

January 2022

## **What's the Point...of Numbers?**

**Mark Garner**

*God's original intent was to take the Israelites into Canaan only a year or so after leaving Egypt. In spite of their frequent grumbling and occasional idolatry, God is still ready to take them in to Canaan, until almost all of them harden their hearts and insist on turning back. As they then must wander in the desert for decades, God continues his care for them, while he also teaches and guides their descendants, encouraging them to remain faithful to him.*

### ***In The Desert (Overview Of Numbers)***

In the opening chapters, the Israelites prepare enter the new land (Numbers 1-10). In the Hebrew Bible, the book we call Numbers is aptly named "In The Desert," for that is where it begins; and, sadly, where it ends. Yet throughout the book we can see God's faithfulness, as he guides them with the cloud and shows them care and his desire to be with them each step.

Ominous signs arise (Numbers 11-12) as the community becomes discontented about the food, and now even Aaron and Miriam become critical of Moses. A number of times in Numbers we see God's 'anger,' yet this not at all like human anger. Rather, we see God's holiness, and we see as well the Lord's desire to continue showing mercy.

All this was a prelude to their final decision to turn aside from the path God had in mind for them (Numbers 13-14). When the scouts return from exploring Canaan and give their report, the people refuse to go; as they persist in their hardness of heart, and show contempt for God, the Lord must reluctantly deny almost all of them the chance to enter the new land.

Inevitably, more troubles follow, as their hardness leads to more restlessness and discontent (Numbers 15-17). When some of the Israelites openly rebel against Moses, more drastic consequences arise. Yet even as they must begin the long years of wandering, God continues graciously giving them procedures for offerings and cleansings (Numbers 18-19).

As the passing of time continues (Numbers 20-27), Miriam and Aaron pass away, and Moses learns that he will not cross over to Canaan. The community continues to be winnowed, yet we also continue seeing both God's holiness and his grace. We also see the plotting of Balaam and Balak to 'curse' Israel; when this fails, they try a distraction that does cause many Israelites to go astray. We also see God reassure Moses that Joshua will guide the Israelites in the future.

The book continues with more thoughts about offerings, holy days, and vows, similar to what we find also in Leviticus (Numbers 28-30). As the Israelites near the end of their wanderings, there is a look back and a look forward (Numbers 31-36), as God continues giving them his guidance.

### ***Overall Thoughts***

Numbers shows us several contrasts between human nature and God's nature, as well as several parallels for us in the ways God guides the Israelites, provides for them, and protects them, even when they persist in their straying. Numbers also reminds us to keep our hearts soft, and to put our trust in God and in the message of Jesus in all circumstances. We too are on a journey, yet our journey leads to a much better, eternal land, where we will be with our Heavenly Father forever.

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## **What's the Point...of Numbers? Caleb Dillinger**

Numbers is a fascinating book, as it holds intriguing stories, but also what many people would call "boring" regulations and rules. It's like a blend of Exodus and Leviticus. You'll read stories about Israel sending spies into the promised, Miriam and Aaron (sister and brother to Moses) rebelling against Moses, Korah leading a rebellion, Israel complaining (yet again), and the strange story of Balaam and his talking donkey. But interspersed through this 36 chapter book are lessons on vows, offerings, purification, and holiness. So we ask the question: What's the point of Numbers?

It certainly serves the purpose of recording Israel's history, both in factual data and in developing the spiritual relationship between Israel and Moses and God. It serves the purpose of teaching the nation about purity and holiness, specifically regarding the tribe of Levi and their role as priests and Aaron's role as high priest. But I would argue the main point of Numbers, particularly relevant for Christians today, is the lesson taught on God's handling of sinful and rebellious people.

Collectively, the people of Israel rebel against God. They cry out in complaint that God is not providing them adequate food and water. God remedies that. The people of Israel send out 12 spies into the promised land, each spy representing a tribe of Israel. Only Caleb and Joshua bring back a faithful, promising report, declaring how God has provided a great land and how God will save them from the giants living in the land. The other ten tribes all cower against the intimidating inhabitants of Canaan. Throughout the book of Numbers, Israel is primarily led by Moses, but also Miriam and Aaron, and then there's the reality that various factions form and follow their own leaders - in the case of Numbers 16, a certain leader named Korah rises up with a faction. Each and every one of these leaders rebel against God. Yes, even Moses rebels, to the point that God revokes his right to enter the promised land.

Data that seems boring and stories about failure....why should you read this book? Because God continues to provide grace after punishment, and it testifies to the beauty of eternal grace we have through Christ.

When the tribes rebel, God doesn't reject Israel altogether. He just punishes them for a while. When Miriam and Aaron rebel, he doesn't reject their leadership altogether - just for a little while. When Moses rebels, God doesn't remove him as leader, but he does punish him. And after the punishment, God continues to work through Moses! When Korah and leaders of the Levites rebel, God punishes them, but he doesn't abandon the Levitical priesthood. God always punishes wrongdoing....but he also follows up with grace and restoration.

We tend to think of Jesus when we think of grace, but this has always been God's operating method. Maybe an argument can be made that Moses deserves grace, but Israel? Miriam and Aaron and Korah? Grace is not deserved. It wasn't deserved then, and it's not deserved now. Yet God has always been a God of grace to undeserving people, including you

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and me. And that's the point of reading Numbers. You will see God's grace at work.