

Numbers 1 Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

The entire book of Leviticus takes place in just one month as Israel was camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

As we've just seen in our study through Leviticus, not much takes place in it in the way of historical narrative – it is a legal code book governing both the moral and ceremonial aspects of the life of Israel as a nation.

Numbers returns us to the narrative of Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan, from bondage to freedom.

We might think that such a journey, beginning as it does with God's dramatic rescue of Israel from slavery, then an entire year of being taken care of by Him while He gave them His Word, would mean a quick and victorious journey into the Promised Land.

Such was not the case. In fact, if you had to pick a one-word theme for Numbers, it would be "*failure*."

Time & again, Israel balked at following the Lord, though He had proven Himself reliable, they kept reverting to the form of defeat & complaint that had marked them as slaves in Egypt.

While Numbers is a book of failure, it is also a fantastic lesson on *how to be victorious!*

Listen to how the Apostle Paul speaks of what we find here in Numbers -
1 Corinthians 10:1-11

¹Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ²all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. ⁵But with most of them God was not well pleased, for *their bodies* were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. ⁷And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." ⁸Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; ⁹nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; ¹⁰nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

The Book of Numbers covers about 38 years in the history of Israel.

It takes us from Mt. Sinai to the border of Israel where the spies are sent in and the people balk at entering Canaan.

They are then doomed to wander through the Wilderness of Sinai for the next 38 years until the entire generation of adults that came out of Egypt dies off.

It is their children, born in freedom and toughed by a harsh life in the wilderness who develop the khutzpah to conquer the Promise Land.

This book is called “Numbers” because it begins and ends with 2 censuses that are taken of the nation.

These censuses were taken for the purpose of ordering the camp of Israel and organizing the allotment of the land once the tribes entered.

It’s interesting that some tribes increase in numbers while others diminish during the time in the Wilderness.

This appears to be reflective of how obedient each tribe was to the Lord.

Those who grew were more faithful and obedient than those who diminished.

What marked a tribe’s obedience to the Lord was the quality of its leadership.

Those leaders who were godly were a blessing to their people.

Those whose hearts strayed from the Lord did not do well by their people.

Outline for Numbers

I. First Census & Ordering the Camp Of Israel Chs. 1-9:14

A. First Census Ch. 1

¹Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying:

[Show map]

The Passover was on the 14th day of the First Month in Year 1.

After the Exodus, it took them a month & a half to arrive at Mt. Sinai.

So they have been there now for 11 months.

While the English title of this book is “Numbers” because of the two censuses we find in it, the title of the Book in the Hebrew Bible is “In the wilderness” because these are the first words.

This is the way the Hebrew Bible usually titles its books, by the first words found in it.

When you read the word “wilderness,” don’t think of it just as barren desert, just miles and miles of sand dunes stretching as far as the eye can see.

The Hebrew word for *wilderness* is *midbar* and refers to a place for driving flocks.

It’s not the arid desert with no vegetation at all.

There are occasional trees and shrubs and low lying vegetation, but it is scarce.

‘Midbar’ refers to that region of land that has only a few inches of rain per year, so it can sustain roving flocks, but not cultivation for crops.

So, in the wilderness, the Lord spoke to Moses – and what He said was to organize the people in preparation for their journey to Canaan.

Now, let’s think about this group of people Moses is leading. Who and what are they?

They are a *redeemed* people – delivered by the mighty hand of a gracious and merciful God.

But do they see themselves as such, or do they still see themselves as what they had been in Egypt – slaves?

As we’ll see, they continue to act like slaves.

In Egypt, their lives had been strictly defined by harsh taskmasters who kept them

in line.

Law was enforced at the end of a whip or point of a spear & tip of a sword.
They'd developed a nasty habit of complaining and distrusting their leaders.
All of this carried over into their behavior as free-men.

At Sinai, when God gave the law as a means to provide content and structure to their freedom, they resisted.

They grumbled about Moses' leadership.

