

# NUMBERS

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THE BOOK OF WANDERINGS

# INTRODUCTION

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Only a year has passed since the exodus from Egypt when the Book of Numbers opens. Numbers, the book of divine discipline, shows the painful consequences of unbelief and irresponsible decisions on the part of God's chosen people. Numbers begins with the old generation (chs. 1–12), moves through a tragic transition period (chs. 13–20) and ends with the new generation (chs. 21–36) poised at the doorstep to the land of Canaan. The book contains the records of two generations, two censuses, and two sets of instructions for enjoying the land of promise. God's love is kind, but it can also be severe. His people must learn they can move forward only as they trust and depend on Him.

# INTRODUCTION CONT...

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Numbers is the book of wanderings. It takes its name from the two numberings of the Israelites—the first at Mount Sinai and the second on the plains of Moab. Most of the book, however, describes Israel's experiences as they wander in the wilderness. The lesson of Numbers is clear.

While it may be necessary to pass through wilderness experiences, one does not have to live there. For Israel, an eleven-day journey became a forty-year agony.

# INTRODUCTION CONT...

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The title of Numbers comes from the first word in the Hebrew text, *Wayyedabber*, “And He Said.” Jewish writings, however, usually refer to it by the fifth Hebrew word in 1:1, *Bemidbar*, “In the Wilderness,” which more nearly indicates the content of the book. The Greek title in the Septuagint is *Arithmoi*, “Numbers.” The Latin Vulgate followed this title and translated it *Liber Numeri*, “Book of Numbers.” These titles are based on the two numberings: the generation of Exodus (1) and the generation that grew up in the wilderness and conquered Canaan (26). Numbers has also been called the “Book of the Journeyings,” the “Book of the Murmurings,” and the “Fourth Book of Moses.”

# THEME & PURPOSE

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The theme of Numbers is the consequence of disbelief and disobedience to the holy God. The Lord disciplined His people but remained faithful to His covenant promises in spite of their fickleness. Numbers displays the patience, holiness, justice, mercy, and sovereignty of God toward His people. It teaches that there are no shortcuts to His blessings—He uses trials and tests for specific purposes.

# THEME & PURPOSE CONT...

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Numbers was written to trace the history of Israel's wanderings from Sinai to Moab. But the fact that there is almost no record of the thirty-eight years of wandering shows that Numbers is a very thematic history. It selects those events that are important to the development of God's redemptive program. The sins of the first generation were written as a reminder and a warning to the second generation. They must implicitly trust God before they can possess the Land of Blessing.

# BACKGROUND & SETTING

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Most of the events of the book are set “in the wilderness.” The word “wilderness” is used forty-eight times in Numbers. This term refers to land that contains little vegetation or trees, and because of a scarcity of rainfall, it cannot be cultivated. This land is best used for tending flocks of animals. In 1:1–10:10, Israel encamped in “the wilderness in Sinai.” It was at Sinai that the Lord had entered into the Mosaic Covenant with them (Ex. 19–24). From 10:11–12:16, Israel traveled from Sinai to Kadesh. In 13:1–20:13, the events took place in and around Kadesh, which was located in “the wilderness of Paran” (12:16; 13:3, 26), “the wilderness of Zin” (13:21; 20:1). From 20:14–22:1, Israel traveled from Kadesh to the “plains of Moab.” All the events of 22:2–36:13 occurred while Israel was encamped in the plain to the north of Moab. That plain was a flat and fertile piece of land in the middle of the wasteland (21:20; 23:28; 24:1).

# CHRIST IN NUMBERS

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Perhaps the clearest portrait of Christ in Numbers is the bronze serpent on the stake, a picture of the Crucifixion (21:4–9): “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:14). The rock that quenches the thirst of the multitudes is also a type of Christ: “they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). The daily manna pictures the Bread of Life who later comes down from heaven (John 6:31–3).



## CHRIST IN NUMBERS CONT...

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Balaam foresees the rulership of Christ: “I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel” (24:17). The guidance and presence of Christ is seen in the pillar of cloud and fire, and the sinner’s refuge in Christ may be seen in the six cities of refuge. The red heifer sacrifice (19) is also considered a type of Christ.

# SURVEY OF NUMBERS

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Israel as a nation is in its infancy at the outset of this book, only thirteen months after the Exodus from Egypt. In Numbers, the book of divine discipline, it becomes necessary for the nation to go through the painful process of testing and maturation. God must teach His people the consequences of irresponsible decisions. The forty years of wilderness experience transforms them from a rabble of ex-slaves into a nation ready to take the Promised Land. Numbers begins with the old generation (1:1–10:10), moves through a tragic transitional period (10:11–25:18), and ends with the new generation (26–36) at the doorway to the land of Canaan.

