

SESSION #10

NUMBERS

Let's turn now to the next book: Numbers. If the names of the books give us some kind of clue as to what each book is about and its content, then what is the book of Numbers all about? Well, it's about numbers. But what kind of numbers? That's pretty easy in this case.

The book of Numbers gets its name from two censuses which were taken of the people of Israel. There was a census of the people taken in Numbers chapter 1. There's another census taken in Numbers chapter 26. So, two sets of numberings of the people.

The one focussed on the past and the grim reality of God's curse, because that numbering is of the old generation who in the course of the stories of this book decide to disbelieve God. And God will allow them to perish in the wilderness – that whole generation.

There's another census at the end of the book which looks ahead to the future possibility of God's blessing for the younger generation, the new generation which is going to move into the Promised Land.

As you read through these early books in the OT, Numbers actually resumes the stories, it picks up the narrative, from the book of Exodus. Leviticus then was rather like a TV commercial, a "word from our sponsor". That was Leviticus. But there isn't much in the way of a story there. The basic narrative ends at the end of Exodus. You don't pick up the story again until you hit the book of Numbers, but it just picks it up as if nothing much had happened except this wonderful 'commercial', the book of Leviticus.

Numbers, then, begins with the story of the pilgrimage of the people. A census is taken to determine their military strength. There are some instructions about the camp, and the Levites are appointed for what jobs they are to do. They march as a whole nation to the border of Canaan. Moses sends 12 spies into the Land to spy it out. The majority of the spies come back saying, "*we can't go in there.*" They don't believe God can make it

possible for them to overcome the Canaanites, and God then judges them for their disbelief with a sentence of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

One year sentence for every day that those spies were in the Promised Land. And God says, *“You don’t believe I can take the whole bunch of you in there? Well, for every day they were in there you’ll spend a year out here until that whole generation dies.”*

Now, since that first generation died, what has to happen at the end of the book? They have to number everybody again to see how many there are now. It’s a whole new group, a new generation. How many are going to go now from this point into the Promised Land?

And the book of Numbers brings us finally to the border of the land of Canaan. And the transition of leadership between Moses and Joshua.

The theme of the book of Numbers is a contrasting two-part theme: the severity of God, and the goodness of God. God is severe with the old generation because they did not believe His promises, but He is good with the new generation. He gives them another chance. And we see throughout the stories and wanderings detailed in the book of Numbers, something of the wonderful faithfulness, mercy and the long-suffering of God with such an obstinate people.

There are, as a result of the stories in this book, some very important warnings. 1 Corinthians chapter 10 tells us very clearly that what happened in the OT and very specifically what came to pass in the book of Numbers, happened to these people not just for their own sake but for an example to us. And as a result, Paul declares that there are some warnings for us, two in particular.

First of all, in 1 Cor. 10:11-12 a warning about **presumption**. He said, *“all these things happened to them as examples, as object lessons to us, to warn us against doing the same things. They were written down so that we could read about them and learn from them in these last days as the world nears its end.”* So Paul says, be careful! If you are thinking, “Oh, I’d never behave like that!”, watch out, let this be a warning to you, Paul says, for you too may fall into sin.

God's people too easily can fall into the sin of presumption, just presuming that I'm okay. *Nothing bad is going to happen to me, I'm God's child, I'm a strong Christian, I can make it.* No, these things are written specially so that we can learn by reading them and realize that if it could happen to them it could happen to you, it could happen to me. We cannot presume that we are immune. We must take the warning.

Then there's a second warning and it has to do with **unbelief**. It's found at the end of Hebrews chapter 3 and into chapter 4. These verses ask: *"why couldn't they [the people of Israel] go into the Promised Land?"* And here's the reason: because they didn't trust God. *"Although God's promise still stands, His promise that all may enter His place of rest, we [NT people of God], ought to tremble with fear because some of you may be on the verge of failing to get there after all. For this wonderful news, the message that God wants to save us, has been given to us, just as it was to those who lived in the time of Moses. But it didn't do them any good because they didn't believe it. They didn't mix it with faith."*

That's what happened to them. They had God's message and they refused to believe it, to mix it with faith. Now the writer to the Hebrews says the very same thing can happen to us. We don't want to fail to get to where God wants us to be because of unbelief, because of not believing His word and His promises. They didn't believe God's promises, especially those given in the covenant with Moses.

