

A Good Start in a Good Direction

Numbers 1:1-10:10

In Numbers, we will see how a people that started well ultimately failed through disobedience, yet God's redemptive purpose carried on. Perhaps you have seen people start well but ultimately for one reason or another fall away. Numbers helps us look soberly at the necessity of persevering to the end.

It was a good day for me when I finally learned that that the Christian life is, as Eugene Peterson wrote, *a long obedience in the same direction*.ⁱ

Perhaps you have experienced the “on again/off again” cycle of Christian commitment. You have had periods of great excitement for the church and for Christ that always seem to dissipate over time. A number of things, I think, lead to these periods on despondency: wrong expectations, neglecting the word, developing a critical spirit, withdrawing from community and service, neglecting gathering with the saints, making excuses and blaming others for your sad state of spiritual affairs, and on it goes.

Numbers comes as a challenge to the “on again/off again” Christian. To walk with Jesus is *a long obedience in the same direction*.ⁱⁱ

We will start the book by looking at how well Israel started. In fact, a more positive beginning than the first 10 chapters of Numbers could not be possible. Israel began so well that it makes their failure both surprising and instructive.ⁱⁱⁱ

We can see the necessary elements of a good beginning in this text.

1. The Presence of God

God's Presence is the gravitational pull around which our lives should orbit. The first 10 chapters of Numbers are about centering Israel as a people around and focused on God's Presence.

A. The blessing of God's Presence among us

No text captures the theological heart of the Presence of God with his people better than the priestly blessing of Numbers 6 (6:22-27). The first 10 chapters of Numbers are not primarily about Israel getting ready to march to the Promised Land, but rather about preparing the nation to live in the Presence and blessing of

God.^{iv} The Presence of God is the number 1 issue; all else is secondary and flows from his Presence.

The arrangement of the camp around the tabernacle is a dramatic enactment of the words of the priestly blessing of Numbers 6. Picture Israel camped *facing the tent of meeting on every side* (2:2). Some translations have *at a distance* where the ESV has *facing*. Literally, the idea is *opposite*, which contextually implies facing.

One might think the tribes would camp facing *outward*, but it is not they who are *keeping* God, but God who is *keeping* them: *The LORD bless you and keep you* (6:24).

Not only are they facing God, but God is facing them. Two times the benediction emphasizes God facing them (6:25,26). They are living life before the face of God. For God's face to shine upon them is for them to live in God's Presence and blessing. With these words of blessing God was putting his Name on his people (6:27). They are his, and he is with them to bless them.

B. The weight of God's Presence among us

At this point in Numbers, Israel is not that far from the golden calf incident.^v That gives you some idea of the people God is endeavoring to dwell among, and how dangerous the situation is.

At this point in Numbers, the tabernacle has been built, the tribes are positioned around it and the glory cloud has moved from the top of Mt. Sinai to the tent of meeting in the middle of the camp. God is dwelling among his people. God's presence with them is what made them distinct.

How will a holy God dwell with a sinful people? At least the Old Covenant part of the answer is the priests and the Levites, the tabernacle, and a system of sacrifices. Numbers focuses primarily on the ministry of the Levites to help us see the weight of the Presence of God.

In short, the ministry of the Levites was to protect the tabernacle from being defiled by the people and, thus, the people from incurring the wrath of God. Among all their duties related to the tabernacle, none was more important than the barrier they provided between the people and the tabernacle. This is what is meant by them *guarding and keeping* the tabernacle (1:53).^{vi}

Of all the repeated warnings against encroachment on the tabernacle (1:51b; 3:10b, 38b), the bookend texts for the service of the Levites sums up their function best:

The Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel. And the Levites shall keep guard over the tabernacle of the testimony (1:53).

And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary (8:19).

The Levites were gifts to Aaron and to Israel (3:6-7,9; 8:19).

The Levitical work was dangerous work, especially for the family of Korah, who was assigned to carry the *most holy things* (4:4). With their task came the warning, *They must not touch the holy things, lest they die* (4:15, cf. 4:17-20).

I wonder, is the Presence of God any less weighty in the church today than in ancient Israel? The church is holy. It is the dwelling place of God being constructed by the Spirit (Eph. 2:22). God has not given up on his holiness to dwell with us. He is not holy-lite. Brothers and Sisters, God dwells with the church because the God-man in his perfection answered all the foreshadowing of the tabernacle in his sinless life, substitutionary death for sinners, resurrection on the third day, his ascension and eternal intercession in our behalf, so that through faith his righteous life is counted to us, so that we draw near rather than stand far off.

