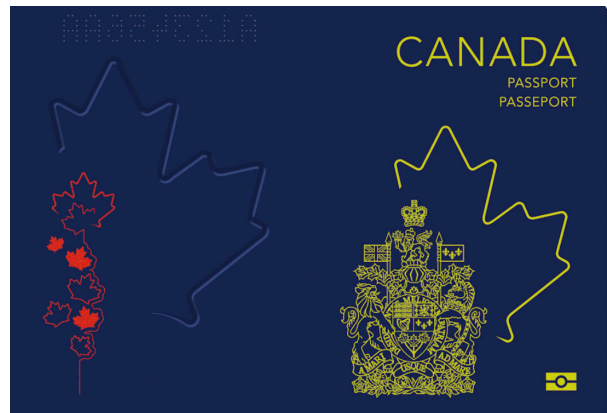


Travel Documents

Written on: September 1, 2023

Article by: Kevin Cleary

I will shortly be traveling for a time in the US. In order to do this it is important to be able to identify myself to the border guard. I could arrive at the border thinking I know who I am and surely when the border guard sees me he will know it too. Yep that's Kevin Cleary, definitely a Canadian Citizen. As convenient as it would be if this were the case, the reality is that the guard will want proof. He will want the right "documentation". For this purpose, I have a passport. Issued by the Canadian government, it has my picture and identifies me, proving that I'm Canadian. And based on that, I should have no problem crossing the border and continuing my trip.



Christians have another aspect to our identity, and it is that we are God's people. Thus, in the same way that a passport or birth certificate certifies our physical identity we need something that documents who we are spiritually. Is there such a thing? Can we know that we belong to God and that God identifies us as his own?

The answer is yes! Unlike the passport that I have to carry with me, our documentation comes from God and is with us all the time.

In Ephesians 1:13 Paul says God has been given the Holy Spirit to us as a seal. This is not the kind of seal that keeps our food fresh. It is an identifying marker indicating ownership. 2nd Timothy 2:19 assures us that God knows those who are his and it is comforting for the saved to know that our documentation before God has come from above.

So God knows that we are His – but can we know it as well? Has God provided a way for us to know that we are saved? What documents might we consult to reach the same conclusion?

When I approach the border, I invariably find myself touching my pocket or getting my passport out to assure myself that I have everything in order. I say it's because of the sign telling me to have my documents ready, but even if there were no sign, I would still have my passport in hand and open to the right page – ready to hand it out the window.

As citizens of heaven, wouldn't it be reassuring to have similar documentation for our trip into eternity? (Phil 3:20). The answer of course is yes, and yes again. God has not left us to wonder about our standing before him or what will happen when we leave this life behind. He has told us what we need to do to have everything in order and to keep it that way.

The word of God supplies this information in its most up to date form in the New Testament. Passages like 1st Corinthians 2:6-16; John 16:12-14; II Peter 1:21; II Timothy 3:15-17” assure us that God has spoken and that divine inspiration conveys divine authority to the message that has been preserved. God’s word assures us that once ‘in Christ’, our sins are forgiven. We have been washed, sanctified and justified – to put us right with God (1st Cor 6:11) And having been joined spiritually to Jesus, we are indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit (Rom 8:31-39).

This is our documentation. No wonder that so many who are approaching death do it with Bible in hand. Like me at the border – they want to know that everything is in order.

Knowing then how to know that we are right with God, let’s obey God so that bibles in our hands have also transformed our hearts. For they reveal the Lord Jesus who is responsible for our salvation and is the true object of our love.

(Anyone who wants to know specifically what the Bible says about how to be saved see: Rom 1:16; 10:9-10; Acts 3:19; Acts 2:38; Rom 6:1-4; Gal 3:27)

Barrie ON

Numbers: Crises and Redemption

Written on: September 1, 2023

Article by: Dave Knutson

Reading: Numbers 20:1-13

This article is a collection of principles that we learn from a fairly surface reading of the book of Numbers. The book of Numbers is a mixture of story-telling and legislation. The story part is not in a strictly chronological order nor is it a complete story. It omits most of what happened during the 38 years that Israel spent in the wilderness

We might think of it this way: The narrative portions are actually bookends to that period, and even though they cluster at the start and finish, they still identify seven crises that took place.

These begin in chapter 12 with a leadership crisis. Moses' sister and brother (Miriam & Aaron) challenged his God-given authority to direct the affairs of the nation. Each had upon at least one occasion 'prophesied' for God and they thought that this should extend to leadership roles that God had not given. God was forced to step in and settle the question once and for all. Miriam was struck with Leprosy and both were rebuked by God's voice, speaking from heaven.

Chapters 13 and 14 tell about a national crisis of faith. The spies returned from Canaan and the majority opinion contradicted God's command to invade. A general mutiny followed with personal threats on the life of Moses.

Chapter 16 records a second leadership crisis when Korah, Dathan and Abiram along with 250 tribal leaders demanded the right to enter the priesthood. Fire from heaven took away the 250 and the earth swallowed up Korah, Dathan and Abiram along with their families. Jealousy over God-given leadership roles goes all the way back...and as the book of Numbers points out, can have deadly consequences.

Now one of the qualities of scripture is...that it does not gloss over the faults of its heroes. That includes Moses who not only led Israel but who wrote a large portion of scripture. Thus in chapter 20, we read about an epic failure on his part. Miriam his sister had just died and the people were up in his face again. They accused him of



incompetence and wished that they had already died. There was no water to drink and they were still a long way off from the land of plenty that they'd been promised. I guess you could say that Moses had had it. He was fed up. He and Aaron prayed to God and God told him what to do. But instead of speaking to the rock as God instructed, Moses disobeyed by striking the rock.

Moses made it look as if he personally had supernatural power. He took credit for giving them water instead of giving credit to God. He let his anger get the better of him and as a result, lost the right to lead Israel into Canaan. This crisis was personal, and he failed the test.

What God made clear at that time is still true: no human leader is indispensable. And no human leader may ignore the words of God and escape punishment.

Numbers 21 begins with what James Smith calls a *program crisis*. Israel was forced to go around the land of Edom which added hundreds of miles to their trip. Israel blamed God for their hardships and accused Him of evil. So God sent poisonous snakes bringing havoc and death.

Then there was a military crisis. Having gone around Edom, Israel came to the Transjordan uplands and had to fight for control of the land. It was hard slogging to capture walled cities and to root out armies that were defensively entrenched. But with God's help, they did it. They conquered both Sihon and Og and took the land that would later be given to Reuben, Gad and part of the half tribe of Manasseh. It seemed that they had finally gotten something right. They had trusted God and God had given them victory.

