

Through the Bible at 30,000 Feet  
**Numbers** | *Blessing in the Wilderness*  
North Center | September 26, 2022  
*Seth Porch*

Good morning, brothers and sisters. My name is Seth Porch. I've had the pleasure and privilege of knowing your pastor, Jeremiah, for the past four years as a fellow student at Bethlehem College and Seminary. I'm grateful that he's invited me to be here with you this morning.

I am here today with my family. My wife, D'Evan, and my two children, Elliot and Olivia.

Both my wife and I share a geographical connection with many of you! We both grew up in West Africa where our parents served as missionaries. We have spent many years living in the Ivory Coast, in Guinea, and in Senegal. I know that many of you are from Liberia. When I was a young boy my family went from Kankan, Guinea to Monrovia, Liberia to be at the ELWA mission hospital where my little sister was born. We were there for about six weeks. I have many fond memories from that time.

My wife and I are praying about returning to Africa. There is a new seminary in Yaoundé, Cameroon that is in need of professors. If the LORD wills, we are planning to go and help fill that need within the next few years.

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## **Sermon Introduction**

My task today is to walk with you through the book of Numbers. It is a long book, so we will be covering a lot of texts. But there's also a lot that we are going to leave out. Thank goodness Pastor Jeremiah is here and he will be able to answer *every question you might possibly have* about this book.

As we work through these texts, have your Bible out. There will be specific verses highlighted on the screen as we go.

## **Literary setting**

Let's do a brief review of where you've been so far in this series.

In **Genesis** we meet the God who is sovereign over the universe that He has made, and all that He does is good. He created humans to have a relationship with Him, and He gave us a mission to fill the earth with His image/glory. We rebelled. He responded with the promise to send a serpent-crushing, sin-conquering hero. He then chooses a people through whom that Hero seed would come, and then covenants Himself to them.

In **Exodus** we see the descendants of Abraham and Sarah as slaves in Egypt, calling out to God for deliverance (which is all part of his plan!). With a mighty hand and outstretched arm, God rescued them, bringing them out of captivity, displaying his power over the gods of Egypt. He leads them through the wilderness to the mountain of Sinai. There he meets with them and

affirms his purpose to bless the world through them, his people, Israel (Exod 19:3–6). They are a people set apart for himself to be a testimony among the nations of his holiness and righteousness (cf. 1 Pet 3:9–12).

In **Leviticus** God demonstrates that *he is holy*. He does this through the giving of laws. He also does it through judgment (the fiery punishment of two priests – Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron). If his people are to live with him in their midst, they are to be a holy people themselves. Yahweh is God over all, and he demands obedience from the people through whom he will fulfill his purpose for the world. AND he makes a way (through sacrifice, purification, laws, and the Tabernacle) for His chosen (yet sinful) people to have a relationship with a holy God.

This brings us to **Numbers**.

### **Book Structure and Overview**

Before looking at that book, I want to draw your attention back to two texts in Genesis.

#### **Genesis 12:1–3**

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. **And I will make of you a great nation,** and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

#### **Genesis 13:14–17**

The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, **for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.** I will make your **offspring as the dust of the earth,** so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through **the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.**”<sup>1</sup>

These are rich promises to Abram, and if you look carefully, you will see that the history of Israel and the whole history of redemption are really the history of God’s faithfulness to fulfill these promises...God at work keeping his word, bringing about the purpose for which he created the world.

The book of Numbers brings two aspects of these promises into special prominence: a **people** and a **land**.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: both promises brought together in Gen 15:1–21, along with the foretold slavery in Egypt (13), the Exodus (14) and destruction of the Amorites (16). Gen 15 also includes the ‘cutting’ of the covenant ceremony.

Gen 17:1–14 is a second ‘cutting’ ceremony in which Abram is renamed to Abraham (in light of God’s promises to make him ‘father of a multitude’) and he is given the sign of circumcision. Promises are given further detail: land, nations (note plural), and kings.