Exodus chapter 6 – remember? What was God's promise: *"I will bring you out"*. Did He do it? Oh, He did that with a fantastic miracle.

"I will be your God, you will be my people." Did He do that? Oh yes, they could see His cloud in their midst every day and night.

"I will bring in to the land I promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Will He do this? Oh sure, He'll do that. He's kept His promises in those other cases; he will surely keep His promise here.

And so the crucial chapter, the turning-point chapter in Numbers is of course chapter 13. The incident of the 12 spies who go into the Promised Land of Canaan and then they bring back their report as to what it was they found. The majority report was negative.

They saw the grapes – they brought back some sample grapes. Huge grapes – it took two men to carry one branch. That was how fruitful the Land was. As they roamed around in their spying, they also saw great walled cities throughout the land. They saw giants, and that was a fearsome thing. And that probably stuck in their minds more than anything else they saw.

The problem was, of course, that they didn't see the biggest "G" of all, they didn't see God. They lost sight of God. And ten of those spies came back with a negative report saying, "*We cannot go in and take the land. We cannot believe God's promise.*" They saw with the eye of flesh, if you will.

In other words, they saw God but in between God and themselves they saw the difficulty. And the difficulty had blocked their view of the reality of God and His promises.

Only two of the 12 spies, Joshua and Caleb, saw the situation with eyes of faith. And how is it that you see with faith? Oh, it doesn't mean that you become unrealistic. The two spies, Joshua and Caleb, saw the great walled cities, they saw the giants, they saw the problems.

They saw the difficulties, but what made the difference for them was that they saw God before the difficulty. They never lost sight of who their great God was. And that made all the difference to their report. And to their destiny as being the only two men of their generation who ever got a chance again to walk in the Promised Land.

The majority of those people saw themselves as grasshoppers in the sight of those giants. That too was part of the report, another "g". "*We're just grasshoppers.*"

But when you move on a little further in the OT and the book of Joshua, chapter 2 and the story of Rahab, a lady in Jericho, she tells what was going on in the hearts and minds of the people of Canaan at the time the spies were moving around in that land. And Rahab reports that all of the people of Canaan melted with fear. They just melted when they heard about the Israelites and what God had done for them. When they even heard the name "Israel" they got the shakes. That was the reality!

For these spies, they thought the reality was, *“those guys are giants. In their eyes we’re nothing but grasshoppers. We’re just little bugs that they’re going to squash as soon as we get within reach.”* Was that reality? That was not reality! The reality was what Rahab reported.

When we see our problems as bigger than God we will always have a distorted view of reality. We will not see things as they really are. And these people lost touch with what the reality really was.

Also note that the majority is not always right. The Christian life does not rest on democratic principles. It rests on the promises, power and presence of a King whose values and priorities will usually be opposed to the majority view of the cultures in which we live.

Notice that their problems began in small ways. Numbers tells us that it began with murmuring. The people murmured and muttered and grumbled. Just small stuff, not big stuff, not stuff that you would call sin. But that murmuring and ingratitude was what got them started on the downward path towards unbelief. It was a serious, serious path to get on. And surely we need to be careful too.

We live in lands where there is so much for which to be grateful. God has blessed us in so many wonderful ways. Let us never murmur, complain or grumble. It can start us off on the path down to unbelief.

Someone has pointed out this reality: it only took 40 hours for the Exodus event to get Israel out of Egypt. Just 40 hours by God’s great power.

But as you look at the story of Numbers it took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel! The memory of the leeks and the garlies and the spices and all the stuff they had left behind... it took 40 years to get that drained out of their system as God worked with these people throughout the stories in the book of Numbers.

God does something similar with us. He weans us away from the ‘world’ and its deadly attractions so that we may increasingly become holy, as He is holy.

I hope you can come back for our next session which will take us through the book of Deuteronomy.