Yet the people of God had a way of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory so that we finish the narratives in Numbers with a religious crisis. Having failed to curse Israel, Balaam advised the king of Moab to lure Israelite men into fertility worship at Baal-Peor. God responded by killing 23,000 Israelite men who gave in to temptation (Ch 25). Camped just across the river from the land of promise, they died without ever entering. All of which reminds us that Satan is never finished tempting – until we leave this earth and are forever safe from his influence.

Now Moses did not just record the facts in Numbers, he also interpreted them. He combined information with explanation, to inform and exhort. He pointed to the hand of God in their daily lives, so that they would never forget that it was God who had brought them to each new day. He rehearsed how the Lord had provided for all their needs, how he had led them to Canaan and protected them from harm. How he had kept covenant with them despite their unfaithfulness and had loved them enough to discipline. There is after all a point to history beyond a bare telling of it.

Now there are five main literary forms in the book of Numbers

(1) Some information comes in lists

(2) Census data provide an official tally of the men of war...one at the start of their time in the wilderness and the other at the end. Their numeric ability to wage war was undiminished, making it clear that earlier failure was their fault and not God's.

(3) Numbers enumerates a number of laws that are unique to it.

(4) It includes some poetic oracles

(5) And from about ch. 12 on, the text tells the story of what happened.

The book also quotes from an ancient Hebrew poetic work known as "The Book of the Wars of the Lord" (ch. 21).

All in all, Numbers is the record of God's discipline in action tempered with patience and grace. In Romans 11:22, the apostle Paul drew attention to two things about God that Numbers remind us of... "Behold the kindness and severity of God." As much as we would just like to think about kindness, we should always remember that God is both holy and just. He will not allow sin to go unpunished.

Shifting gears a little: According to Numbers, Israel started their march from Mt Sinai about thirteen and a half months after leaving Egypt. During that time, the law had been given, the tabernacle built, the priests consecrated and the Levites commissioned. The usual journey from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh took about 11 days, but since there were several million Israelites and since they only moved when God moved, the trip took about 11 months.

About thirty-eight years went by between their arrival at Kadesh and the conclusion of Numbers. We know very little about what happened during that period. But the scriptures do indicate that for 38 years, the Israelites did not circumcise their children, nor observe the Passover. Both of these resumed once Israel entered Canaan according to Josh 5. It was as if God needed to renew the covenant with that new generation.

Now its fair to ask: what are the **main theological truths** that come out in this book? Let me suggest five, though there may be more: and each still applies to us.

The first is that God is always present with his people. Now Israel could see God's presence by looking to the tabernacle. There was a cloud by day and a fire by night. It hovering over the most holy place...and when it moved, they moved. The tabernacle was situated under it. That's how they knew where God wanted it located.

The whole nation took it's physical point of orientation from the tabernacle. 3 tribes camped on each of the four sides. The 3 clans of the Levites camped on the north, west and south side – while the priests and Moses camped on the east side where the entrance was. You could say, that for a time God allowed them to walk by sight, so that one day they would grow up and walk by faith.

This began to happen once they crossed the Jordan River. Manna stopped falling and they lived off the land. Most of God's miracles ended – leaving them with scripture instead. But first and most importantly, God provided himself. He called Israel into a covenant *with* himself. He sanctified them and claimed them *for* himself. He granted cleansing and forgiveness –in order to live in His presence. He gave them hope for the immediate future and for those more spiritually minded, hope for the life to come

The second theological truth in Numbers is that God provides for his people.

- Manna appeared daily and was free for the taking
- Water flowed through the camp – in the middle of a desert
- Mothers did not miscarry and disease was held at bay
- Their clothes and shoes did not wear out
- They didn't need jobs, infrastructure, daycare or shopping malls
- They built no cities, dug no wells, paved no roads

It was as close to a 'free ride' that any nation has ever had. It was all because 'the Lord provides'. And while the miraculous agency of God's providence was replaced by more 'natural' means, it persisted all the same.

Also, in Numbers, we see that God is patient with his people. Never have a people had so little to complain about, and yet excelled at it. Over and over in Numbers the people grumbled. By the way, grumbling is the polar opposite of thanksgiving. The word denotes a settled attitude of ingratitude – that justifies itself by making accusations of evil

When Israel grumbled, they weren't reciting pet-peeves.

- They actually accused God of evil motives and hostile action.
- They said that he had brought them into the wilderness to kill them.
- They called God a liar and demanded that he change for the better.

They tried the patience of God and at times he had just had enough. So He disciplined them...yet in the end, his forbearance won out. At the end of 40 years there were just as many men of war as there had been at the start. That is what those two census figures are all about.

Now it is very much worth noting...that while God patient God, there is also an *end* to his patience. Judgment delayed is not judgment escaped. The day of the Lord is as inevitable as any other. May we purpose never to try his patience or presume upon it.

A fourth theological truth is that God listens to the prayers of his people. Numbers is a book about intercessory prayer. Moses must have had calluses on his knees.

There was probably no one in Israel more put upon than Moses. His life was not his own.

- He was badgered day and night...constantly in court mediating cases

- Blamed when things went wrong and not thanked when things went right. And threatened...his life was put in peril at the hands of his own countrymen.

Yet when the patience of God wore thin, Moses intervened.

- He prayed for Aaron & Miriam who challenged his authority
- When God threatened to wipe out Israel...for refusing to enter Canaan, he asked God to pardon them...and to do it on no other grounds than God's own reputation and mercy (14:13-16).
- He intervened when they grumbled – when God sent fire and then again when he sent serpents.
- Had it not been for the prayers of Moses, thousands more would have died.

It is hard to pray for sinners. It is even harder when they've done you wrong and threatened your life. But that is what Moses did and what God wants us to do

Then, **a final theological truth** is, that God always protects his people. He protects them from spiritual harm. He protects them from the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. When Balaam tried to curse God's people, He turned them into blessings. In a world given to magical incantation and pagan ritual, God showed himself superior to all. The civilizations who practised them were wiped from the earth while God's people became triumphant.

Yet God's protection was conditional. He blessed those who were obedient while 23,000 men went to an early grave. May we trust and obey God so that he can treat us as the objects of his kindness.

Barrie ON

Lessons “In the Wilderness,” An Introduction to Numbers

Written on: September 1, 2023

Article by: Paul Birston



“The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai...” Israel learned many compelling spiritual and practical lessons from the LORD in the wilderness and so can we today. In this brief introduction we look at a few of these valuable lessons.

“In the Wilderness” (Numbers 1:1), the Hebrew title, is perhaps as illustrative of Numbers’ contents as its naming after the two main censuses (literally, **“take the sum”**) of the men above 20 years of age who are able to go out to war in chapter 1, in the second year after the Exodus and then ca. 38 years later in chapter 26. Throughout Scripture, God’s people, even God’s Son, learn and teach important lessons in the wilderness.

