

# Names, Not Numbers

Based on Numbers 1:1-19, 44-46 | In the Wilderness: A Fall Series in Numbers (1)

"Take a census of the whole Israelite community... listing every man by name, one by one." — Numbers 1:2

## SERMON SUMMARY

This sermon opened a new fall series in the book of Numbers — what the preacher cheerfully called the perfect combination of an obscure text and math. Few of us have ever done a Bible study, heard a sermon series, or returned in personal devotions to Numbers. It's a fair question what spiritual value there is today in learning that several thousand years ago there were 46,500 Reubenites. Even an early church father, Origen, warned that a reader of Numbers might judge there is nothing in it to remedy his weakness or benefit his soul; a modern scholar called most of it dull, hard to understand, and apparently irrelevant. So why study it?

### Good News, Bad News — and Why We're Here

The good news: Numbers is a fascinating book — supernatural food from heaven, ground that swallows people, espionage and warfare, a talking donkey, giants, water from a rock, prophecy from a pagan. The bad news: all of that is chapters 11 and following. This fall the series covers only the first ten chapters — no miracles, no movement, just three weeks in the life of God's people. Why spend a whole fall on three weeks?

The sermon gave three reasons. First, theological: all Scripture is God-breathed and useful (2 Timothy 3:16). We come to church because we want to hear God speak — and in Numbers we hold a living part of God's word that many of us have never listened to, a fresh chance to hear a new word. Second, moral formation: in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul points the morally-confused Corinthians back to this wilderness generation, saying "these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us... so if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." Third, we need Christ: in Luke 24, the risen Jesus, "beginning with Moses," explained from the books of Moses (including Numbers) what the Scriptures said about himself. Numbers is where Jesus begins to describe himself — and Paul says the rock that gave the wilderness generation water "was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus was with them in the wilderness, even as he is with us.

**2 Timothy 3:16** "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

### Everyone Has Always Been Counting

The sermon set the scene with the origin of numbers themselves. Every ancient civilization developed a number system because everyone had to count — first livestock (once you passed ten goats you needed a way to track them), then, crucially, people. Censuses go back to Babylon around 3800 BC, Egypt building the pyramids, Persia, and Rome (the census under Quirinius that sits at the edge of the Christmas story). The very word "census" comes from the Latin. And the book of Numbers is a book of censuses — two of them, one of the first generation (chapter 1) and one of the second (chapter 26). The Greek name Arithmoi gives us "arithmetic"; the Latin Numeri gives us "Numbers."

But that name, the sermon noted, isn't the deepest one. The Hebrew name comes from the book's opening words: Bemidbar — "in the wilderness." Because Numbers happens in the wilderness, the space between Egypt and the promised land, between deliverance accomplished and deliverance finished. And that is exactly why it speaks to us: we too live in between — between the cross and the consummation, between a victory

won and a victory realized, between freedom from sin and its fullness in glory. We live in the wilderness. So we study this book.

## The Setting: God Speaks in the Wilderness

Numbers 1 begins with God: "The Lord spoke to Moses." That phrase (in various forms) occurs some 150 times in the book — Numbers is not just a human road trip, it is divine revelation. It happens in the tent of meeting (a place of worship) in the wilderness of Sinai — that roughly 23,500-square-mile triangle of rugged mountains, high plateau, and dry coastal plain where God gathered his people for forty years.

The timestamp is precise: the first day of the second month of the second year after leaving Egypt. Israel had reached Sinai eleven months earlier; in that time Moses received the Ten Commandments, Israel broke them (literally and figuratively) with the golden calf, Moses received them again, and the tabernacle and sacrificial system were built. The tabernacle went up on the first day of the first month (Exodus 40); Numbers opens exactly one month later. And the series' whole span — through chapter 10, when the cloud lifts on the 20th day of the second month — covers just nineteen days, three weeks.