We could outline this book by these two promises:

**1. People and Land 1**

a. 1:1–46

b. 2:1–25:18

**2. People and Land 2**

a. 26:1–27:23

b. 28:1–36:13

**People and Land 1**

**Numbers 1:1–46** is a detailed census of the people of Israel. The number in verse 46 represents the able-bodied men who were able to go to war: **603,550!** Just think, that does not include their wives, children, or aging parents! Numbers 1:46 is very clear evidence that God is faithful to keep his word. The offspring of Abraham have indeed become a multitude!

**Numbers 2–25** are about this generation of Israelites. These chapters consist of laws that God gave them and two accounts of their journeys towards the Promised Land. But this whole generation dies in the wilderness because they failed to believe that God could conquer the Promised Land for them.

**People and Land 2**

**Numbers 26–27** give a detailed census of a new generation of Israelites (the population of the new generation is **601,730!**) and describe the commission that Moses gave to Joshua as the new leader of the people of Israel.

Then chapters **28–36** include more laws for the people, the defeat of the nation of Midian, and the beginning of the inheritance of the Promised Land.

This story, though it is full of hardship, reveals that God never ceases to remain faithful to his promises. Despite the ongoing rebellion of Israel, despite their hardness of heart, despite their lack of faith in God's ability to keep his word, despite how they frequently forgot his past provision, he does not let his people go.

And because of his faithfulness there is great hope that God will bless them and that through them he will bless the whole earth.

**Walk Through of Numbers**

So let's begin walking through this book.

It opens at Mt. Sinai with the people encamped around the tabernacle.

### **Num 2:1-2**

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers’ houses. They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side.”

So we get this very real picture of what Israel was called to be: a people who were wholly dedicated to God. The very layout of their camp was a visual reminder to them that they were a holy nation, a treasured possession of God. The tabernacle was in the center and they camped all around it. Note fulfillment of...

### **Exod 29:45**

I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God.

After the description of the camp there’s a long section of different laws about being a people set apart for God. It is in the midst of these chapters, after God has rescued his people, revealed himself to them, made his dwelling among them, and is preparing them to inherit the Promised Land, that we get one of the most significant blessings in the entire Bible. Look with me at

### **Num 6:22-27**

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

‘The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift his countenance upon you and give you peace.’

So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

This is a restoration of all that was lost in the Garden. Yahweh, the LORD, the God who saves, brings his people into his presence and stamps them with his name (“You are mine!” “I will be your God!”). This is a gracious restoration of the peace between God and man that man so desperately longs for, whether they recognize it or not.

It is an act of reclaiming. What man cast aside in the Garden, God takes initiative to restore.

Israel does not actually retain this. As soon as they begin marching from Sinai toward the Promised Land they rebel against God. But we have here an anticipation of what God will finally bring about in the new heavens and earth. This is pointing us forward in hope that God will be faithful to actually accomplish his purpose, which is that his redeemed people will dwell in his presence forever and see him face to face.

### **Rev 21:3–4**

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

### **Rev 22:3–4**

No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

This was the blessing that so many in faithless Israel did not recognize. They were looking towards the provision of a land flowing with abundance. That was right because God promised it to them. But the promise was never just about the land. It was never just about the good things that God might do for them. The promise was about God himself. The promise was for right relationship, restoration of the intimacy between man and God that sin had cut through like a meat cleaver.

Do you see that if you are merely content with the material blessings God has given you, maybe a lot, maybe a little, I don’t know, then you are missing the point. God is kind to shower us with many undeserved blessings. But the point of those blessings is to point us to him.

And if you have him, if by faith you have received Christ, then whether or not you receive the “land” in this life doesn’t matter. You already have what you were designed for: relationship with God. And you are looking forward to the inheritance yet to come (cf. **Heb 11:13–16**). Oh church, do not mistake God’s blessings for God himself.