# SURVEY OF NUMBERS CONT...

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***The Old Generation (1:1–10:10):*** The generation that witnessed God's miraculous acts of deliverance and preservation receives further direction from God while they are still at the foot of Mount Sinai (1:1–10:10). God's instructions are very explicit, reaching every aspect of their lives. He is the Author of order, not confusion; and this is seen in the way He organizes the people around the tabernacle. Turning from the outward conditions of the camp (1–4) to the inward conditions (5–10), Numbers describes the spiritual preparation of the people.

# SURVEY OF NUMBERS CONT...

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***The Tragic Transition (10:11–25:18)***: Israel follows God step by step until Canaan is in sight. Then in the crucial moment at Kadesh they draw back in unbelief. Their murmurings had already become incessant, “Now *when* the people complained, it displeased the Lord; for the Lord heard *it*” (11:1). But their unbelief after sending out the twelve spies at Kadesh-barnea is something God will not tolerate. Their rebellion at Kadesh marks the pivotal point of the book. The generation of the Exodus will not be the generation of the conquest.

Unbelief brings discipline and hinders God’s blessing. The old generation is doomed to literally kill time for forty years of wilderness wanderings—one year for every day spent by the twelve spies in inspecting the land. They are judged by disinheritance and death as their journey changes from one of anticipation to one of aimlessness. Only Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who believed God, enter Canaan. Almost nothing is recorded about these transitional years.

# SURVEY OF NUMBERS CONT...

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***The New Generation (21–36):*** When the transition to the new generation is complete, the people move to the plains of Moab, directly east of the Promised Land (22:1). Before they can enter the land they must wait until all is ready. Here they receive new instructions, a new census is taken, Joshua is appointed as Moses' successor, and some of the people settle in the Transjordan.

Numbers records two generations (1–14; 21–36), two numberings (1; 26), two journeyings (10–14; 21–27), and two sets of instructions (5–9; 28–36).

It illustrates both the kindness and severity of God (Rom. 11:22) and teaches that God's people can move forward only as they trust and depend on Him.

# KEYS TO NUMBERS

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## ***Key Word: Wanderings***

***Key Verses (14:22–23; 20:12)***—“Because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it” (14:22–23).

“Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them’ ” (20:12).

## KEYS TO NUMBERS CONT...

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***Key Chapter (14)***—The critical turning point of Numbers may be seen in chapter 14 when Israel rejects God by refusing to go up and conquer the Promised Land. God judges Israel “according to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, *namely* forty years, and you shall know My rejection” (14:34).

# KEY WORDS IN NUMBERS

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**Sacrifice:** Hebrew *zebach*—6:17; 7:17, 29, 47, 59, 77; 15:3, 5, 8—from a verb meaning “to slaughter for an offering.” According to the law of Moses, a priest would offer sacrifices on behalf of a worshiper by burning them on the altar (Ex. 20:24). Sacrifices could either be grain offerings (the first fruits of the harvest) or animal sacrifices. Animal sacrifices under the law served one primary function—to cover or atone for sin (Lev. 22:21; Heb. 9:22). The sin of an individual was symbolically transferred to the sacrificed animal, thereby providing a temporary substitutionary atonement that had to be repeated annually because it only partially dealt with sin (Heb. 10:4). Ultimately, all sacrifices in the OT point forward to and are types of the final, all-sufficient sacrifice made by Christ (Is. 53; 1 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 9:10).



# KEY WORDS IN NUMBERS

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**Anointed:** Hebrew *mashach*—3:3; 6:15; 7:1, 10, 84, 88; 35:25—a verb meaning “to wet or dab a person with olive oil.” Kin., priests, and prophets were anointed at the beginning of their service (8:12; 16:32; 2 Samuel 2:4; 5:3; 1 Kin. 19:15, 16). This ritual identified a person or object as set apart for God’s special purposes. During the Exodus, many holy objects were anointed, including the tabernacle itself. Anointing oil was an exquisite and expensive blend of oil and spices (7:1). This special oil symbolized the consecration of the tabernacle and its furnishings to God.

# KEY WORDS IN NUMBERS

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**Vow:** Hebrew *neder*—6:2, 21; 15:3; 21:2; 30:2–3, 9, 13—a vow.