## The Command: Count the Army

What happens in those three weeks? God commands a census: "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families... all the men twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army." As censuses almost always were, this one is for military purposes — God wants to know how many can fight. Twelve named leaders, one from each tribe, take the count. (The name list is strikingly ancient: none contain "Yahweh" because that name had just been revealed, many contain the older divine names El or Shaddai, and 16 appear nowhere else in the Old Testament. Among them are ancestors of Boaz and David, and the father of Joshua son of Nun.) The total: 603,550 fighting men.

**Numbers 1:45-46** "All the Israelites twenty years old or more who were able to serve in Israel's army were counted according to their families. The total number was 603,550."

Counting only military-age men, and knowing the women, elderly, and children aren't in that figure, the whole community likely numbered two to three million. But the sermon asked a more personal question: what would it have been like to be one of those Israelites, counted? And it wouldn't have been the first time. Egypt had counted its slaves for a thousand years — indeed, the whole story began in Exodus 1 when Pharaoh looked at the rolls and said the Hebrews were "too numerous" and needed thinning out. These men had spent their entire lives as just a number: a number as a slave in Egypt, and now a number as a soldier in the wilderness. And, as anyone who's been through a census knows, being reduced to a number tends to cheapen rather than deepen our humanity.

## "I Feel Like a Number"

Modern life does the same to us. The sermon quoted Bob Seger's 1978 song: "To workers, I'm just another drone... I'm just another statistic on a sheet... And I feel like a number. Feel like a stranger, a stranger in this land." It's almost as if Seger were reading Numbers. There are over 8.3 billion of us, ticking on a clock of births and deaths; we're one blade of grass in a vast field. At the DMV you take a number and hand over your license number, Social Security number, and VIN. At the McDonald's kiosk you get a receipt number, and eating the burger makes you part of "billions and billions served."

And it goes deeper. "A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths a statistic." The cancer diagnosis that chokes us personally becomes part of Iowa's statistics (second-highest in the nation). The loved one lost in a car accident — the worst moment of our lives — becomes a tally on a highway LED sign. The Department of Transportation even prices a "statistical value of life" at \$13.7 million. And older members remember the 1970s

draft, when each person got a lottery number no one wanted drawn — the sermon told of Ben Witherington, a college student whose number came up and whose body felt like it was shutting down under the weight of being just a number. Even in church, with hymn numbers and attendance numbers posted on the wall, we can look around a full sanctuary and feel like one more blade of grass. And the question that opens Numbers rises: If I'm just a number, do I really count? Do I matter? Does God even know who I am, or care?

### **First Truth: Behind the Number, God Invites Us Into His Mission**

God isn't merely gathering a statistic. First, behind the number, he is inviting people into his mission. He counts the men able to serve because he has a purpose — and notably, he isn't counting the "important" people (the Levites, exempt from military service, aren't in this count); he's counting those with a particular call to serve. As one scholar puts it, everyone was counted because everyone had to support the war effort. God is saying to these ex-slaves: I have a mission so big I need all hands on deck, and every one of you is counted because every one of you is needed.

And that mission was the fulfillment of a covenant promise. In Genesis 15, God had told Abraham his descendants would be enslaved 400 years — and then given the land. These men were born in slavery at the end of those four centuries, heirs of a promise made four hundred years earlier. When God delivered them from Egypt, he did it single-handedly — the people contributed nothing to the plagues or the parting of the sea. But to take the promised land, God chooses to use the arms of his people — every one of them. So every one must be counted. They are part of something far bigger than themselves, and the number reminds them they are needed for God's purpose.

### **Second Truth: Behind Each Number Is a Name**

But here is the remarkable thing. Look at what God actually commands: "listing every man by name, one by one" (1:2), "listed by name, one by one" (1:18). God isn't just numbering his people — he's writing down 603,550 names, one by one by one. To God, his people are not a number. They are names. The book that should be called Numbers might better be called the Book of Names.