Lesson: God’s Way Is the Best Way vs. Rebellion

This generational interval of the wilderness journey was of course the result of Israel’s rebellion against God during the Exodus and at Sinai.

This is one of the major lessons Israel learned in Numbers: rejecting God and His gift of the Promised Land had consequences, just as rejecting God and His gift of eternal life today has eternal consequences. The rebels would not see the Promised Land but their children would. The rebels were replaced.

The sum of the men of the Exodus generation was 603,550 in Numbers 1:46. The sum of the new generation was very similar at 601,730 in Numbers 26:51. The rebels perished in the wilderness. A new generation entered the Promised land.

Lesson: God Always Continues to Accomplish His Eternal Purposes

Israel's rebellion brought a serious setback for God's people but not for His eternal purposes. Through the instructions, wilderness wanderings and events Moses records in Numbers, God moves His eternal purpose of redemption forward from the giving of His commandments at Sinai to the Plains of Moab across from the Promised Land.

In fact, from Creation and the sin of Adam and Eve, all five action-packed books of the Torah look forward to the gospel of Christ, Jesus' death and resurrection. The gospels is God's universal answer to the universal problem of sin. Jesus died for our sins in our place and was raised for our justification.

The events of the five books move geographically from Eden to Egypt (Genesis), to Sinai (Exodus), at Sinai (Leviticus), through the wilderness (Numbers), to across the Jordan from the Promised Land and (Deuteronomy). God continues working today.

Lesson: Be Careful What You Ask For

Israel's rebellion against God and His appointed leaders was so strong they preferred death to His leadership and promises! **“And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the entire congregation said to them, ‘If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or even if we had died in this wilderness!’”** (Numbers 14:2)

God responded to their request. **“I, the LORD, have spoken, I certainly will do this to all this evil congregation who are gathered together against Me. They shall be worn out in this wilderness, and there they shall die.”** (Numbers 14:35; see Romans 1:16–32; God will let people have their way and will not force them into His kingdom.)

God explained His response clearly and publicly for all generations: **“So the Lord's anger burned on that day, and He swore, saying, 11 ‘None of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; for they did not follow Me fully, 12 except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun; for they have followed the LORD fully.’ So the LORD's anger burned against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until the entire generation of those who had done evil in the sight of the LORD came to an end”** (Numbers 32:10–13). Caleb and Joshua set the example to follow the LORD fully.

Lesson: God's Gracious Leadership in Purposeful Planning, Training, Discipline, Reward

Throughout Numbers God continues to reveal His gracious nature and approach to leadership that He showed throughout Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus. In spite of their sin and rebellion, God keeps training imperfect people to work with Him to fulfill His eternal purposes. No one and no thing will stop God from fulfilling His eternal goal of redeeming all who will follow Him fully as Caleb and Joshua did.

While God gives further explicit instructions for life and worship in Numbers, most of His training in discipleship happens through experiences along the journey just as Jesus taught and trained His disciples on His journeys with them. The structure of Numbers shows God's integration of life and learning:

1–10 God numbers and prepares His people for the journey and gives a blessing

10–12 The journey from Sinai to Kadesh in Paran

13–20 Spying out the Promised Land, rebellion

20–22 The journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab

22–32 Balaam's prophecies, Israel's idolatry at Peor, Joshua's succession

33–36 Israel's journey reviewed, tribal allotments, Levitical cities

God speaks directly with or through His delegated leaders in every chapter of Numbers. He constantly engages with them through His spoken Word, instructing, guiding and correcting them. Eighteen chapters begin with God speaking directly to Moses (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 17, 19, 26, 28, 29, 31, 34 and 35) as well as engaging with him many more times.

As He always does, God speaks very clearly. His commands, instructions and corrections leave His people with no doubts about who He is and what He wants them to know and do.

God also listens. He listens to Moses' brilliant intercessory prayers for His people after His anger was kindled by their complaining (11:10–15; see also Moses' prayer in Exodus 32:9–14). When Moses faces opposition from the people, and even his siblings Aaron and Miriam (12:1–16), God intervenes to defend him.

Lesson: Learning Leadership, Trust and Humility from Moses

Reluctant leaders are often the best leaders. Ambitious leaders often seek their own ends at the expense of their people. Moses, as we know from Exodus 3–4, was a reluctant leader. Though he claimed not to be **“a man of words”** (i.e. eloquent; Exodus 4:11), in the crucible of the pressures of leadership he became a powerful speaker and brilliant intercessor as we noted above. Moses learned to delegate and empower others (11:16–17; see also Jethro's counsel in Exodus 18).

Ambitious leaders are often driven by pride. Pride has a blinding effect. Humility, on the other hand, opens eyes to see and to learn from God. The parenthetical observation in Numbers 12:3 tells us, **“Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.”** Humility is an attribute of the greatest leader of all, of God Himself, **“I am gentle and humble in heart”** (Matthew 11:29).

Moses was intimately acquainted with the frustrations of leadership. It got the best of him when he hit the rock instead of speaking to it (20:8–13). His trust in God kept Him going. His humility empowered him to accept God's will that he would see the Promised Land but not enter.

God invested 80 years preparing Moses for his work (40 years in Pharaoh's palace, 40 in the wilderness). Moses mentored his successor Joshua. Leadership looks ahead.

Lesson: Faith over Fear

The twelve spies **“went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, at Lebo-hamath”** (13:21). Lebo-hamath is near the top of Lebanon. This was a long journey. The majority reported the land **“‘ certainly does flow with milk and honey’”** (13:27) but they feared the people, their cities and the descendants of Anak. **“Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will certainly prevail over it”** (13:30).

Fear outnumbered faith 10 to 2. The majority is not always right, especially in God's eyes. Israel was a small people surrounded by mighty empires. Caleb and Joshua knew that faith in God is always the right response in challenge, crises and everyday living.

Lesson: Speak God's Words, Their Literary Power

Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse Israel. At God's direction, Balaam did the opposite. His prophecies/discourses (literally proverbs/parables) in favour of God and Israel, are marvelous (Numbers 22–24).

Balaam said he could not help but speak **“what the LORD speaks.” “If Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything contrary to the command of the LORD, either good or bad, of my own accord. What the LORD speaks, I will speak”** (24:13).

From the LORD through His word come the power to save, deliver and direct the steps of His people in His will. Jesus, the Living Word, is His ultimate revelation. His gospel is **“the power of God for salvation”** (Romans 1:16–17).

Numbers is a wonderful example of the many genres and literary power of God's written and spoken words. While it is a book of Torah (law, teaching, instruction, direction), it has internal genres within its narrative that add to its power: dialogue, prophetic poetry, parable.

