

NUMBERS

COUNTING GOD'S BLESSINGS

STUDY GUIDE

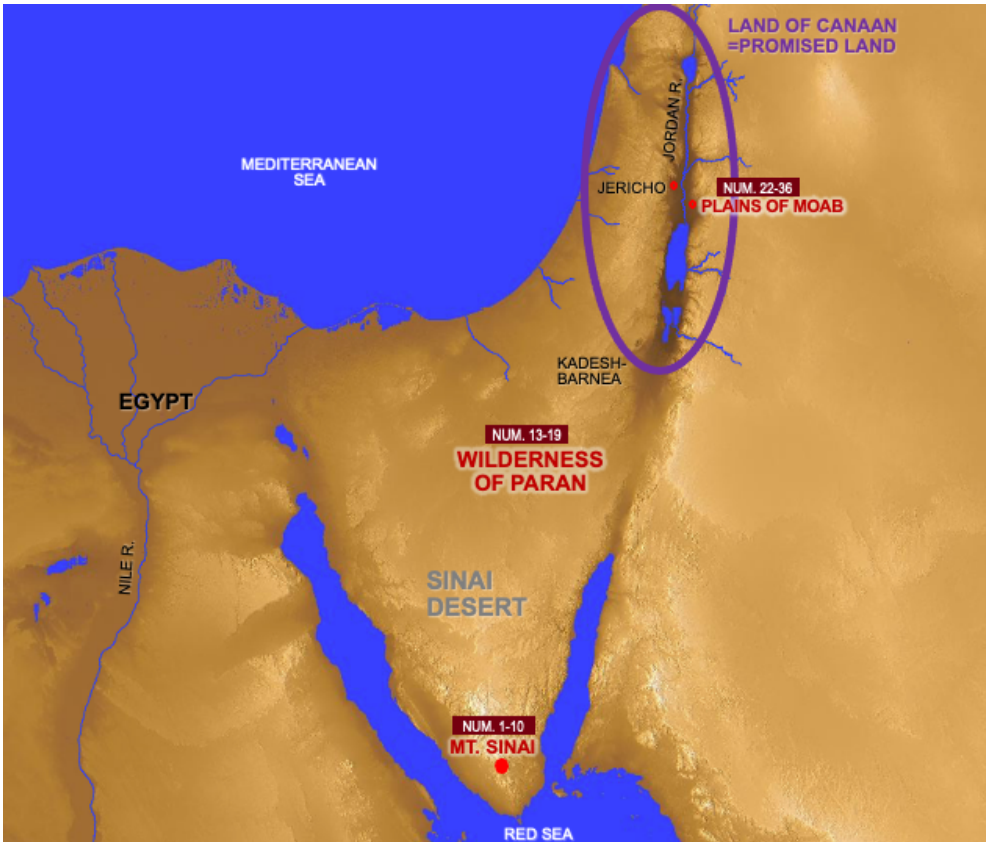


Introduction to Numbers

The Hebrew name for this book is “in the wilderness” – a bit more evocative than its name in English Bibles! Whilst the Israelites are counted at the beginning and end of the book, the action in between sees the Israelites travelling through the desert.

Having been powerfully rescued out of Egypt (Exodus), and having received God’s law and begun tabernacle worship at Mount Sinai (Leviticus), the people of Israel were ready to move to the land God promised them. But, like a family road trip gone wrong, this journey takes about 40 years longer than it should have.

The events of Numbers occur in and between three key locations: **Mount Sinai** (ch. 1-10), the **Wilderness of Paran** (ch. 13-19), and the **Plains of Moab**, on the edge of the promised land (ch.22-36).



A broad outline of the book is below. In this series we will only be able to cover a few snippets.