Well, Israel traveled north from Sinai. In **Numbers 13** they arrived at the southern end of the Promised Land. They sent spies into to scope out the land and bring back a report. Those spies came back and said that it was a wonderful land but that there were large, fortified cities and strong, fearsome people.

So, Israel rebelled against God.

Here’s what they said:

### **Num 14:2b–3, 4b**

“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?...Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

They had forgotten that God had just (I mean, like two or three years earlier) single-handedly wiped out the most powerful nation on earth without them lifting a finger. He had brought plagues on Egypt, destroying the nation’s might, then he gave all the Egyptians’ goods to his

people, and then he wiped out their army by causing an entire sea to crash down on them. O Israel, do you think it might just be possible that God do something like that again?!

**Application:** I wonder, are we ever this forgetful? One of the lessons we learn in this book from the people of Israel is how can we exercise faith day by day...we do it by remembering how God has worked in the past and trusting that he will continue to work for our good.

I remember several years ago when my wife and I were first married. Our car was totaled, and we didn't have the money to buy another one. I was driving back from work on day asking God to provide somehow for our big need. When I got home, I found two letters in our mailbox, each containing checks for \$1,000! The next day we got a phone call from the insurance company, and they had decided to pay out to us the full value of our car! We had more than enough to get another vehicle. That event has stuck with me throughout the years. Often, when I begin to wonder how God will possibly meet our needs, I remember how he worked in the past, and it helps me to trust that he can do it again.

He shows us that he works this way. He also tells us that he works this way.

- Has he promised that he will take care of your needs?
  - **Yes!** Jesus said, “Don’t be anxious, saying ‘what shall we eat?’ or ‘what shall we drink?’ or ‘what shall we wear?’...your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.” (**Matt 6:31–32**)
- Has he promised that he will keep you?
  - **Yes!** Jesus said, “I know my sheep...I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” (**John 10:27–28**)
- Has he promised that he will be with you?
  - **Yes!** God said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (**Heb 13:5; cf. Josh 1:5**) and Jesus told the disciples, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (**Matt 28:20**).
- Has he promised that you will never walk through a difficult wilderness, like the Israelites?
  - **No!** In fact, he’s the promised *the opposite*! Jesus said, “In this world, *you will* have tribulation.” You *will* have it. There *will be many hard moments in life*. Is that cause for despair? Is that enough cause to say, ‘That’s it! Let’s go back to slavery in Egypt!’ No! “Take heart,” says Jesus. Be of good courage, Israel. Don’t be dismayed, Christian. “Take heart, I have overcome the world.” (**John 16:33**)

I wonder what you might be experiencing in life right now. I don’t know. Maybe it was a hard week at work. Maybe you’re out of work and you don’t know what’s about to happen. Maybe your experiencing difficulty in relationships (your children, with your spouse, with your parents, your friends?). Maybe you went to the doctor cause you have a little cough, and you discover that you have lung cancer. Maybe you’re sitting on top of a pile of broken dreams and hopes, wondering what in the world happened to your life, and is God really that good?

He is leading you to the Promised Land. Like Israel, you have been bought by him from slavery. He has taken his law and given it to you, writing it on your very hearts. He has commanded you to be a witness, a light, among the nations. And he has promised that, on your journey, you are not alone.

I'm telling you, the journey may not be glorious. You might have to eat manna for 40 years. You might not ever get that job you were hoping for. You might not be healed from your cancer.

But God has put his stamp on you. He's said, "You are mine. I will never, never leave you. I will never, ever forsake you."

**Isaiah 43:2–3a**

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

And through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you;

When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Why?

For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Let's continue the story...

In **Numbers 14** God responds to his people's rebellion. Chapters 13-14 closely parallel the incident of the Golden Calf in **Exodus 32–33**. The people rebel, God says that he will destroy them and rebuild the nation through Moses's line, Moses intercedes with God on behalf of the people, and God forgives. In **Numbers 14** Moses actually reminds God of that incident. He says,

**Num 14:17–19**

And now, please let the power of the LORD be great as you have promised, saying, 'The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and fourth generation.' Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now."