Lesson: Avoid Idols of All Kinds

While God was with Moses on Mount Sinai the people down below worshiped the golden calf. Similarly, immediately after Balaam's vivid prophecy of God's blessing of Israel, we read in Numbers 25:1–3, **“While Israel remained at Shittim, the people**

began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. 2 For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3 So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel.”

At times throughout its history, Israel has synchronised its belief in God with idolatry, including sexual immorality. Idolatry, including sexual sin, and synchronism are huge temptations today as they were then. Numbers is a wake up call for believers of every generation to focus on God and examine ourselves to make sure we are not synchronising our faith in Him with practices that are clearly at odds with Him and His commands which are ultimately for our good, and profoundly, originate in His character: love, holiness, righteousness, mercy, justice...

Lesson: Keeping Track of God's People

What can we learn from censuses and genealogies? God knows all His people by name, individually and collectively. God cares about every one. God works through all who are willing to work with Him.

We learn to value our spiritual ancestors. We learn the lessons God taught them to live His will in our generation and pass it on to the next.

Keeping track also helps us to see progress or needs, to know who's missing, who's in danger, to make sure none are ignored or left behind, that we help meet their spiritual and practical needs.

Lesson: Numbers in the New Testament

Jesus used the incident of the golden serpent from Numbers to prophetically illustrate the saving power of His crucifixion, **“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes will have eternal life in Him”** (John 3:14–15; Numbers 9:12; See also how Jesus adds more detail to this prophecy of the cross in John 8:28; 12:34).

The preservation of Jesus' body following His crucifixion fulfills God's instructions regarding the Passover lamb, **“For these things came to pass, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, ‘Not a bone of Him shall be broken’”** (John 19:36; Numbers 9:12; Exodus 12:46; Psalm 34:20).

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus quoted Numbers 30:2, **“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the LORD.’ 34 But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; and anything beyond these is of evil”** (Matthew 5:33).

We noted the importance of God knowing His people by name and their holiness. Paul reminds Timothy of this, **“Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness’”** (2 Timothy 2:19; Numbers 16:5)

In addition to these direct quotations, New Testament writers include approximately 70 allusions and verbal parallels to Numbers.

Our Awesome God

Through Numbers our awesome God continues to reveal many encouraging things about Himself. He is faithful. He continues to work out His eternal purposes of redemption. He speaks His life-giving commandments with perfect clarity. He teaches practical lessons in the midst of life on the go. He prepares His people for leadership, to work with Him and to make the journey to the Promised Land, ultimately to eternal life in heaven with Him.

Waterloo, Ontario

Our Recently Departed

Written on: September 1, 2023

Article by: Dave Knutson

Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has for decades been documenting the downward trend of attendance among churches in Canada that identify as ‘Christian’¹. Religious ‘affiliation’ has not translated into personal involvement, nor is the spiritual life of congregations still at the front of the line. It is way back in queue – behind ‘felt needs’ and social mores. Pluralism and choice have secularized churches which are now emptying at a faster rate than ever before. Very few churches remain *in the world and not of the world*. As the differences between church and non-church disappears, so do the the reasons for ‘staying in’.



More than fifty years ago, philosopher Francis Schaeffer observed that the populations of formerly ‘Christian’ countries now valued personal peace and prosperity above everything else. A half century later, ‘the chickens have come home to roost’.

We live in a prosperous country that is at peace with itself, but not with God. The generation of ‘fox-hole Christians’ is almost gone along with survivors of the crash of 29 and the ‘hungry thirtys’. God is not a ‘felt need’. Our prosperity is killing us.

When Christian writers used to discuss ‘a crisis of faith’ they usually referred to a Christian’s struggle with paradoxical aspects of our faith and practice. But the more recent crisis of faith is a crisis of no-faith at all. No faith in God the creator. No faith in God’s Son and our saviour. No faith in the spiritual nature of people made in the image of God and no faith in the spiritual realm of angels and demons.

An increasing number of our most recent generations – our own children included – see the world through a monochromatic lens. Reality has been reduced to the physical. The generation that once “Shrunk the Kids”, has also “shrunk the world”. And in the much reduced world of materialism, it is every person for themselves. It is a world where ‘might makes right’, ‘only the strong survive’ and ‘every person is a law unto themselves’. And it is *in* that world and *for* that world that people are leaving the church.

Recently I read an article in The Washington Post that was referred to me. It was written by a now middle aged man who was raised in a church that he no longer attends. He tries to explain his departure and what it is that he still longs for. In the meantime, he no longer attends any church. He *thinks* that all religions are pretty much the same and that their main contribution is to encourage higher values while ensuring that no one is alone. He is very much at the centre of his own world. When he takes the measure of

churches and religious beliefs he judges them by his own opinions. I re-read the article looking for even a single Biblical passage. There were none.

When he is not self-referential, he compares his values to those of political parties and activist groups. In a word, he is his own God. He refuses to believe in any god and certainly not one who sends people to hell, who condemns sexual immorality or rebellion against Himself. His god is fully inclusive, accepting all and condemning no one. In his world, sin does not exist nor does the need for salvation.

And while his experience may not be typical, there were several things that caught my attention.

In his own words, he misses what he once had. He never did really believe in God. He never believed that Jesus was the Son of God or that he rose from the grave. Therefore, what he misses are the social aspects of a church and he would like to have those again, but free and clear of doctrines and beliefs. This is what he still longs for... though he admits that he could probably benefit almost as much by joining a club or attending a 'happy hour'. One is left with the impression that were he to join a church, it would need to have all of the programs and services of a first class country club.

Failing that, if he were to make up his own church it would be...a church made up of 'nones' – former church people with no particular theological convictions. Here is his reasoning:

"Many Americans, including me, were once part of churches that were essential parts of our lives. It's strange to me that America, particularly its left-leaning cohort, is abandoning this institution, as opposed to reinventing to align with our 2023 values. I can easily imagine a "church for the nones." (It would need a more appealing name.) Start the service with songs with positive messages. Have children do a reading to the entire congregation and then go to a separate kids' service. Reserve time when church members can tell the congregation about their highs and lows from the previous week. Listen as the pastor gives a sermon on tolerance or some other universal value, while briefly touching on whatever issues are in the news that week. A few more songs. The end. An occasional post-church brunch. During the week, there would be activities, particularly ones in which parents could take their kids and civic-minded members could volunteer for good causes in the community. (Later in the text he observes) –

"Theologically, I'm comfortable being a none. But socially, I feel a bit lost."²

What he would like is 'a reinvented church that aligns with 2023 values'. It would not gather to worship or to draw near to God. It would hear only positive messages, share personal concerns and encourage universal values. He wants a church to fill the church-shaped hole in his life that is empty. What he refuses to recognize is the 'God-shaped hole' that has never been filled. He was never truly a part of the church that he left.