A vow to God is a voluntary commitment to do something that pleases Him or to abstain from certain practices to demonstrate devotion to Him. A vivid example of a vow in the OT is the Nazirite vow (6:1–21). Scripture admonishes the believer against making rash vows, since they are made before God, the righteous and holy Judge (Eccles. 5:4). The reason for the warning is that a vow made to Him is binding and must be fulfilled.

# KEY WORDS IN NUMBERS

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**Elders:** Hebrew *zaqen*—11:16, 24, 25, 30; 16:25; 22:4, 7—a word that means “aged” or “old.” In the OT, the word *elder* refers to either an aged, feeble person (Gen. 44:20; Job 42:17) or to a mature person who had authority within the Israelite community (Ex. 3:16; Josh. 8:33). Elders could serve as judges (Ex. 18:12), advisers (Ezek. 7:26), and ruling officials (Deut. 19:12; Ruth 4:2). Their position was one of great honor (Prov. 31:23; Is. 9:15). In addition to age (Hebrew tradition states that an elder had to be a man at least fifty years of age), an elder had to demonstrate his maturity by fearing God, being truthful, and not coveting (Ex. 18:21).

# KEY PEOPLE IN NUMBERS

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- **Moses**—great prophet and leader who acted as God’s mouthpiece to explain His Law to Israel (1:1, 19, 48; 5:1, 4, 5, 11—and over two hundred other references)
- **Aaron**—Moses’ brother and first high priest of Israel (1:3, 17, 44; 2:1; 3:1–10; 12:1–5; 20:23–29)
- **Miriam**—sister to Moses and Aaron, also songwriter and prophetess; stricken with leprosy because of jealousy toward Moses (12; 20:1; 26:59)
- **Joshua**—Moses’ successor as leader of Israel; one of the only two people to see both the Exodus from Egypt and the Promised Land (11:28; 13; 14; 26:65; 27:15–23; 32:11, 12, 28; 34:17)

# KEY PEOPLE IN NUMBERS

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- **Caleb**—one of the men sent to scout Canaan; faithful to God in his desire to conquer the land; one of the only two people to see both the Exodus from Egypt and the Promised Land (13–14; 26:65; 32:12; 34:19)
- **Eleazar**—son of Aaron who succeeded him as high priest of Israel (3:1–4; 4:16; 16:36–40; 20:25–29; 26:1–4, 63; 27:2, 15–23; 32:2; 34:17)
- **Korah**—Levite who assisted in the Tabernacle; killed because of his rebellion against the Lord (16:1–40; 26:9)
- **Balaam**—prophet and sorcerer who halfheartedly obeyed God; attempted to lead Israel into idol worship (22:1–24:25; 31:7, 8, 16)

# KEY DOCTRINES IN NUMBERS

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- **Rebellion against God**—resulted from Israel’s coupling with heathen nations (14:26–38; Ex. 34:6, 7; Josh. 24:19; Ps. 32:1–7; Hos. 10:9, 10; 2 Thess. 2:3; Jude 1:14, 15)
- **Inheritance of the land**—God secured the Promised Land for His people (16:14; 26:52–56; Lev. 14:34; 1 Chr. 28:8; Ezra 9:10–12; Ps. 16:5, 6; Joel 3:2; Col. 1:11, 12; 1 Pet. 1:4)
- **Divine authority given to Moses**—Moses spoke the words of God and led Israel (1:1; 7:89; 12:6–8). God also gave authority to others of His prophets (Jer. 5:12, 13; 1 Cor. 1:10) and to Jesus (Matt. 2:9; 9:6; Mark 6:12; Luke 10:22)
- **Israel’s sin and judgment from the Lord**—God does not have favorites; Israel’s sin demanded punishment (11:1, 10, 33; 12:9; 14:18; 25:3, 4; 32:10, 13, 14; Lev. 10:2; Deut. 9:22; 2 Kin. 1:12; Ps. 78:21; 106:15; Jon. 4:2; John 3:18, 19; Rom. 5:9; 1 John 4:17, 18; Rev. 20:11–15)

# KEY DOCTRINES IN NUMBERS

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- **Faithfulness of God to His covenant**—when God's people are unfaithful, God remains faithful (15:2; 26:52–56; 27:12; 33:50–56; 34:1–29; Josh. 11:23; 14:1)

# GOD'S CHARACTER IN NUMBERS

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- **God is long-suffering**—14:18
- **God is merciful**—14:18
- **God is provident**—26:65
- **God is true**—23:19
- **God is wrathful**—11:1, 33; 12:9–10; 14:37, 40–45; 16:31, 35; 21:6; 25:9; 32:14