God does answer Moses's prayer, but he condemns that generation to the wilderness and says that they have lost the gift of the Promised Land because of their unbelief and rebellion.

This "wilderness generation" is a rebellious group of people. Between the time they left Sinai to the time that they had passed away (**Numbers 10:11–25:18**), there are twelve recorded instances of rebellion and punishment.

What is amazing is that God does not wipe them all out in the desert.

The second census in **Numbers 26** is a testimony to God's mercy and steadfast love. He has rebuilt his fallen people and is preparing a new generation to receive the promised inheritance.

That census comes after a surprising reaffirmation of his faithfulness through an unlikely source. **Numbers 22–24** tell the story of Balak, king of the Midianites, and his attempts to place a curse on the people of Israel. He summoned a pagan prophet named Balaam to come and curse Israel. Although God does speak through Balaam, he is not an upright man! He actually proves to be more ungodly than his donkey!

Balaam speaks four prophecies over Israel. Each time Balak, the king, is upset with him because instead of cursing Israel, he blesses them! In the first prophecy (or oracle), Balaam declares that Israel has received God's blessing (**23:8**), and Balak gets mad that he blessed them. In the second, Balaam says that God is with Israel and will raise up a king from the nation (**23:21**). The king responds by asking to just stop talking. But Balaam goes on! In the third prophecy, Balaam compares Israel to the Garden of Eden and prophecies that Israel will destroy its enemies (**24:5–8**). After that the king responds with anger. But Balaam has one final word. He says,

**Num 24:17**

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

The star and the scepter are symbols of a king who would rise up in the future to crush the foes of Israel. This promise does two things for us:

**First**, it points us back to **Genesis 12**. The whole saga of Balak and Balaam illustrate God's words to Abram that those who cursed him (or, at least tried to), would themselves be cursed (**Gen 12:3**). Those who were a part of Abraham's family had received God's blessing. Neither Balak nor Balaam could change that fact. In Numbers 31, the curse comes true. Israel wiped out the Midianites, along with Balaam, in battle.

That which was true for Israel is true for us today as well. Jesus told his disciples that when other people cursed them, reviled them, told lies about them, because of their identification with Jesus, they were blessed. Those whom God chooses to bless cannot be cursed by the world. Oh, sure, your family may turn against you. You might lose your job. You may end up in prison. In fact, you could even lose your life. "Rejoice," says Jesus, "and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven" (**Matt 5:12**).

**Second**, it points us forward to a coming king. One day, a king would arise in Israel and crush his enemies. This certainly points us toward David. But Christ is the final fulfillment. He is the Hero who will finally crush all enemies of the people of God. He is the one who will exercise final and full dominion over every nation on earth. He has defeated our great enemy, he has overcome the world, and we are waiting for his return, when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord over all (**Phil 2:11**).



It is this King, this Hero, who came and purchased for us the blessing that Numbers anticipates. When God's face was against us to wipe us out for our rebellion, he interceded and said, 'Pour out your wrath on me.' By his blood he purchased us. And now God sets his seal upon and says, 'You are my people. I am for you. I am with you. Come, child, and be at peace.'

### **Conclusion**

To summarize,

In Numbers, God demonstrates his faithfulness to a rebellious people as he leads them toward the fulfillment of his promises to Abraham, teaches them that he is their great hope, and points them toward the reign of a future King who will subdue their enemies.

### **Song: The Blessing**

Church, it is in Christ that we receive this blessing. It is because he has conquered sin and death and Satan that we have peace with God. It is because he has poured out his Spirit into our hearts that we can come before the God of all creation and say, 'Abba, Father.' This is the peace for which we long.

And if you do not know that peace today, then I invite you to receive it. You will not be turned away.

Church, receive this blessing that is yours in Christ:

The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

### **Chorus of the Blessing**