There remains within each and every soul – the image of God that longs for the one who put it there. Those who now claim no religious affiliation at all, still miss what they once had. They miss the fellowship of kindred spirits. They miss the solidarity of shared

values. They may even miss the hope for something more enduring than a life that is passing them by. They miss it – but not yet enough to come back. For them, the question is...what would I be coming back to?

It seems to me (my opinion) that what we are seeing as a generational disconnect may actually be a theological one. That when our children walk away from the church, it may be that at least some were never truly convinced or convicted in the first place. They were loved and accepted, socialized and served but never did really love God in return or accept Him as both saviour and lord. They were never matured in the faith nor had they experienced a depth of theological understanding that might have changed their souls forever.

Building a gymnasium with a hot tub and weight room will not help. It may actually be a symptom of the problem. What our young people cannot get any place else is spiritual preparation for life in a world that is hostile to faith. "...Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12).

What might happen if we reinvested time and energy into educating young souls and strengthening spirits – fortifying them against the onslaught to come? What if we helped them to mature, so that the faith of their fathers became their own? What might happen if we raised expectations – engaging them in service and evangelism before they left home? What if they spent time in university instilling faith in others instead of losing their own? And what if they were more like shepherds instead of sheep?

But – our recently departed are still not back...nor will they come back unless we offer that which the world cannot. For those who were never truly 'converted', we may need to go back to the basics. Getting an audience with those who think that they know what you are going to say will take both wisdom and patience. Yet we do so, knowing that there is salvation only for those who are 'in' Christ Jesus.

May we renew our confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is 'the power of God unto salvation to all who believe'. May we call our recently departed back to the Lord and back to his word. May we preach the Lord and not ourselves. Churches will always fail and should, if they preach themselves for when we do, we help the god of this world who is blinding the eyes of the unbelieving.

The apostle Paul wrote: Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in trickery nor distorting the word of God, but by the open proclamation of the truth commending ourselves to every person's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case **the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving** so that they will not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. **For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants on account of Jesus"** (2nd Cor. 4:1-5)

The scriptures warn that it is hard, even bordering on impossible to restore to faith those who having left it are thereby inoculated against it. (Heb 6:4-8). It is hard to soften hardened hearts and to restore sight to those who do not want to see. But hard is not same thing as impossible. And we may be assured that “whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (Jas 5:20)

Personal peace and prosperity will not survive death. But it is at that exact moment, that peace with God and spiritual prosperity take on eternal dimensions. Perhaps in the wisdom of God the choice between these is easier, when the message is not.

¹ “It’s as if a fire of secularization has devastated much of what, through the early 1960s, was a flourishing religious forest” (*Resilient Gods: Being Pro-Religious, Low Religious, or No Religious in Canada*, by Reginald Bibby, UBC Press, 2017)

2. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/21/leaving-christianity-religion-church-community/?wpisrc=nl_ideas

Note: a 2019 article by Pew Research identifies these trends in the United States of America as nation-wide. Link: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

THE JUSTICE AND AUTHORITY OF GOD

The Rebellion of Korah, Dathan, & Abiram

Written on: September 1, 2023

Article by: Chad Ramsey

Introduction

Although God does not always punish wickedness immediately, Scripture assures us justice will eventually be served. Making this point to the churches of Galatia, Paul wrote: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” (Galatians 6:7-8 NKJV). Sometimes justice is handed down in this life; sometimes it is not. In these instances, the wicked seem to prosper. Even so, Scripture promises: “the way of the unfaithful is hard” (Proverbs 13:15). Ultimately, however, God will “repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 1:6-8). God will see justice served sooner or later.

In Numbers 16, we find an occasion when justice was served quickly and punishment was appropriately doled out. Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the two hundred and fifty men who challenged the leadership position of Moses and the priestly work of Aaron, are afflicted in an obviously divine manner. As He did when Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses’s authority (cf. Numbers 12), God acted in a way that left little doubt about who He intended to be over His people. His actions were not covert. Rather, God caused the earth to open up and swallow the offending rebels and their families (Numbers 16:31-33).

Importantly, God also forced the Israelite nation to choose between Moses and his challengers. The people were first instructed to remove themselves from the offenders (Numbers 16:26). After doing so, Moses declared that God would make it clear that he had not taken the leadership position upon himself. Warning the people about the way God would punish Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Moses stated: “By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will” (verse 28). If anything, this account reveals that man has no right to challenge the authoritative plan of God. But if such does occur, punishment will undoubtedly follow. In this case, the severity of the punishment is striking. Regardless, God will not be mocked.

God's Message (Numbers 16:23-26)

Following Moses and Aaron's plea for God to have mercy upon the congregation and not punish the entire nation for the sins of a few (Numbers 16:22), the Lord instructed Moses to warn the people: "Get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram" (verse 24). Obviously, God intended to punish the guilty. But the language issued here is as much about choosing sides as it is about safety. The people had to make a choice. They could stand with Korah, Dathan and Abiram, or they could stand with Moses and Aaron. Adding drama to choice the people had to make is the Hebrew word Moses used to refer to their "tents." Instead of using the common word for a personal dwelling, Moses chose the word normally associated with the tabernacle—*miskan*. Explaining the possible importance of this choice, Ronald B. Allen observed: "We may wonder whether the term is not used sarcastically: the Lord has his *miskan*, and now these false claimants to the priesthood have their *miskan*" (Numbers 840).

Whether this was the intended use of this term, Israel was not to have any association with Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Making this clear, Moses, in the very presence of his challengers, declared: "Depart now from the tents of these wicked men! Touch nothing of theirs, lest you be consumed in all their sins" (Numbers 16:26). The meaning of this statement is abundantly clear. Israel was to have nothing to do with the rebels. To refrain from touching things belonging to them was to avoid being contaminated by their misdeeds (cf. Haggai 2:12-14). To ignore the warning and continue with Korah, Dathan and Abiram was to consent to their rebellious cause. This was unacceptable. Therefore, God instructed the people to openly declare their allegiance and face the consequences.

Moses's Test (Numbers 16:27-30)

Upon hearing the instructions of God, the people obeyed and separated themselves from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Numbers 16:27). For their part, Dathan and Abiram, who previously refused to meet with Moses (verse 12), "came out and stood at the door of their tents, with their wives, their sons, and their little children" (verse 28). Although the nation had chosen to remove itself from the side of the challengers, their family members did not relent in their support. It is possible, as Woods and Rogers acknowledge, that the phrase "came out and stood," which depicts the defiance of Dathan and Abiram and their families, "implies taking up arms (cf. 1 Samuel 17:4, 16)" (Leviticus-Numbers 281).