We need to feel the weight of God's Presence among us. We are not at liberty to treat holy things as if they are common.

The presence of God is a blessing and is weighty.

2. The faithfulness of God

These opening chapters of Numbers are a testimony to the faithfulness of God. The census information in Numbers is hard for many of us to wade through. I think this was the most interesting part to the Israelites. The tribes are all listed by their patriarchal heads, reaching back 400 years. Most of us cannot name our grandparents, even less our great grandparents.

In chapter 1 a census is taken to count the number of men from *20 years old and upward who are able to go to war* (eg. 1:20). Chapter 2 lists the tribes again, grouping them in triads around the tabernacle. The number of fighting men in both cases is 603,550 (cf. 1:45; 2:32).

Some modern scholars are skeptical of the accuracy of the large numbers and find creative ways to explain why the biblical writer might have exaggerated the numbers. They argue that an army of 600,000 fighting men would be large today and would demand a total population of at least 2 million people. The most gracious among them explain that exaggeration was used as a literary tool to argue for God's faithfulness.^{vii}

I approach the Scripture from the assumption that the Bible is true. Typically, symbolic numbers are obviously symbolic. It is hard to imagine 2 million people trekking through the wilderness with cloud covered tent in the middle of their camp. I have a few reasons for taking these numbers at face value. First, the numbers are deliberate and consistent.^{viii} Exodus 12:37 numbers the people at *about 600,000 men on foot, besides women and children*. Exodus 38:26 numbers the men 20 and up at 603,550. So when the numbers of Numbers are questioned, you have to reckon with those two Exodus texts.

Second, the population of Egypt in the New Kingdom period (1550-1069 BC), which takes in the time of the Exodus, is estimated to be 2.5-4.5 million. The book of Exodus starts by noting, *the children of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them* (Ex. 1:7). Their population growth was why Pharaoh set out on a campaign of infanticide: *Behold the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land* (Ex 1:9-10). So, it seems their population was large enough to cause fear in Egypt in the New Kingdom period.

Last, we cannot forget Balaam, the prophet sent to curse Israel. He said, *Who can count the dust of Jacob or the number of the fourth part of Israel* (Num. 23:10a). The sheer population of Israel was troubling to the nations around them.

God had promised Abraham that he would make of him a great nation (Gen. 12:2).

On a starlit night, the LORD came to Abram to ratify his covenant with him. He brought Abraham outside and said to him, *Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them ... so shall your offspring be* (Gen. 15:5).

The numbers of Numbers show the faithfulness of God. The numbers are miraculous. Ordinary numbers are not what God promised Abram.

To be confronted with the God of the Bible and the truth of Scripture is to be confronted with anything but the normal and the ordinary. If the large numbers are too much for you, what do you do with Genesis 1:16, *And God made the two great lights... and the stars?*

Ultimately, what do you do with the incarnation, the sinless life, the resurrection, the ascension, and the second coming? What about Jesus raising us on the last day or transforming our bodies to be fit for the eternal world? All of that seems much bigger to me than 2 million people in Numbers. Everything about our encounter with God is anything but ordinary. This is the nature of who God is. Numbers shows us he is faithful to his promises.

3. The community of God's people

God's presence and faithfulness makes the community of God's people possible. The text shows us some things that must characterize the community of God's people.

A. Obedience

The most obvious characteristic of the people of God in the first 10 chapters of Numbers is their obedience. From chapters 11-25, the most obvious characteristic of these same people is their disobedience. The change is surprising if not shocking.

Obedience arises out of faith. Faith obeys.^{ix} The obedience of faith is always grounded in the word of God. The most repeated phrase in Numbers is *The LORD spoke*. These words are repeated in 20 different ways more than 150 times throughout the book.^x

In the first ten chapters, *The LORD spoke* is met with the obedience of the people.

For example, in chapter 1, *The LORD spoke to Moses* (1:1), telling him to set aside

chiefs for the tribes to help with the census of the men of war (cf. 1:2-5,16). Then the text says, *as the LORD commanded Moses. So he listed them...* (1:19). After the census took place (cf. 1:20-46), 1:54 sums up all of chapter 1, *Thus did the people of Israel; they did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses.* The LORD spoke, and the people obeyed.

