God’s people into the land. Indeed in chapter 32, the first tribes settle just east of the Promised Land. Then, in chapter 34, God gives the people instructions for assigning the land to the Israelite clans. In the final chapter, chapter 36, we see how special provisions are made for how the land will remain with each tribe. God’s past promises are coming through.

In relation to **presence**, God is still with them! In chapter 29 – we discover that there is to be a feast of trumpets – where (verse 1) the Israelites are to remember God’s presence with a whole day of trumpet blowing.

But what of God’s promise of **blessing** to the nations? If anything don’t we see God people being a curse to the nations? After all in chapter 21 the Canaanites and Amorites are destroyed by God’s people, in chapters 22-24 the Moabites lose their possessions to God’s people, and in chapter 31 vengeances are taken on the Midianites.

Nevertheless, we must again turn to the Abrahamic covenant Genesis 12v3 says this: “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Balaam, in Numbers 24:9, uses almost the exact phrasing when he says to Israelites, “Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you.”

The implication is that nations who treat Israel generously, who do not reject his people and his Word, will be blessed.

**Conclusion**

Well then, we’ve reached the end of the book and it’s time to conclude. The message of Numbers is this: God prepares his people for the fulfilment of his promises, but the people are punished since they do not believe his promises. Nevertheless God’s patience sees that his promises will prevail and will come to pass.

As God’s people today we face similar problems. We are sometimes tempted to question whether God’s promises will come true. We perhaps wonder if God will use us in the building up of his people, the church. We question the reality of heaven given all the hardship earth has to offer. We forget that God is with us. So just like Hebrews tells us, we need to keep these people in mind as an example—an example of what not to do—so that we can trust in our God. Because just like we see in Numbers, his promises will always prevail.

**[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

**[PRAY]**

1. You could make a point that when Moses’ father-in-law (a Midianite) joins them, they are beginning to be a blessing to the nations, promise #4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Not only that but in the census of the priests in chapters 3-4 we see that there are “8580 priests” (4v48). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)