

# THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

## THE GOODNESS AND SEVERITY OF GOD

### I. THE OLD GENERATION (Sinai to Kadeh) 1-14

- A. The Numbering—1-4
- B. The Instructing—4-9
- C. The Journeying—10-14

### II. THE TRANSITION ERA (In the Wilderness) 15-20

The Wandering—15-20

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# THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

The original Hebrew name for this writing of Moses was Be-midbar, which means “in the wilderness” (from the words in the opening verses of chapter one). The Greek name given to it by the Septuagint translators was Arithmoi which is the origin of our English word “arithmetic.” In Latin “Arithmoi” becomes Numeri and in English: “Numbers.” The book is so named because in it the children of Israel are twice numbered, once at the beginning of the book and again towards the end. The Hebrew and Greek names taken together certainly give the gist of the book: wilderness and numberings.

## Its Nature

Numbers resumes the narrative where Exodus left off. In the last chapter of Exodus (40:17), we are told that in the first month in the second year on the first day of the month, the tabernacle was erected. Numbers 1:1 says the Lord spoke to Moses in the Sinai wilderness in the tabernacle on the first day of the second month in the second year after they came out of Egypt. There is a break of just one month between the erecting of the tabernacle at the end of Exodus and the command to number the people at the beginning of Numbers (with the Leviticus instructions coming in between).

Although Numbers resumes the Exodus narrative, it does not intend to be a full or strictly continuous narrative. For instance, we are told very little about the thirty-eight years of the so-called wandering while certain other events from a comparatively small space of time are very carefully described. This is in accord with the consistent practice of the scriptures to put the emphasis not on mere extent of time but the significance of the events. Numbers covers the period of Israel’s history from the second month of the second year after the Exodus to the tenth month of the fortieth year. It is possible then that a few parts of Numbers overlap into Deuteronomy (32:39-42). So that we may speak of it as, “the book of forty years.” Its record is one of gripping interest which advances in eleven steps:

1. The census is taken: with the primary objective of determining Israel’s military strength.
2. The camp is strategically distributed: with a view to facilitating orderly mobility.
3. The services of the Levites in connection with the tabernacle are appointed: all is made ready for the advance to Canaan’s borders.
4. The march ensues in divinely determined stages: Jehovah himself leads the mighty host by the pillar of cloud and fire.
5. The ground is covered, Kadesh is reached: Canaan is in sight.
6. Then comes the tragic breakdown: Israel disbelieves and then rebels.

7. Judgment falls: The forty years of wandering set in.
  8. God eventually takes up with the new generation: which reassembles at Kadesh.
  9. The new numbering is negotiated.
  10. The fresh advance takes place to the plain of Moab: Israel is on Canaan's margin again.
  11. Final preparation begins: with a view to Israel going up at long last to possess the land.
- These are the eleven steps in which Numbers covers this forty year period of Israel's history.

### Structure

The structure of Numbers is unique and once seen it is difficult to forget. Unlike the Book of Leviticus in which we are geographically stationary, Numbers is a book of movements. It is these movements which mark the main divisions of the book. But, it is most vital to realize that in Numbers we deal in turn with two different generations of people. First, with the generation that came up from Egypt but perished in the wilderness. Second, with the new generation that grew in the wilderness and then entered Canaan. This gives us a clue to the structure of this wonderful book. In the first group of chapters (1 -14) where we read about the Israelites move from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea, we are dealing with the old generation. In the final group of chapters (21-36) where we witness their move from Kadesh to the plain of Moab, we are dealing with the new generation. Coming between these two groups and unmistakably marking them off is the wilderness wanderings (15- 20). The period of transition during which the old generation died off and the new generation grew up. This three-fold grouping is too clear to miss. See it all together and commit it to memory.

Part one (1 -14): The old generation

Part **two** (15—20): The transition era

Part three (21—36): The new generation

(Note: at this time carefully study the outline provided.)