At this juncture, Moses proposed a test to reveal God's decision in this matter. He stated: "By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will. If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the Lord" (Numbers 16:28-30). The test involved the eventual fate of the rebellious individuals. An eventual natural or common death would indicate Moses was a presumptuous leader; an unusual death (presumably by immediate and

undeniable divine intervention) would indicate Moses was truly chosen by God—the very fact denied by Korah (verse 3) and Dathan and Abiram (verse 13).

God's Action (Numbers 16:31-35)

As Moses finished explaining the terms of the test to the people, God responded in an amazing, yet terrifying way. According to Numbers 16:31-32: “Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods.” Rather than allowing the opponents to continue to live until death came by natural causes, God expedited the process by consuming them all in one startling moment. “There is no mercy, no pleading, no help. The children, wives, and even toddlers died with their wicked fathers. It was the wiping out of a family. In this judgment we see that which was immediate, catastrophic, horrible, and complete. Yet there is something in it that is also satisfying: something of the honor of the Lord; of the servants he had named; of the purity of the camp; and, in a sense, of poetic justice” (Allen, *Numbers* 841).

Perhaps most startling is the description found in Numbers 16:33. Moses wrote: “So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly.” The term translated “pit” (NKJV) is elsewhere translated “Sheol” (ESV) or “grave” (NLT). Such a scene could hardly be forgotten! God did not simply punish the rebels, He demonstrated His great power in so doing. Those who were not swallowed by the earth—the 250 Levites who had joined with Korah (verses 2, 16-18)—were consumed with a fire sent from the Lord (verse 35), a fate that mirrored that of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3). Whether Korah was swallowed by the earth or burned with fire is debated. Passages that have bearing upon this question include Numbers 26:9-11 and Psalm 106:16-18. What is not debated, however, is whether Korah died.

Not surprisingly, the Israelites reacted to the scene of divine punishment with panic. Describing this, Moses wrote: “Then all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, ‘Lest the earth swallow us up also!’” (Numbers 16:34). Nevertheless, the power of God, and the position His appointed leaders occupied was obvious to all. It is no small matter to challenge God’s authority.

A Lesson for Today

Although some have questioned the severity of the punishment inflicted upon the families of the offenders in Numbers 16, we must remember that God is both completely just and righteous. His choice to destroy Dathan and Abiram along with their families was not cruel, for “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (Psalm 19:9). We would do well to remember that our just God sent Jesus to rescue us from punishment. This does not mean justice has been replaced by mercy. Instead, “in Christ both mercy and righteousness meet. In Christ the righteousness that Israel was called to is fulfilled and the wrath of God against sin is simultaneously expressed. God’s mercy and justice are seen and fulfilled in Christ” (Stubbs, *Numbers* 147). God remains

completely just today. At the same time, He is longsuffering with us (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus paid the price for our sins when He died upon the cross. We must obey Him!

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Living Sacrifices – Then and Now

Written on: September 1, 2023

Article by: Dave Knutson

Numbers 3

When God brought his people out of Egypt he kept a covenant that he had made with Abraham (Gen. 15:12-16). God had promised that an heir would come from Abraham's body and that his descendants would one day inherit the land of promise, after spending 400 years in Egypt. On the evening before Israel left Egypt, God sent an angel to kill all of the firstborn children and livestock in Egypt, but spared those belonging to Israel. The blood of the Passover lamb protected Israel's firstborn who then came to belong in perpetuity to the Lord.

"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the firstborn of every womb among the sons of Israel, among people and animals *alike*; it belongs to Me." (Ex 13:1-2). God went on to explain that it was the firstborn males that he had in mind. (Ex 13:12) "...you shall devote to the Lord every firstborn of a womb, and every firstborn offspring of an animal that you own; the males belong to the Lord".

The firstborn males were significant in ancient society for several reasons and enjoyed the rights of primogeniture. The firstborn son ordinarily received a double portion of their father's estate along with the trailing responsibility of providing for his father's household and its dependants. The firstborn also enjoyed leadership status and came to represent the family in legal and military matters¹. While it is not stated in so many words, the vesting of positions and responsibility in the male leader is similar to and perhaps rooted in Adam's place as the federal head of the human race from whom all others have descended.

The practice of primogeniture was in place prior to the law of Moses. It was a source of contention between Esau and Jacob who were twins. Esau was born first but exercised the option of selling his rights as firstborn to Jacob for a single meal. In a slightly different way, the rights of primogeniture came to rest upon Judah – since his three older brothers disqualified themselves from leadership – Reuben committed incest while



Simeon and Levi slaughtered an entire male population. Therefore this right was not automatically assigned by the father to the firstborn male in a family. Jacob also prophesied that the throne in Israel would be occupied by a descendant of Judah (Gen 49: 8-12)

So it was that when God spared the first born males at the **Passover** (both men and beasts) He added a new layer of significance to this practice. From that day onward, all male firstborn belonged to God. Firstborn males of both flocks and herds that were suitable for sacrifice were offered. But in place of sacrifice, firstborn male children were to be redeemed and returned to their families to serve as leaders².

Thus the Passover which signals God's redemption also acted to sanctify the firstborn as a special possession of the Lord.

Not long after the 'exodus', God brought Israel to mount Sinai to ratify . God then his covenant with them. While Moses was on the mountain receiving detailed instruction from God, the people rebelled by reverting to the idol worship of the Egyptians. In the aftermath, it was the Levites who responded when Moses called for faithful men to stand up for the Lord (Ex 32:26). As a tribe, they showed exceptional zeal for the purity of Israel. The result was that God elevated them to a place of service at the tabernacle – near to his presence. In the wilderness they did not have to commute to work as the families of the Levites camped closest to the Tabernacle on three sides, while the families of Moses and Aaron occupied the side where the entrance was.

In Numbers chapter three God initiated a new relationship between the firstborn whom He had redeemed at Passover and the Levites whom he had chosen at Sinai (Vs 11-13)

“Again the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Now, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the sons of Israel instead of every firstborn, the firstborn of the womb among the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall be Mine. For all the firstborn are Mine; on the day that I fatally struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, from the human *firstborn* to animals. They shall be Mine; I am the Lord.”

The special service at the tabernacle that God had in mind for the firstborn would from that time onward be rendered by the Levites. The Levites became substitute firstborn, which in a very real sense put all firstborn in their debt. We might also think of them as a vicarious assembly of the firstborn dedicated to spiritual service.

Moses describes the initiation of this practice in Numbers 3:14-50. All of the Levite males one month old and older were counted and a list made of their names. The same was done for the firstborn males. There were 22,000 Levites and 22,273 firstborn. One by one and name by name, each firstborn was replaced by a Levite. The substitution was individual and personal. The 273 firstborn whose number exceeded that of the Levites were redeemed at a price of 5 shekels each...with the price passed on to the family of Aaron.