1-10 *At Mount Sinai*

- 1-4 Census of the first generation and arrangement of the tribes
[SERMON 1] [STUDY 1]
 - 5-9 Further laws
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10-12 *Travel*

- 11 The people complain, quail from the Lord [STUDY 2] [SERMON 2*]
 - 12 Miriam and Aaron rebel against Moses
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13-19 *In the Wilderness of Paran*

- 13-14 Spies explore the promised land, Israel refuses to enter
[SERMON 3] [STUDY 3]
 - 16-17 Korah and co rebel against Moses
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20-21 *Travel*

- 20 The people complain, water from the rock
 - 21 The people complain, the bronze snake
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22-36 *On the Plains of Moab*

- 22-25 Balak & Balaam [SERMON 4] [STUDY 4]
 - 26 Census of the next generation
 - 26-36 The next generation prepares to enter the promised land
[SERMON 5] [STUDY 5]
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* Because of Creative Kids Sunday, sermon 2 will be at night church only.

Much of the study material which follows originates from Christ Church St Ives, and is reused by permission.

Study 1: Numbers 1-2

The Hebrew name for this book is “in the wilderness” (see the introduction above).

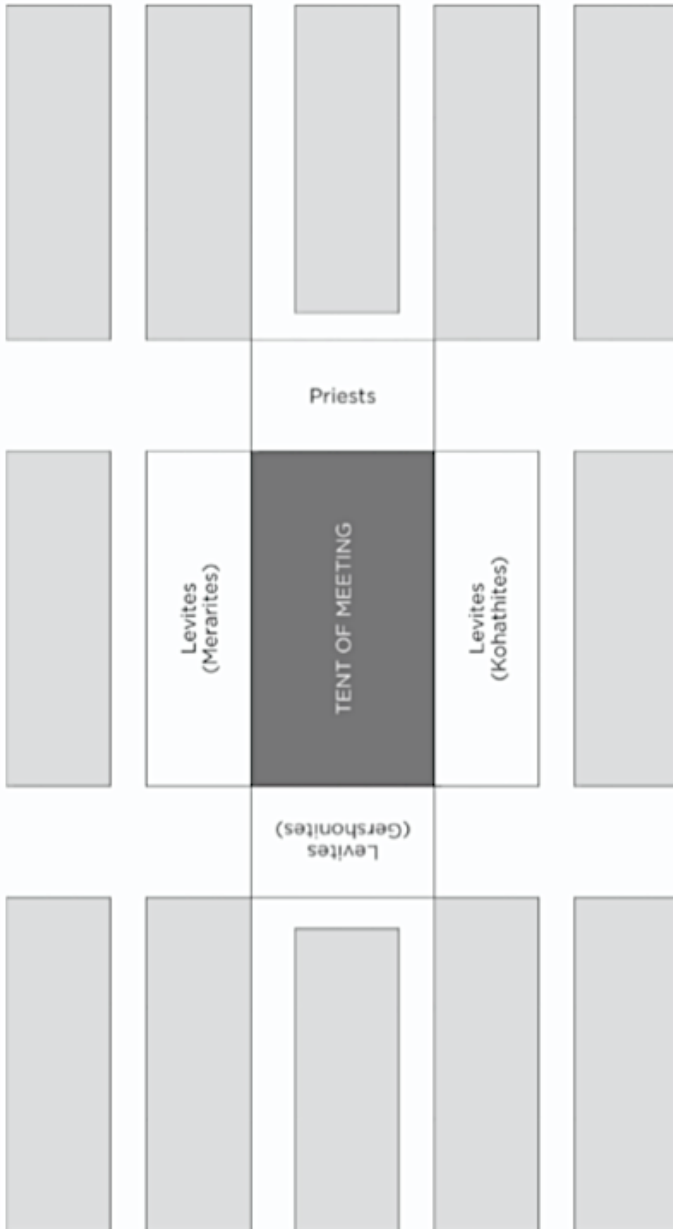
1. Can you think of a time when you felt ‘in the wilderness’ spiritually?
2. Numbers is about the people of God in the days between being saved from Egypt and settling into their promised home. What similarities can you see between this and us as we live the Christian life?

