

Numbers

The book is called Numbers because it includes two numberings of the men of war, in chapters 1-4 and 26-27. Numbers takes up where Exodus left off and is a wilderness book. It describes the failure of Israel at Kadesh-Barnea and their wilderness wanderings until the unbelieving generation died. The book has been described as the longest funeral march in history.

Structure and Outline

The book has 3 major divisions based around the 3 important locations where they occurred.

1. Israel at Sinai (1-12)– time frame of about **90 days**

- preparing to depart for the promised land (1:1–10:10)
- journey from Sinai to Kadesh-Barnea (10:11-12:16)

2. Israel at Kadesh-Barnea (13-21) time frame of **38 years**

- delayed as a result of rebellion (13:1-20:13)
- journey from Kadesh-Barnea to plains of Moab (20:14-22:1)

3. Israel at Moab (22-36) - timeframe of about **5 months**

- anticipating the conquest of the promised land (22:2-32:42)
- an appendix dealing with various matters (33-36)



Key Chapters and Events in Numbers

Chapters 13-14 are Key Chapters

Imagine the scenario here – The people of God have been rescued miraculously from Egyptian slavery, are being led by the very presence of God in the Ark of the Covenant, and now stand beside the land that God had promised their ancestors. Everything God had promised is being fulfilled. Now, Moses sends out 12 spies to search out the Promised Land. Ten come back with a negative report. They complain, rebel, and decide to elect a new leader to take them back to Egypt. Only Caleb and Joshua say, “Let us go up and possess the land”. While they are giving their report, the people are picking up stones to kill them.

Two Responses to the Mission of God

Response #1 - Portrait of the Fearful

- a. They disregarded the goodness of God
- b. They doubted the greatness of God
 - they magnified potential problems
 - they minimized powerful promises
- c. They disobeyed the Word of God
- d. They disqualified themselves from the blessing of God – “they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers”

What happens when God’s people abandon God’s mission because of fear?

1. They immediately lost the power of God and were quickly defeated by the enemy (14:39-45)
2. An entire generation wasted their lives and never experienced the blessing that God had intended
3. They suffered unnecessary afflictions and trials
4. They declined in number

5. They made no progress or advancement – 38 years later they returned to the same exact spot where they had been unfaithful in Kadesh-Barnea

Response #2 - Portrait of the Faithful

- a. They believed the goodness of God
- b. They trusted in the greatness of God
 - While others saw an obstacle, they saw an opportunity
 - While others worried about man's power, they were confident in God's presence
- c. They obeyed the Word of God
- d. They experienced the blessing of God – Caleb and Joshua were the ONLY ones who inherited the land!

Warning to The People of God – Chapter 16

Another key theme in the book of Numbers is - Attacking a man of God can be very dangerous. In Chapter 12, Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses, and Miriam is stricken with severe leprosy. In Chapter 16:1-40, a group of men rise up against Moses and Aaron, and God sends an earthquake during which all of the attackers are killed. Then in Chapter 16:41-50 another group rises up against Moses and Aaron, and before God is finished 14,700 of the complainers have been killed by a plague. What is the message? The common theme in each instance is that the intent of the attackers is motivated by a desire to increase their own power and position among God's people. They each ask, "Who put you in charge?", and in each case God says, "I did". If a man of God is engaged in sin, the people of God should hold him accountable according to Matthew 18:15-20. However, the book of Numbers does demonstrate that if a person attacks a man of God in order to gain personal power, it may be costly to them and their family.

Warning to the Leaders of God's People – Chapter 20

Numbers 20 is one of the saddest chapters in the Bible. Moses, the leader that God had chosen to lead the rescue of His people from Egypt and guide them to the Promised Land, disobeys God and learns his sin will cost him entry into the land. Our initial reaction is – Why is the punishment by God so severe for a man who had been so faithful in the past? What could cause a leader of God who had done so much for the cause of God to miss out on the blessing of God?

1. Uncontrolled Anger – "Hear now you rebels"

Moses suffered from an inability to control his temper. In Exodus chapter 2, he kills an Egyptian in uncontrolled rage. In Exodus 32, after coming down from the mountain Moses smashed the two stone tablets in uncontrolled anger. In both instances, Moses allows anger to take control of him and disobey the Word of God

2. Pride – "Must WE bring water for you out of this rock?"

Moses produces water out of the rock his way, rather than the way that God had instructed him. It wasn't Moses who had divided the red sea, provided manna in the desert, or water from a rock. It had all been done through God's mercy and care. Moses made the mistake of believing that God needed him to perform the miracle. God could have managed without Moses, just as he can manage without you or me. We are all important in God's plan, but none of us are essential.



3. Lack of Faith – "Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod."

God tells Moses to speak to the rock and bring forth water. Instead Moses strikes it with his staff. What made Moses do this? When Moses had been in this situation last (Ex.17), God told him to hit the rock to bring forth water. God was now telling Moses to do something different. God was looking for fresh faith!