And this runs right through Scripture. Isaiah 43:1 — "I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine." Isaiah 45 — God bestows on ex-slaves "a title of honor." In John 10, Jesus reveals his messianic work: "he calls his own sheep by name." Farmers may tag livestock with numbered ear tags, but Jesus doesn't call his sheep by number — he's the shepherd who calls them by name. And Luke 10:20 — "rejoice that your names are written in heaven." God keeps a census not just of the number of the elect but of every single name.

| **Isaiah 43:1** "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."

How could a holy God care enough to know the names of ex-slaves who had been just a number their whole lives — something Pharaoh never would? Because of what happens later. The sermon pointed to Luke 22:37: Jesus "was numbered with the transgressors." Jesus is counted among the sinners so that we can be counted among God's children. He takes God's punishment for our sin — and Numbers will show plenty of sin — so that we can eternally have a name in him. That is the good news: God's people get a name because God became, for them, a number.

#### **Key Takeaway**

The book of Numbers opens by counting an army of ex-slaves who had spent their whole lives as just a number — and it turns out to be the Book of Names. God counts every one because every one is needed for his mission, and he lists every one by name because to him no one is a statistic. And the reason a holy God can know the names of sinners is that Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors" — counted among sinners so that we could be counted, by name, among God's children.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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Take your time. Listen well to each other. There are no wrong answers — only honest ones.

1

Be honest: what was your reaction when you heard the church would spend the fall in the book of Numbers? Have you ever read it? The sermon gave three reasons to study it — theological, moral formation, and needing Christ. Which of those most makes you want to dig in?

2

The Hebrew name for the book is "Bemidbar" — "in the wilderness" — the space between deliverance accomplished and deliverance finished. Where in your own life do you most feel that "in between" right now — between a victory won and a victory realized?

3

The sermon said modern life makes us feel "like a number" — the DMV, the kiosk receipt, the statistics. When have you most felt reduced to a number rather than known as a person? What was that like?

4

"A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths a statistic." The sermon named cancer diagnoses and accident deaths that become mere statistics. Have you experienced something deeply personal being flattened into a statistic? How did that feel?

5

God counted every fighting man because his mission was so big he needed "all hands on deck" — everyone was needed. Do you tend to feel needed in God's work, or more like an optional extra? What would change if you truly believed you were needed?

6

The book that should be called Numbers turns out to be the Book of Names — God lists every one "by name, one by one." What does it stir in you to know that God knows your name, not just your number? Is that easy or hard for you to actually believe?

7

Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors" so that we could be counted, by name, among God's children. How does it change your sense of worth to know that God became a number so that you could have a name in him?

## LIVING IT OUT

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You are not a number to God — you are a name, needed for his mission. This week's invitation is to live like it, and to help others know it too.

### In Your Inner Life

- Read Numbers 1:1-19 and 44-46 this week — slowly, even the names. Notice that God commands each person be listed "by name, one by one." Sit with the truth that God knows your name, not just your number. Where do you most need to hear that this week?
- Meditate on Isaiah 43:1 — "I have summoned you by name; you are mine." Read it as spoken directly to you. If you've been feeling like a statistic — in your work, your health, your grief — let God's naming of you be the deeper truth.
- The sermon said we live "in the wilderness," between deliverance accomplished and finished. Name the specific "in between" you're walking through, and bring it to God — not pretending you've arrived, but trusting the God who speaks in the wilderness and knows your name there.

### In Your Closest Relationships

- The census worker said "I just need the number"; the mother said "my children don't have numbers, they have names." This week, make sure the people closest to you know they are names, not numbers, to you — known, seen, and valued as individuals, not taken for granted.
- Is there someone in your life who feels like "just a number" right now — overlooked at work, lost in a crowd, reduced to a diagnosis or a role? Speak their name and their worth to them this week. Remind them, in your own words, that they matter.
- The sermon connected knowing names to real community — you stay a number if you walk into a big sanctuary and back out, but in Bible study and fellowship you come to know names and stories. Commit this week to learning one person's name and story more deeply.

