

Bible Overview: 6 “In the Wilderness” (Numbers)

Context:

Numbers covers the period of time between the Exodus and entry into the Promised Land (Joshua).

It describes life in between:

- God’s great act of Salvation
- The Fulfilment of God’s act of Salvation
- Promise of God’s continuing presence with them

They live in the ‘in-between times’, the time of the ‘now and not yet’.

They face 3 (at least) temptations:

1) Looking back with _____

2) Looking forward with _____

3) Living now with _____

Overview of the Book:

Starts in the wilderness

Ends in the wilderness

Starts on the brink of the Promised Land being counted for ‘holy war’ 1:1-46

“All the Israelites twenty years old or more who were able to serve in Israel’s army were counted...the total number was 603,550” 1:46

Ends still on the brink of the Promised Land being counted for ‘holy war’ 26:1-51

“Take a census of men twenty years old or more....the total number of the men of Israel was 601,730” 26:2,51

The book covers 40 years and the life of one generation and the beginning of a new (second generation) – it is the story of 2 generations.

1-25 – 1st generation – characterised by unbelief, rebellion, despair and death
27-36 – 2nd generation – characterised by faith and life – esp 'Zelophehad's daughters – chapters 27 and 36 – women of faith who typify new generation (see later)

1:1-10:10 Israel at Mt Sinai preparing to enter the Land
(Law giving at Sinai)

10:11-12:16 Marching from Sinai to Kadesh

13:1-19:22 Forty Years near Kadesh
(Law giving at Kadesh)

20:1-21:35 Marching from Kadesh to Plains of Moab

22:1-36:13 Israel in the Plains of Moab
(Law giving on the Plains of Moab)

Snapshots in Numbers:

1) Constant complaining and opposition to Moses

By 14:22 – 10 significant times of complaint

Longing to be back in Egypt

"If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic" 11:4-5

"If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword" 14:2-3

What is the root problem being expressed here? _____

Chapter 12 Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses

"Hasn't her also spoken through us? And the Lord heard this?" v2 (Moses then intercedes for Miriam)

Chapter 14 The people reject Moses

"We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt" v4 (Moses then intercedes for them)

Chapter 16 Group of 250 led by Korah

"You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" v4

*Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land **flowing with milk and honey** to kill us in the desert? And now you want to lord it over us?"* v13 (Moses then intercedes for them 16:22, 46)

Moses understands the issue to be – is he God's appointed leader or not

"This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that is was not my idea" v28

"We don't want this man to be our king" Luke 19:14

"Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing"
Luke 23:34

Who/what is the equivalent of Moses today?

2) Spying out the Land: Chapters 13-14

12 spies explore the Land, see the same thing but different response:

"We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are very powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large... we can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are". And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored.....That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud" 13:27-28,31-32, 14:1

"Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, " We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it" 13:30

What accounts for the different response to the same thing?

*"Not one of them will ever see the land **I promised on oath to their forefathers**. No-one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to" 14:23-24*

3) Moses and the Rock

Exodus 17:

What is the accusation made against Moses? How strong the opposition? V2-4

What does the 'staff' of Moses represent? Eg Exodus 10:12-13

Moses is told to take some of the elders with him and go to the rock. The elders were the leaders in Israel responsible for leading/governing/exercising authority over the people.

What is happening here?

God tells Moses that he will stand before him by the rock.

Who is the 'dock' here?

What is Moses commanded to do?

What happens when he does?

Read John 4:13-14, 7:37-38, 19:34 1 Cor 10:4

This incident is crucial to understanding why it is that Moses is not allowed to enter the Promised Land for a seemingly insignificant act.

*"Take the staff and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. **Speak to that rock** before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so that they and their livestock can drink...Moses said to them, "Listen, **you rebels** must **we bring you water** out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and **struck the rock twice with his staff**" Numbers 20:7-8,10-11*

"Because you did not trust me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them" v12

Moses sets himself up as their condemning judge, when God is intent on showing mercy.

Moses sets himself up as their deliverer not the Lord.

It is one thing to strike God when he instructs you to do so; quite another to strike him twice on your own authority. "Moses' act was thus nothing short of a direct assault on God himself" (Numbers: commentary by Iain Duguid)

4) The Bronze Snake Numbers 21:4-9 Group Discussion

What do the people do?

What is God's response?

Again Moses intercedes for the people
What does God instruct him to do?

What is the significance of what Moses puts on the pole?

How are the people healed? How are they not healed?!

Read John 3:14-15 – why does Jesus refer back to this incident? What is the point/connection that he is making?

How are we saved? How are we not saved?!

4) Death of the High Priest

When someone has accidentally killed someone they may flee to a 'city of refuge', where he is to be allowed to stay unharmed.

"He must stay there until the death of the high priest, who was anointed with holy oil" 35:25

"The accused must stay in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest; only after the death of the high priest may he return to his own property" 35:28

"When the High Priest dies, the blood he shed on the land is cleansed and he may return home" (A House for My Name: Leithart p105)

But in the book of Numbers – the dying of 1st generation in the wilderness, includes the death of Aaron, the high priest. Upon his death (Numbers 20), the second, new generation rises ready to enter the Land, their inheritance. It is after the death of Aaron, that Israel wins its first victory over the Canaanites (Numbers 21).

Through the death of the Great High Priest – Jesus, his people may now enter into their inheritance, and return 'home'.

"In my Father's house there are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am" John 14:2-4

5) The Daughters of Zelophehad Ladies of Faith

Numbers 27-36 starts the story of the next generation, it begins and ends with Zelophehad's daughters. They request an inheritance in Numbers 27

"Our father died in the desert... and left no sons. Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father's relatives" 27:3-4

Under traditional rules, daughters did not inherit from their father. The Father would provide a dowry for them when they were married but his land and other possessions were divided among his sons. If he had no sons, his estate would pass to his nearest relative.

- Why does this matter to Zelophehad's daughters?
- What is so significant about their request?

This is also the last story with which the book of Numbers concludes.

Numbers - Story of 2 Generations:

- A generation of unbelief that leads to death
- A generation of faith that will lead to life.