Read Numbers 1 (when reading aloud, feel free to summarise verses 22-43)

3. What are your initial, honest reactions to this text? Do you feel positive, negative, or a mixture?
4. What demographic of person is counted in this census? Why would that be? What does it imply about what’s to come?
5. Look at the total number of fighting men after the end of the list of tribes.
 - a. What is striking about this number?
 - b. Consider God’s promise in Genesis 12:1-3. What does the census result reveal about God?
6. The Levites are not included in the census of fighting men. Why not? (1:47-43)

Read Numbers 2 (when reading aloud, feel free to summarise verses 10-31)

7. Numbers 2 reports God's instructions about how the Israelite tribes were to be arranged around the Tent of Meeting. Look over the details and fill in the names of tribes on the chart below



8. What does this arrangement of Israel's tribes show us about:
 - a. the place of God in Israel's life?
 - b. the holiness of God?

Reflect on both chapters

*One of the big points made in this section is the **number of Israelites**. The large numbers speak loudly about God's faithfulness to one part of his promises to Abraham – that God would bless him with many descendants and make him into a great nation. Other parts of the promises are still to be fulfilled, but already God has proven himself as a great promise keeper.*

9. What are some of God's promises to us in Christ? (Think especially about some of the promises you can sometimes doubt.) How does this passage strengthen your trust in God's faithfulness?
10. Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which, though it starts off small, grows into a large tree that can support the birds of the air (Lk 13.19). What hope does this give you in terms of evangelism among your friends and family?

*Another notable theme of this section is **Israel as the army of God**. Military themes are much less prominent in the New Testament but there are a few passages that speak of Christians in this way.*

11. Read Ephesians 6:10-18 and 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. What are some of the key differences between the warfare of Israel and the warfare of God's people today?
12. What are the dangers of God's people today not realising there is a sense where they are still 'at war'?

Pray

- Give God thanks for his faithfulness to his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which has been fulfilled for us in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Ask that God would make us more trusting of his faithfulness in his promises to us, especially in areas where we are prone to doubt.
- Give God thanks that even from small beginnings the kingdom of God grows because God is powerful to make it grow. Pray for family and friends that you are trying to share the gospel with, that God would bring them to repentance and faith in Christ.
- Ask God to give us an awareness of the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged, and a willingness to take up the full armour of God as we strive to live in this world.

Notes & Prayer Points

Study 2: Numbers 10-11

The Israelites had camped at Mount Sinai for about a year (Exodus 19 – Numbers 10) - and what a year it had been! But God had promised long before that he would bring them into the land of Canaan – “a land flowing with milk and honey” – and now the time has finally come to depart on that journey.

In this study we'll glance at a few snippets to understand the Israelites' mode of travel, before looking closely at the first drama that unfolds along the journey.

The mode of travel

Read Numbers 9:15-23

1. Who decides the timing and the direction of Israel's travels? How is this communicated? What mindset would this have instilled in God's people?

Read Numbers 10:11-21

(The Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites were Levite clans who were allocated particular responsibilities in chapter 4)

2. What important possession are the Israelites bringing with them? What is to be done each time they set out and each time they stop?

Read Numbers 10:33-36

3. According to this section, what/who was leading the Israelites?

Flashback: A previous journey

Let's look at a previous journey of the Israelites, straight after they left Egypt.

Read Exodus 16:1-4 and 16:13-16

4. What did the Israelites do?
5. How did God respond?
6. What specific instructions did God give?

Trouble on the way

Read Numbers 11:1-9

7. How does the Israelites' behaviour on this journey compare to the previous, pre-Sinai journey?
8. What is the origin of the Manna that they are complaining about?
9. What does Moses do?

Read Numbers 11:10-23

10. Look at verses 10-15. How is Moses feeling? What practical problem is he facing? Who does he blame?
11. How does God respond to Moses' complaint?
12. How does God respond to the Israelites' complaint?

13. Look at verses 21-23. How is Moses feeling? What assumption underlies his concern?

14. How does the Lord respond to Moses' scepticism?

Read Numbers 11:24-30

15. What problem has been resolved here? How?

Read Numbers 11:31-32

16. Describe the quantity of quail (look at your Bible's footnotes to understand the measurements). How would you feel if you were surrounded by them?