God's plan was to bring them out of the wilderness into the glorious provision of His grace in Canaan.

But the people resisted following the Lord. Having gained their independence from political bondage, they tried to gain spiritual independence too.

They showed a reluctance to do things God's way in preference of their own directions.

This is why in Numbers we find the phrase, "the Lord spoke to Moses" some 150 times!

Deliverance from the Wilderness comes only one way – by hearkening to the Word of the Lord!

2“Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, ³from twenty years old and above—all who *are able to go to war* in Israel. You and Aaron shall number them by their armies. ⁴And with you there shall be a man from every tribe, each one the head of his father's house.

The census was to be of all males 20 years and older. This number would constitute the army of Israel.

Assisting Moses & Aaron in the task of taking the census would be each tribe's chief elder – the patriarchs of the 12 tribes.

God then names who these men are . . .

5“These are the names of the men who shall stand with you:

- **from Reuben, Elizur**
- **⁶from Simeon, Shelumiel**
- **⁷from Judah, Nahshon**
- **⁸from Issachar, Nethanel**
- **⁹from Zebulun, Eliab**
- **¹⁰from the sons of Joseph:**
 - **from Ephraim, Elishama**
 - **from Manasseh, Gamaliel**
- **¹¹from Benjamin, Abidan**
- **¹²from Dan, Ahiezer**
- **¹³from Asher, Pagiel**
- **¹⁴from Gad, Eliasaph**
- **¹⁵from Naphtali, Ahira . . . ”**

¹⁶These were chosen from the congregation, leaders of their fathers' tribes, heads of the divisions in Israel.

These men, as the chief elders of their tribes were like governors.

17Then Moses and Aaron took these men who had been mentioned by name, **18**and they assembled all the congregation together on the first day of the second month; and they recited their ancestry by families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, each one individually. **19**As the LORD commanded Moses, so he numbered them in the Wilderness of Sinai.

The chief elders went back to their tribes and had the fathers of each of the tribal clans come and give an accounting of all the males 20 and older.

The elders then brought this count back to Moses and Aaron.

Vs. 20-46 gives us the count. This gets a bit technical so we'll just give the totals –

Verses	Tribe	Total Fighters
20-21	Reuben	46,500
22-23	Simeon	59,300
24-25	Gad	45,650
26-27	Judah	74,600
28-29	Issachar	54,400
30-31	Zebulun	57,400
32-33	Ephraim	40,500
34-35	Manasseh	32,200
36-37	Benjamin	35,400
38-39	Dan	62,700
40-41	Asher	41,500
42-43	Naphtali	53,400
44-46	Summary	603,550

Many Bible students think these numbers were rounded off to the nearest hundred or 50 for the sake of making the calculations quicker.

If there were 600,000 males 20 and older, this could easily translate into a nation of as many as 2 million.

You'll notice the tribe of Levi was not a part of this count. *Why* is explained in the next verses.

47But the Levites were not numbered among them by their fathers' tribe; **48**for the LORD had spoken to Moses, saying: **49**“Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor take a census of them among the children of Israel; **50**but you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the Testimony, over all its furnishings, and over all things that belong to it; they shall carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings; they shall attend to it and camp around the tabernacle. **51**And when the tabernacle is to go forward, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall set it up. The outsider who comes near shall be put to death.

The census was a military one, to determine the army strength of Israel.

The Levites were not a part of the army. Their duty was the administration of the holy things.

Any non-Levite who tried to do a Levites tasks was to be executed.

⁵²The children of Israel shall pitch their tents, everyone by his own camp, everyone by his own standard, according to their armies; ⁵³but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel; and the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony.”

⁵⁴Thus the children of Israel did; according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so they did.

When the camp of Israel was arranged, the different tribal clans & families were to stay in the area assigned to them.

These areas would be identified by flag or standards.

Acting as a buffer zone between the tents of Israel and the tabernacle which was at the very center, would be the tents of the Levites.