Thus the Levites became substitute firstborn and served in the presence of God. In turn, each firstborn, each family's head had a personal representative ministering in the presence of the Lord and in their place. Each firstborn was in that sense, present before the Lord even while bodily absent.

Before the Levites could serve, they had to be cleansed and dedicated to the Lord. Moses describes this in Numbers 8: 9-19 this way:

“So you shall present the Levites in front of the tent of meeting. You shall also assemble the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, and present the Levites before the Lord; and ***the sons of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites***. Aaron then shall present the Levites before the Lord ***as a wave offering from the sons of Israel***, so that they may qualify to perform the service of the Lord. Now the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls; then you are to offer the one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering to the Lord, to make atonement for the Levites. And you shall have the Levites stand before Aaron and his sons so as to present them as a wave offering to the Lord”.

“So you shall single out the Levites from among the sons of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine. Then after that the Levites may go in to serve the tent of meeting. But you shall cleanse them and present them as ***a wave offering***; for they are exclusively given to Me from among the sons of Israel. I have taken them for Myself instead of the firstborn of every womb, the firstborn of all the sons of Israel. For every firstborn among the sons of Israel is Mine, among the people and among the animals; on the day that I fatally struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified them for Myself. But I have taken the Levites instead of every firstborn among the sons of Israel.

And I have given the Levites as ***a gift to Aaron and to his sons*** from among the sons of Israel, to perform the service of the sons of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement on behalf of the sons of Israel, so that there will be no affliction among the sons of Israel due to their approaching the sanctuary.”

There are several salient points in this passage.

- The first is that the people of Israel are those who are bringing and presenting the Levites to the Lord as their wave offering. The Levites are Israel's offering to the Lord.
- Israel laid their hands upon the Levites, personally identifying with those being offered and presenting them on their own behalf and as a replacement for themselves. Every family in Israel had a stake in this substitution.
- The wave offering was dedicatory. That which was offered was neither killed nor consumed. As an offering, the Levites yielded their value through a lifetime of service.
- God not only accepted this substitution, He insisted upon it.
- So it was, that representing all of Israel as substitute firstborn and belonging exclusively to the Lord that God in turn gifted them to the priesthood to assist in the functions and service of the Tabernacle.

- The Levites first had to be cleansed and qualified for service through sacrifices that were made on their behalf.
- As it was with the priests, the “Lord was their portion”. They were supported by Israel for their labour, receiving 90% of the tithe set aside for God’s work by the people of Israel.

In this way and at that time, the Levites in every sense, became **living sacrifices**. As a ‘type’, their place and function in Israel anticipates our own and our service to the Lord.

As the apostle Paul put it in Romans 12:1-2 –

“Therefore I urge you, brothers *and sisters*, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect”

Referring to this passage, we often hear the assertion that for Christians “all of life is worship”. But that is not what the Apostle Paul said. He calls Christians to give themselves entirely to the Lord as ‘living sacrifices’. Having been cleansed by the blood of Jesus and raised to walk in newness of life, ours is to be a life of service³. We are to give ourselves bodily to the Lord with minds transformed by the word of God and indwelt from above by the Spirit of God. Some of the service to which we are called is worship, but each moment of our lives belongs to the Lord.

Consider the language that Paul used in Romans 12:1-2. Our service to the Lord **as living sacrifices** is our service to the Lord. The word for service is not ‘proskuneo’ but ‘latreian’. Latreo denotes service rendered – usually in exchange for pay or a reward. In Old Testament contexts this often referred to service rendered by the priests and levites. Translators have added the word ‘**worship**’ to modify or indicate what kind of **service**, Paul is talking about. This is their opinion, and not what the apostle said. The text indicates that our service or latreia is logikos, meaning logical or reasonable. It is our life long response to God’s grace and goodness. Romans 12 however does not say that our service is equal to or limited to worship.

It is therefore simply not true as some assert, that “all of life is worship”.

As it was with the Levites, our lives are to be given in their entirety to the Lord’s service. Within such a life, there are periods of worship when we ‘draw near’ to our Lord and assemble in His name and His presence. Our worship when assembled is most often described by the Greek term proskuneo which denotes both prostration and obeisance – literally ‘to kiss toward’. But this word is not used in Romans 12:1-2.

We are to be “living sacrifices” – rendering our service to the Lord over a lifetime of faithfulness, which most certainly includes worship in his presence... and yet is so much more.

1 While not the same, primogeniture was related to the principle of corporate solidarity – wherein the identity or actions single member of a group might have repercussions for the entire assembly. This pertained both to positive or to negative consequences, to blessings as well as curses. For example, as descendants of Adam, we all face physical death. Yet as members of the family headed by Jesus, we look forward to the resurrection.

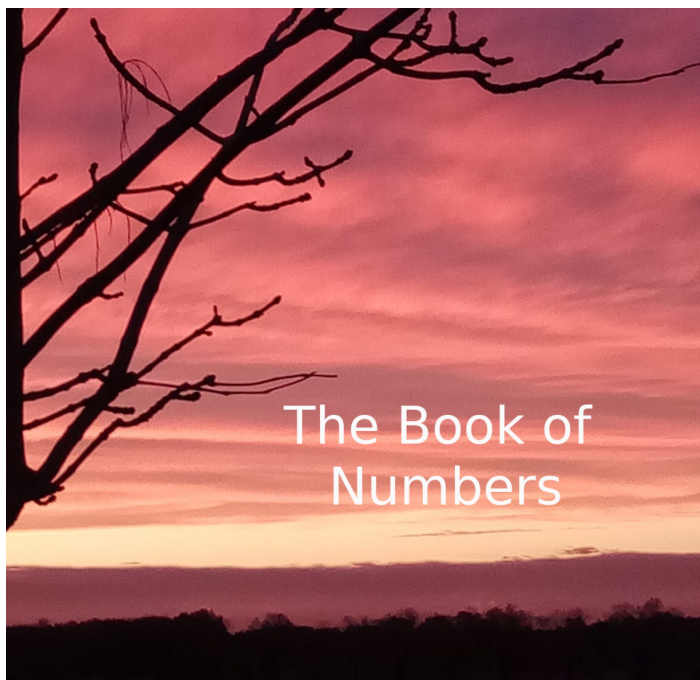
2 See Numbers 3:46-48. This option was not always taken. Hannah dedicated Samuel ‘to the lord’. No redemption price was paid. He became a lifetime servant of God in did so as a Nazarite.

3 Paul’s use of the word *latreia* signifies that the kind of service that he has in mind is priestly and sacrificial. As the lives of the priests and Levites were given to the Lord, so ours also are to be used up in God’s service.