17. What problem has been resolved here?

18. Think back to God's instructions about gathering the Manna in Exodus 16:4. How does the Israelites' gathering of the quail compare? What seems to be in their minds and their hearts at this point?

Read Numbers 11:33-34

19. What new perspective do we now have on the mega-dose of quail?

Reflecting as Christians

Read 1 Corinthians 10:10-12

20. According to the New Testament, what's the value for us Christians in reading passages like Numbers 11?

21. Are there ways in which our everyday complaints are a bit like the Israelites in Numbers 11? What are the similarities?

22. Sometimes, there are things we really want which God doesn't give us. What potential reason for this is revealed in Numbers 11?

23. How does this chapter help us to appreciate Jesus as the leader of God's people?

Pray

- Ask God's forgiveness for our times of grumbling along our journey to our eternal home
- Thank God for his patience with his grumbling people then and now, and the way he tempers judgement with mercy
- Ask for God's help in heeding the 'example' of Numbers 11 which was written down for our instruction
- Give thanks for Jesus our steadfast leader.

Notes & Prayer Points

Study 3: Numbers 13-14

In the previous study we saw several instances of Israel complaining against Moses and the Lord. Chapters 13-14 show us where such a spirit of grumbling and distrust can easily lead.

Read Numbers 13:1-20

1. Why does God initiate the exploration of the land? What is its purpose?
2. As in Numbers 1-2, information about each tribe is listed individually. What does this emphasise?

Read Numbers 13:25-33

3. What did the spies find out:
 - a. about the land itself?
 - b. about the people who lived in the land?
4. In 13:30-33, who is right and who is wrong: Caleb or the other spies?
5. Read 14:1-12. Describe what reaction is reported for each of the following:
 - a. the people of Israel
 - b. Moses and Aaron
 - c. Joshua and Caleb

Read Numbers 14:13- 38

6. What things most strike you about Moses' intercession in 14:13-19?

7. What things most strike you about God's response in 14:20-35? What kind of picture does this give you of God and of God's judgment?

8. In 14:36-38, the spies who gave a bad report are struck down. But when the people hear God's response through Moses, they try to resist God's judgment. How does it all end? Why?

For the people of Israel, God's assurance that he was giving them the land (13:1) seemed to clash with their experience of the bigger and stronger nations who lived in the land. This led them to doubt God's goodness to them. And in fact, it made them begin to long that they were back in Egypt!

9. What sort of situations might we face today where our experience seem to clash with God's assurances to us in Christ? What sort of situations might we face today where we, too, are tempted to doubt God's goodness to us, and even long for the days before we were saved?

10. When we face situations like this, what things will help us to live by faith in God's promises and not be put off by what we see with our eyes?

11. Consider privately: Are there areas of ongoing sin in your life where you are in danger of treating God with contempt, like he describes Israel doing in 14:11?

12. Given that God is 'slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion' (14:18), how should we respond to the presence of sin in our lives?

Pray

- Give God thanks for his goodness; that he doesn't desire harm for his people, but blessing.
- Ask that God would make us more trusting of his goodness to us in Christ, especially in areas where we are prone to doubt.
- Give God thanks that he is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion; that he has demonstrated this not only through his long patience with Israel, but even more for us through the Lord Jesus.
- Ask God to give us an awareness of sin in our own lives, and that he would turn our hearts back to him, so that we would not be in danger of treating him with contempt and falling under his judgment.

Notes & Prayer Points

Study 4: Numbers 22-24

By this stage in the story of Numbers, the Israelites have spent their forty years in the desert. Recently on their journey to the plains of Moab, they have defeated Arad (21:1-3), as well as Sihon, king of the Amorites (21:21-31), and Og, king of Bashan (21:32-35).

Read Numbers 22:1-20

The Israelites are now very close to the goal of their salvation - they have made it to the plains of Moab, along the Jordan across from Jericho (22:1).

1. What things are significant about:
 - a. the reaction of Balak and Moab (22:2-3; cf. Exod 1:12; 15:13-17)?

 - b. the final sentence told to Balak in 22:6 (cf. Gen 12:1-3)?

