



Reverend Dr. Charles L. McNeil, Sr., Senior Pastor
15 E. Charleston Avenue Lawnside, New Jersey 08045
www.gracetemplebaptist.org

A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

An Overview

Moses is more likely the author of Numbers, writing this and other books of the Pentateuch perhaps during Israel's wilderness wanderings in either the fifteenth or the thirteenth century BC. It is a book about faithfulness—God's faithfulness even when we are faithless. It is a book about learning from the failures of past generations in order to be more faithful today. Numbers teaches these lessons through the story of two generations of Israel: one generation that consistently breaks faith with God, and an emerging generation that trusts him.

The first generation is introduced with a census (1:1–4:49), the first of two censuses in the book. This census counts the generation of the exodus who saw God's wonders in Egypt and at Mount Sinai. But in spite of all God's marvels, this first generation is consistently stubborn and rebellious. When God brings them to the border of the Promised Land, their lack of faith hinders them from entering it (13:1–14:45). They are forced to return to the wilderness to wander for another 40 years.

The second generation includes the children raised in those years of wilderness wandering. Their emergence into adulthood is introduced with a second census (26:1–65). This generation learns from their parents' failures and proves faithful to God. They are obedient and quick to repent when corrected—not stiff-necked like their parents were. When this new, faithful generation arrives at the border of the Promised Land, they experience victory and God's blessings (31:1–32:42). Through the experiences of these two generations, we are taught the amazing patience of God despite our faithlessness, and his rich blessings upon those who learn from the past in order to be faithful in the present.

The English title of Numbers is based on the book's organization around two censuses. The Hebrew title of the book is based on a Hebrew word occurring in its first verse, translated "In the wilderness." The entire narrative takes place in Israel's wilderness wanderings from Sinai (1:1) to the "plains of Moab" on the border of Canaan (36:13).

The Larger Story

Numbers is the fourth book of the Pentateuch and occupies an important place in its overarching narrative. Genesis, the first book of the Pentateuch, describes the beginnings of all the nations of the world with a special focus on God's covenant with one house among those nations: the house of Abraham. Exodus continues that narrative with the transformation of Abraham's household through much suffering into a nation redeemed by God and ordered around his law. The book of Leviticus comes next, teaching the gift of atonement at the center of God's kingdom-forming law.

Next, the book of Numbers takes the stage, tracing this newly organized kingdom on its march from Sinai to the border of its promised new land. Numbers assures us of God's faithfulness to his kingdom-building project, even when his people rebel. Deuteronomy concludes the Pentateuch with Moses' final instructions for Israel's settlement in the land, including a vision for taking God's blessings to the rest of the world. The rest of the Bible follows the promises and lessons outlined in the Pentateuch.

Definition of terms

ATONEMENT: The reconciliation of a person with God, often associated with the offering of a sacrifice. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ made atonement for the sins of believers. His death satisfied God's just wrath against sinful humanity, just as the OT sacrifices symbolized substitutionary death as payment for sin.

LAW: When spelled with an initial capital letter, "Law" refers to the first five books of the Bible. The Law contains numerous commands of God to his people, including the Ten Commandments and instructions regarding worship, sacrifice, and life in Israel. The NT often uses "the law" (lower case) to refer to the entire body of precepts set forth in the books of the Law.

PENTATEUCH: The first five books of the Bible.

REDEMPTION: In the context of the Bible, the act of buying back someone who has become enslaved or something that has been lost to someone else. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus purchased redemption for all believers.

Book Outline

1. Lessons from a Faithless Generation (1:1–25:18)
 - a. The first census and preparing the camp (1:1–6:27)
 - b. Preparing the tabernacle (7:1–10:10)
 - c. The need for the right ruler (10:11–12:16)
 - d. The need to be a faithful people (13:1–15:41)
 - e. The need for the right priesthood (16:1–19:22)
 - f. A taste of victory (20:1–21:35)
 - g. A faithful God despite a faithless people (22:1–25:18)
2. Lessons from a Faithful Generation (26:1–36:13)
 - a. The second census and preparing the camp (26:1–30:16)
 - b. A taste of settlement (31:1–32:42)
 - c. Review and prospect (33:1–36:13)