In chapter 2, *the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron* (2:1) telling them to arrange the tribes in 4 triads around the tabernacle in the order they would camp (cf. 2:1) and march (2:9b, 16b, 24b, 31b). The camp arrangement ends with, *Thus did the people of Israel. According to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so they camped by the standards, and so they set out, each one in his clan, according to his father's house* (2:34). The LORD spoke, and the people obeyed.

In chapter 3, the LORD instructed Moses concerning the Levites (3:5, 11, 14). The summary is, *Moses and Aaron listed them at the command of the LORD* (3:39). The LORD spoke, and Moses and Aaron obeyed.

We could go on and on.^{xi}

The first 10 chapters of Numbers are characterized by the obedience of the people.

B. Interdependency and belonging in the community

All the details of counting the people, arranging the camps, placing the Levites as buffer between the camps and the tabernacle, redeeming the firstborn, and giving offerings tribe by tribe seems monotonous to us, but to each Israelite these details brought a sense of belonging, identity, and community to life.

Each person knew who he was, where he belonged, and what his place of service was. No member of the community could imagine he or she did not count.

Imagine you are of the tribe of Benjamin. Your chief Abidan is called forward (1:11). He counts the men of war in your tribe. You hear your tribe has 35,400 fighting men (1:36-37). You are camped on the west side of the tabernacle in the camp of Ephraim. Your camp has 108,100 fighting men (2:18-23).

Between your camp and the tabernacle is the Levitical family Gershon, who are assigned the heaviest lifting among the Levites (3:21-26). You learn the LORD has taken the Levites in the place of the firstborn of Israel as a redemption price (3:11-

13).

An offering took place among the tribes that lasted 12 days. On the 9th day, Abidan took the offering of your tribe and gave in dedication of the altar (7:60-65, cf. 7:11).

God's people are an interdependent community where each member plays his or her part. You can see from our interdependency that the whole body is impacted by each member. We cannot say, I don't belong, I won't serve, give, participate, or attend. *My sin does not impact anybody else.* We are the church. We depend on one another.

C. Purity

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the purity, the striving after holiness, of the community. In Numbers 1-10, a section of scripture that deals with building the community, the exhortations to purity and holiness in chapters 5 and 6 deal with those particular issues that most immediately place the community at risk in the Presence of God.

The first thing that is dealt with is the status of clean and unclean (5:1-4). To be in the camp, the Israelites must be clean, free from ceremonial and moral pollution. The stated reason is *that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell* (5:3b). Ceremonial and moral pollution would put the community at risk because God dwelled among them.

It is easy to see then how sinning against others in the community (5:5-10) and marital infidelity^{xii} (5:11-31) would put the community at risk. The people of God must pursue holiness together in the community. Holiness was a community project because God dwelled among them.

In the context of a community pursuing holiness, it is not surprising that some people in the community would dedicate themselves to seasons of a deeper pursuit of holiness (6:1-21). The Nazirite was one who was separated, dedicated, and consecrated to the LORD for a specified period of time (6:2). To be set apart is to be holy: *all the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD* (6:8).

How might such intense devotion to the LORD translate into our context? We could think of many ways, but I want to offer a few that come to mind.

First, wake up and realize the moment you are in. You are in a community that is pursuing health and holiness and that should deeply impact you.

Second, to our young men, I want to encourage you to seriously kick-the-tires of pastoral ministry. I am not asking you, *Do you feel called?* or *Have you ever thought about it?* What I am saying is, regardless of your career track or course of study, take some time to seriously consider before the LORD if the LORD may use you in that way.

Third, to our young people, before you start on your career path, take some time to devote yourself to service in this church or in New York or Salt Lake or Peru. Then go and pursue what God sets your heart on.

Fourth, I want to talk with our young people about marriage. Marriage rates have decreased in the US from 11.1 per 1000 in 1950 to 6.5 per 1000 in 2018. That means, the chances of a man or woman finding a mate have decreased by 40% in the last 70 years. You must make a conscious effort not to let your views of marriage be shaped by the culture. Both the feminists and the manosphere influencers want to sour you on marriage. Your views need to be shaped by the Bible. God still says, *It is not good that the man should be alone* (Gen. 2:18a). As a godly young woman or a godly young man open your life to the idea marriage.