### Central Message

Seeing these prominent features suggest to us the central message of this book. It may be expressed in the words of Romans 11:22 “...***Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God.***” In Numbers, we see the *severity* of God in the old generation which fell in the wilderness and never entered Canaan. We see the *goodness* of God in the new generation which was protected, preserved and provided for until Canaan was possessed. In the one case, we see the awful inflexibility of Divine Justice. In the other case, we see the unfailing faithfulness of God to His promise, His purpose and His people. The central message of Numbers then is, “***Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God.***”

Running very closely to the central message are two very important warnings, two vital lessons which we need to learn and heed. These also may be expressed in words from the New Testament. The first is warning against “presumption” (taking undue liberties by being arrogant). In 1 Corinthians 10:1-12, Paul, referring to the old generation, says, “*all these things happened to them as examples for us.*” In verse 12, he says “...*so if you think you are standing firm be careful that you don't fall.*” We cannot be presumptuous in our relationship with God. We must serve Him with humble obedience.

The second warning is against “unbelief.” In Hebrews 3: 19, we read concerning the old generation, “*They were not able to enter Canaan because of their unbelief.*” Then in Hebrews 4: 1, “*Therefore since the promise of entering His rest still stands let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.* In verse 12 of that same chapter, “*See to it brother that none of you has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*” This brings us to our consideration of:

### The Importance of Numbers

Look again at I Corinthians 1-12. It is in this passage that we find the importance of the book of Numbers (please read these verses carefully at this time). Note the words: *all these things happened to them as examples*. The Greek word here translated “examples” is “*tupoi*” or types. What Paul is expressing here is that these things (the events in Numbers) are made immortal by their having been Divinely resolved into types for our learning. It is the presence of these typical meanings and representative lessons which give this book its rich, spiritual value. It notably exemplifies the fact that the greatest illustrations of the New Testament doctrines are found in Old Testament story. Typical meanings and representative lessons make Numbers vitally important to us today.

### Practical Lessons

Let’s consider just one representative and very important lesson as we conclude our consideration of this book. It is found in Part two, the wilderness wandering or transition era. This, as we will see, is the delay period of Israel’s history. It is the delay period because a delay sets in immediately after the Kadesh crisis and terminates in the year of Aaron’s death.

Both at the beginning and at the end of Numbers we see an Israel carefully prepared for immediate conquest and possession of The Promised Land. The first time was just two years after they came out of Egypt. Thirty-eight years later, they were there again because this needless tragic delay intervenes. It is at this point that Numbers becomes the book of arrested progress. Why the breakdown? Why the delay? The answer is simple a mixed multitude. You see, there were those who were permitted to travel with the congregation who were not really one at heart with the people or the project (consider carefully chapters 13- 14). Then very soon, besides mixed multitudes, there were mixed motives. The Israel’s progress was halted. Listen to the words of J. Sidlow Baxter concerning Israel’s arrested progress: “These thirty-eight years simply mark time without making history. There is an almost complete submergence of the chosen people from view. During those years the real history of Israel was actually in abeyance; “The thirty-eight years are a hold up of the purpose and therefore a gap in the history.”

For thirty-eight years, Israel simply marked time without making history; they were a nothing people going nowhere. Now, consider how prevalent the mixed multitudes in our local churches are today. How obvious is the arresting of real spiritual progress, It took only forty hours to get Israel out of Egypt but it took forty years to get Egypt out of Israel. Oh, the tragedy of the mixed multitude and arrested progress. It is time for us to ask ourselves, “Where are we going? Or are we going anywhere at all?” Each of us need to honestly determine where we stand with the true

congregation-one at heart with God and His purpose or with the mixes refusing to go up and conquer.

There is much to be learned from this third book of the Bible. God bless you as you prayerfully consider its contents.

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1-14	15-20	21-36
The Numbering (1-4) The Instructing (5-9) The Journeying (10-14)	The Wandering	The New Journeying (21-25) The New Numbering (26-27) The New Instructing (28-36)

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