Numbers: Organisation and Leadership

Written on: September 2, 2023
Article by: Thayer Salisbury

It is unfortunate that the Book of Numbers is so little studied today. Numbers is a book with a message much needed. It is thought of as a book with boring lists of names and numbers. There is much more to the book than this.



The **theme** of Numbers is organisation and leadership. This book reminds us that God's people need more than knowledge about spiritual matters. God's people also need leadership and organisation. Moses was expected to plan the movements of Israel, and we are expected to plan the work of the church today. In many places churches are failing because of a failure to plan. The church leaders know a lot of Bible verses. Most church leaders know what a person needs to do to accept God's gift of salvation. But without plans and organisation of the work, the church often fails.

God's People Need Organisation

Most modern countries take a census every ten years. Israel had no such practice. There was no regular time at which to count the Israelites. But twice during the wilderness wandering God ordered a census of the people. This counting (numbering) of the Israelites is how the book gets its name.

Census figures can be rather boring to read. But a census serves a useful purpose in any country or even in a business or a church. If leaders do not know how many people there are they cannot plan properly for roads, police posts, or any of the basic services of government. Moses was not concerned with building roads across the wilderness, but he did need to plan. The Israelites lived in tents and moved these with them as they travelled. Without careful planning, setting up even a single tent can be very confusing. The Israelites needed hundreds of tents. In the first chapter of Numbers the people are counted. In the second chapter instructions are given for how the people will camp. They are to be arranged around the tabernacle (their tent of worship) with nearly equal numbers on each side. Nothing like this could have been arranged without first counting the people.

The nation as a whole needed organisation, but each tribe also needed organisation. There are several places where the leaders of the various tribes are mentioned. This indicates that each tribe was organised in some way. The most carefully organised tribe in Israel was the tribe of Levi. Chapters three and four give directions for how the Levites were to do the work connected with the tabernacle. Each clan within Levi is assigned a certain portion of the work. The assigning of this work is done after the size of each clan has been decided by the census. Once again the purpose of the census is made clear and the importance of organising the work is emphasised. It is interesting to notice that the work of the tabernacle is more carefully organised than anything else in Israel. Today we usually see careful organisation in the military and in big businesses. Most people do not think that the organisation of church work is very important. But in Israel, it was the work of the priestly tribe that was most carefully organised.

Even their giving was carefully organised. Chapter seven tells of the offering made to the tabernacle. The people did not all rush forward at once to give their offering. Instead each tribe sent forward their leaders, one at a time, to give their offering.

The invasion of the land was also supposed to be organised. Moses sent men ahead to spy out the land so that they could plan how they would attack (chapter 13). Unfortunately some of these men were not faithful to the Lord and their bad report led to trouble. Still we can see that in sending spies Moses was trying to keep the people organised in what they were doing.

Organising people once does not mean that they will stay organised forever. As time goes by there is a need to reorganise. Chapter twenty-six tells us that another census was taken after the wilderness wanderings. By that time the numbers in the various tribes might have changed greatly, and there might be a need to change some of the plans. We should remember that plans do need to be reviewed from time to time.

God's People Need Leaders

To have organisation we must have leaders. No group of people can be organised without leaders. If official leaders do not exist then leaders will emerge over time. Israel had a clearly appointed leader. Moses was the leader the Lord had chosen for them. We must have leaders, yet whenever we have leaders there are dangers.

Jealousy

One danger is that people will be jealous of the leaders. This certainly was a problem in Israel. There are three chapters in Numbers about jealousy toward Israel's leaders. Miriam and Aaron, Moses' own sister and brother, challenged his authority (chapter 12). A man named Korah, together with some other men, challenged Moses' authority and the right of Aaron as priest (chapters 16 & 17). In both cases God responds with miracles that are designed to match the sin being rebuked. In chapter twelve Miriam seems to have been offended that Moses had a dark skinned wife, so God makes Miriam "a snow white leper." In chapter 16 Korah emphasises that all the people are "holy" (separate 16:3), so God orders that everyone "separate" themselves from Korah

and his friends (16:24ff). The Lord then opens up the earth to swallow those who had led this rebellion. He also sends fire to consume those of them who demanded to be made priests. The claim that leadership should be equal among all the tribes is answered by demanding that each tribal leader send his staff (the symbol of his authority). These are placed before the Lord and only the staff of Levi is shown to have any life in it (chapter 17).

Failure to Share the Leadership

A second danger is that the leaders will try to do too much. Instead of assigning tasks to other people, many leaders try to do much of the work themselves. This is one of the most common errors of leaders. Moses seems to make this mistake, possibly more than once. Numbers 11 tells us that Moses felt as if the whole burden of the people was on him. God orders him to call out leaders from each tribe and share the leadership with them. The Lord even places a spirit of leadership on these men so that they can help Moses lead the people.

Pride

Numbers 11 also introduces us to the third major danger of leadership, the danger of pride. Two of the leaders chosen to assist Moses are reported to be prophesying in the camp. They are not with Moses. They are exercising their God-given spirit apart from him. Joshua is upset about this. He does not want anyone working independently of Moses. On this occasion Moses is not proud. He is glad to know that the Lord is working through others. Throughout the early years of Moses' leadership, he seems to have avoided the danger of pride. Unfortunately, Moses did have a problem related to pride on another occasion.

Many Christians think that it was for striking the rock that Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land. The Bible never says that. Moses is never rebuked for striking the rock. He is rebuked for failing to give God the glory. It is what Moses says that is the difficulty, according to the scriptures. Moses says, "Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" (20:10). This implies that he and Aaron are the ones performing this miracle for the people. God does not say to Moses, "Why did you strike the rock instead of speaking to it?" God says, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." (20:12) The problem is a failure in faith leading to a failure to honour God. This is also what is emphasised in the other biblical accounts of this event. Numbers 27:14 emphasises the failure of Moses and Aaron to honour God. Psalm 106:33 makes it plain that it was the "rashly spoken words" of Moses that were the sin.

Moses' failure on this occasion is a warning to all leaders. Pride is a tremendous danger for those given leadership positions among God's people. It is not a danger that ever goes away. In fact this temptation may increase as we grow older and lead longer. We must always remember that God is working through us. It is not by our own strength that we lead. We must not take the glory for ourselves. We must always lead in a way that honours God.

Conclusion

The Book of Numbers is not like any other Bible book. It does not have the foundational teaching of Genesis or the careful explanation of salvation that we find in Romans. But this book has a place in our study. There is much that the church could learn from the Book of Numbers. Israel needed leadership and organisation. The church needs leadership and organisation. We should not neglect the study of Numbers.

¹ For more excellent insights on organisation and leadership in Numbers, see Thayer's very helpful book *God's Mission Begins: Vol 2: Leviticus – Deuteronomy*. Available as a Kindle Book at www.amazon.ca

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