Many more talking points could be explored. It is enough to say the community of the people of God is to be marked by holiness. Your devotion to the LORD deeply impacts the church family.

D. A community on the march

As Israel of old was poised to march at the sound of the trumpet (10:5-6), the church has been given its marching orders. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:8, played off of this text saying, *If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?* As a church, we are to give no indistinct sound, but rather clearly preach the gospel of Christ crucified and risen again to save those who believe. This endeavor is what I am to give my life to and, you, your life to.

ⁱ Eugene Peterson wrote a book by that title that has become a classic on discipleship. For Peterson discipleship was *a long obedience in the same direction*.

ⁱⁱ Jesus had a number of things to say about following him that totally contradict much Christian culture today: *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (Mt. 16:24); *Enter by the narrow gate...for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those that find it are few* (Mt. 7:13,14); *because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved* (Mt. 24:11,12).

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul explained that Israel's experience in the wilderness of Sinai is written to be instructive for us in the New Covenant: Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come (1Cor. 10:11). Paul, also, pointed out that Numbers shows both the kindness and severity of God. Paul wrote, *Note then the kindness and severity of God's severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off* (Rom. 11:22).

^{iv} The ordering of Israel with God in the center of the camp is reminiscent of God's ordering the original creation and dwelling with Adam in the Garden. Additionally, The census of the men of war in Numbers 1, the arrangement of the camp on every side around the tabernacle in Numbers 2, the placement of the priests and Levites as a barrier between the camp and the tabernacle in Numbers 3, the Levites set apart for service to the LORD in the place of the firstborn of Israel in Numbers 3,4, and 8, the purity of the camp and periods of special devotion to the LORD in Numbers 5 and 6, bringing offerings and celebration the Passover in Numbers 7 and 9, and final preparations to march to Canaan in Numbers 10 is what it meant for Israel in wilderness to live in the Presence of God.

^v At this point in Numbers, Israel had been at Sinai for about 10 months (1:1; cf. Ex. 19:1). God's intent was to dwell among his people. This raises the question: How can a holy God dwell among a sinful people? God instructed Moses to tell the people to make [him] a sanctuary, that [he] many dwell in their midst (Ex. 25:8). While Moses was on the Mountain receiving the law, the golden calf incident occurred. At first, God was going to destroy the people and start over with Moses (Ex 32:7-10). Moses interceded (Ex. 32:11-14). Then, God told Moses to take the people into the Land but he would not go with them lest [he] consume them on the way, for [they were] a stiff-necked people (Ex 33:3). There is weightiness to the Presence of God. Moses interceded pleading that if God would not go with them, he should not send them. Then Moses asked this telling question, Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people of the face of the earth (Ex. 33:16b)?

^{vi} This is the same function Adam was assigned in the Garden, *to guard and keep it* (Gen. 2:15).

^{vii} It is common for scholars to say the numbers are exaggerated by a multiple of 10.

^{viii} Where there is inconsistency in the numbering the Levites versus the firstborn of Israel (3:21-51), the inconsistency is deliberate.

^{ix} Neither the exodus generation nor Moses and Aaron would enter the land, curiously, because of their unbelief (14:11; 20:12). Their unbelief led to their disobedience.

^x EBC, 702.

^{xi} In chapter 4, the instructed Moses and Aaron to take a census of the Levites (4:1,17,21,). The summary is, *According to the commandment of the LORD through Moses they were listed, each one with his task of serving or carrying. Thus they were listed by him, as the LORD commanded Moses* (4:49). The LORD spoke, and the people obeyed. Consider, as well the lampstand (8:4b), the Passover (9:5), and when the people camped and when they set out (9:18,23).

^{xii} Numbers 5:11-31 might be the oddest text in the Bible. Before we pass judgment on this text that belonged particularly to the Old Covenant people of God specifically in their wilderness context as the height of misogyny, we need to realize that it is the word of God and, therefore, properly sits in judgment on us not the other way around. The purpose of the law was to promote marital fidelity in the Israelite camp. The law protected women falsely accused and exposed men who were unreasonable jealous. It also exposed the unfaithful wife and the godly jealousy. It is not a magical ordeal, but a test that brings what is potentially unclean into contact with what is holy—holy water and dust from the holy place.