### In Your Daily Life and Work

- The sermon said God counted everyone because everyone was needed for his mission — "all hands on deck." Where is God calling you to be counted this week in his work? Don't assume you're optional; show up where you're needed, whether that's the visible task or the sandwich-making behind it.
- The pastor mentioned the fall silage-pile week when 150 people are needed — a concrete way the community lives out its promises. Look for the practical "all hands on deck" moment in your own church or community this week, and be one of the hands.
- Notice this week where you're tempted to treat people as numbers — a customer, a coworker, a stranger, a statistic. Deliberately learn and use one person's name, and treat them as the named individual God knows them to be.

### In Your Faith Community

- The sermon noted the name tags handed out at the door — because in God's house his children have names, not numbers. Wear yours, learn others', and help make your congregation a community of names rather than a crowd of strangers this week.
- The sermon tied baptism to being named — we baptize someone by name into God's name, and we make promises to support them. If you've made baptismal promises to someone in your church, take one concrete step this week to live them out.
- As the fall series in Numbers begins, consider joining a Bible study or small group where you can actually be known by name and know others. The sermon was explicit: it's in fellowship, not just attendance, that we become a community of names. Take the step this week.

#### A Word to Carry

You are not a blade of grass in a vast field, not a statistic on a sheet, not one of billions served. The God who commanded a census of ex-slaves wrote down every name, one by one — and he knows yours. Because Jesus was numbered with the transgressors, you have a name written in heaven. You count. You matter. God knows exactly who you are.

## SERVICE CHALLENGE

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God turns numbers into names and invites everyone into his mission. This week, help one person who feels like a number know they are a name.

### **This Week's Challenge: Turn a Number Into a Name**

Ben heard a voice call his name in the dark and it set his life on a new path. This week, be the one who calls someone by name and reminds them they are not just a number to God.

#### **Step 1 — Name Someone Who Feels Unseen.**

Think of one person who may feel like just a number right now — overlooked, anonymous, reduced to a role, a diagnosis, or a statistic. Someone the crowd passes over. Write their name down.

#### **Step 2 — Learn and Use Their Name and Story.**

Go to them, use their name, and learn a piece of their story. The sermon said we become a community of names, not numbers, precisely by knowing one another's names and stories. Move one person from stranger toward known.

#### **Step 3 — Remind Them They Are Needed.**

God counted everyone because everyone was needed for his mission. Find a way to include this person — invite them into something, ask for their help, show them they have a place. Being needed is part of being known.

#### **Step 4 — Point Them to the God Who Names.**

If the moment allows, share the heart of this text — that God knows them by name, that Jesus was numbered with sinners so they could be named among God's children. Pray with them, using their name before God.

#### **Step 5 — Come Back and Share.**

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share who you reached out to and what happened. A church that turns numbers into names becomes the community God is calling us to be.

### **Optional Extended Challenge**

- Read the three passages the sermon used to frame the whole series: 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (Scripture is useful), 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 (the wilderness generation as example), and Luke 24:25-27 (Christ in the books of Moses). Let them set your expectations as the Numbers series unfolds this fall.
- Read Numbers 1 alongside Isaiah 43:1-7 and John 10:1-15 this week. Trace the thread of God knowing and calling his people by name, from the wilderness census to the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name. Where do you hear your own name in it?
- Ben Witherington heard his name called in the dark and it changed his life. Spend some quiet time this week simply listening — asking God to remind you that you are known by name. Then write down what it would mean to live this week as a name, not a number.

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### **Closing Prayer Guide**

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — for a God who speaks in the wilderness, who counts every one of his people by name, and who in Jesus was numbered with sinners so that we could be named among his children.
- Confess honestly — the ways we've felt like (and treated others like) just a number; the times we've doubted that we count, matter, or are known by God.
- Ask to be known and to know — that God would help you rest in being named by him, and make you someone who learns and honors the names and stories of the people around you.
- Pray to be counted — that you would show up where God's mission needs you, believing that you are needed, and pray for the one you named in the service challenge this week.