 - c. the fact that Balak seems to be speaking to YHWH (the 'LORD' in 22:8, 13, 18-19)?

Read Numbers 22:21-41

2. What is so confusing about God's treatment of Balaam?

3. In verse 35, God repeats the instruction that he had already given in verse 20. What, then, is the purpose of the events in between?

4. What can we learn from this chapter about the reality and/or limitations of divination and other forces of spiritual evil?

Split into four groups to read and examine a different section of Balaam's oracles:

i. Num 23:1-12

ii. Num 23:27-24:14

iii. Num 23:13-26

iv. Num 24:15-25

5. What does your allocated section reveal

a. about God

b. about Israel

c. about Israel's enemies

6. As the other sub-groups report back, add their insights to your list above.

Consider all of what we've read today.

7. The theme of blessing and cursing ties this passage to the much bigger promises of God back in Genesis 12:1-3, and give us an understanding of all people that is either for God and his people or against them. Do you agree that our understanding of people and of the world should be so binary, so black and white?

8. How could/should such a binary understanding of people and of the world change the way you pray for yourself, your family, our church, our mission partners around the world ...?

9. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) is a great explanation of what happens in Numbers 22-24. But how does the gospel amplify this truth for us if our trust is in Christ?

10. How will knowing that God is for us in Christ change the way you are thinking about issues in your life at the moment? (Try to be very specific and practical.)

Pray

- Give God thanks that he is more powerful even than the forces of spiritual evil at work in this world.
- Give God thanks that he is faithful to his promise to bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants and to curse those who curse Abraham and his descendants.
- Pray that as we endure opposition, we would not be afraid or think that something strange is happening, but would recognise that what is happening to us is what has always happened to God's people.
- Ask God to give us a spirit of patience and perseverance as we endure opposition, trusting that he is able to rescue us from harm and bring us into his eternal kingdom.

Notes & Prayer Points

Study 5: Numbers 32

The story of Numbers is nearly at an end. The second census has been taken, recording the names of the new generation that stands ready to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 26). Joshua has been designated as Moses' successor (Numbers 27). Instructions have been given about the annual pattern of worship in the land (Numbers 28-29). Vengeance has been taken on the Midianites (Numbers 31) for the way they earlier led the Israelites to sin (Numbers 25). Israel are on the plains of Moab, waiting to cross the Jordan River and enter the land God was giving them as an inheritance.

Read Numbers 32:1-15

1. Is the Gadites and Reubenites' request a good one? Why/why not?
2. What are all the different problems that Moses sees with their request?

Read Numbers 32:16-32

3. What solution do they come up with?
4. What does this solution show us, as Christians, about:
 - a. the obligation God's people have to God and to each other (32:22)?
 - b. the importance of unity among God's people?
 - c. God's gift of a home for his people?
 - d. the hard work that needs to be done before the time of rest comes?

Read Numbers 32:33-42

5. What does the success of the Gadites, Reubenites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh suggest about Israel's future in the land?

6. What are some of the specific things that can threaten unity among us as God's people today?
 - a. between Christian brother and sister?

 - b. within a Growth Group?

 - c. within an All Saints congregation?

 - d. between All Saints congregations?

7. Choose one of the situations you've identified. What practical steps should we take to maintain unity?

As Christians awaiting our eternal inheritance, we also have hard work to do as God's people. The apostle Paul depicts this as warfare, just as it was for Israel.

Read Ephesians 6:10-20

8. Has your Christian life been actively reflecting this sense of warfare recently?

9. What strategies does Paul give for how we are to wage this battle? Identify one or two specific things you can try to change this week to express your obligation to the Lord and to God's people.

Pray

- Give God thanks that he has completely done the decisive work for our salvation, through Christ's death and resurrection.
- Ask that God would give us understanding of the work of salvation we still need to do while we wait for the time of rest, and that he would strengthen us to work hard and not give up before it's time.
- Ask God to help us see the importance of unity among God's people, and help us do everything to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
- Ask that God would help us to take up 'the full armour of God' and be diligent in prayer as we seek to live out our spiritual warfare in this age.

Notes & Prayer Points
