

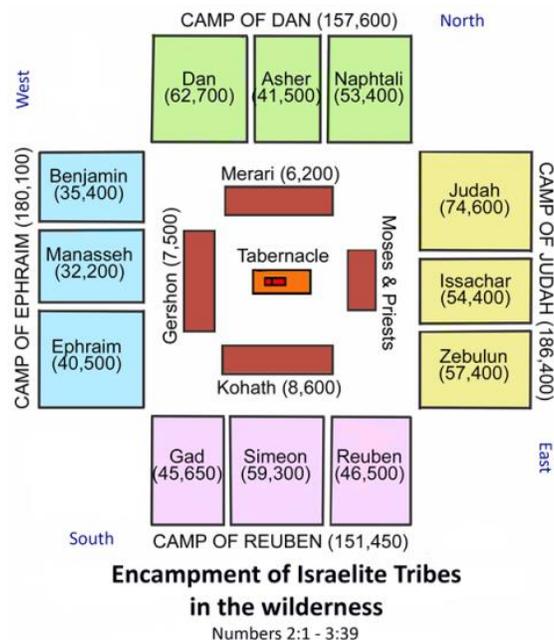
The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

In the Desert, God’s Promise in Dry Places: The book of Numbers is known as such in the English Bible because of the census taken at least twice of the multitude in the wilderness. However, in Hebrew the book is more appropriately titled, *Ba-Meedbar* or “In the Desert”. Considering the content of the book, the Hebrew title is more appropriate since an account is set forth of life in the wilderness. We here learn of the aborted attempt to enter into and possess the land of promise. We also learn of the various events both good and bad that befell God’s people in the wilderness. More importantly, we are given a stunning picture of God’s providential care for his people even when they are plagued with rebellion and disobedience. The section that will be considered today is Numbers chapters 1 through 21.

Part One: Law and Order – The first four chapters of our text deal with the unique and orderly manner in which Israel was instructed to organize their camp, and journey throughout the wilderness. The diagram below shows the centrality of the tabernacle as well as the protective buffer zone of the priests who were instructed to pitch their tents surrounding the tabernacle. Then, the designated tribes were instructed to pitch and march in the order shown.



Graphic borrowed from: http://www.conformingtojesus.com/charts-maps/en/wilderness_camp_of_the_tribes_of_israel.htm

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The camp of Judah would set our first, following the Shekinah, followed by the camp of Reuben. Then, the tabernacle would move forward with each of the priestly clans responsible for transporting a specific part of the tabernacle. God was very specific, that no commoner and definitely no stranger was allowed to come near the holy objects associated with the tent of God. Next, the camp of Ephraim would set forth followed by the camp Dan of in the rear.

The Pidyon Ha-ben: Also included in these chapters is the redemption of the firstborn sons of Israel otherwise known as the *pidyon ha-ben*. This requirement is initially mentioned in Exodus 13:2 in the context of the redemption of God's people from Egypt. There we read, "Consecrate to me (make holy) all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast is mine." After the election of the Levites to be consecrated to God among the tribes of Israel to offer sacrifices to him and tend to his holy dwelling place, we see that the Levites became the substitutionary representative of the first born from among the people. The text in Numbers states, "List all the firstborn males of the people of Israel, from a month old and upward, taking the number of their names. And you shall take the Levites for me – I am the Lord – instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel" (Numbers 3:40-41). When the account was taken, there was a total of 273 fewer Levites than firstborn among Israel. God instructed Moses, "...you shall take five shekels per head; you shall take them according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are over" (Numbers 3:47-48). Pause momentarily and ponder the theme of the firstborn and redemption within the Pentateuch. We immediately think of Genesis 22 and the binding of Isaac as well as the ram caught in the thicket that God provided as a redemption for Isaac. In Egypt, we see that God redeemed his people from slavery and bondage (both spiritual as well as physical) through the substitute of a lamb slain whose blood was instructed to cover the houses of God's people. From this point forward, God is reminding his people of the price of redemption. Instead of sacrificing their firstborn to God, he is allowing a substitute through the priestly clans of the Levites. The act of redeeming the firstborn made it possible for all of God's people to be made holy or consecrated to God. Some through acts of mediation (the Levites) and others through acts of redemption (*Am-Israel*).

The Levites were a class of priests set apart, consecrated for the exclusive worship of God. This redemptive motif in which a substitute is allowed to take the place of another is central to the message of the Pentateuch and a constant reminder to the OT church. The Apostle Peter later touches on this motif in his first epistle when he declares, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Part Two: The Practice of Holiness – The command to be holy even as God himself is holy was given in the book of Leviticus (11:45), but we are offered a glimpse of God's people attempting to pursue holiness in the next section. In Chapters 5 through 10:10 we are offered an array of commands regarding the mandatory placement of an unclean person "outside the camp". A means is also provided for the jealous spouse who is seeking proof of adultery (5:11-31). The Nazarite vow wherein a commoner among Israel can become holy in the Levitical definition of the word is explained and the offering upon completion (or desecration) of the Nazarite vow is described. Then, an account is given of the people's sacrifices consecrating the tabernacle. This is separate from the consecration of Aaron and the priests mentioned in Leviticus 8-9. There is a principle throughout the Pentateuch that the lesser is made holy by the greater, i.e. Moses consecrates the high priest (Aaron) at the command of God. Aaron

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consecrates the priests, the priests consecrate the people. This is later affirmed by Christ when he reprimands the Jewish elders of his day for allowing one to swear by the temple, but not the gold of the temple. In Matthew 22:16-17 we read, “*But woe to you blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath...For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred.’*” In the seventh chapter of Numbers we see that Moses consecrated the temple and the altar as well as all the furnishings in the temple (7:1), but the congregation assented to this consecration through their offerings. After a very detailed description of the various offerings we read, “*...this was the dedication offering for the altar on the day when it was anointed, from the chiefs of Israel*” (7:84a). This consent, though not required, seems to have been a very important part of the process of consecrating the tent of God’s dwelling. We witness a similar response from the King and congregation when the temple is dedicated in Jerusalem during the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 8:62-63).

Part Three: *Graves of Craving* – The departure of the people of God from Sinai is recorded in Numbers 10:11-35. The journey was a brief one lasting only three days. When they stopped next in their journey, their stay was not a pleasant one. Chapter 11 provide the account of the people’s frustration with God, as well as Moses and Aaron. They had been subsisting largely off of Manna, a substance provided by God especially for his OT church in the wilderness. They longed for, craved, lusted after the meat of Egypt. What is interesting is the phrase in 11:5, “*We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing...*” Is it not remarkable that though they had not been long removed from Egyptian slavery, their memory and grip on reality was already beginning to fade? They failed to remember the terrible price of slavery and bondage. They lusted after the meat they romantically seemed to enjoy in Egypt. For this reason, God sent them quail from the sea (it may have been fish or possibly some other bird). Moses said that Israel would eat of this meat, “*...not just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected the Lord who is among you...*” The meat caused a very great plague among the community and many died. Therefore, the name of the place was known as Kiborth-Hattaavah, which is Hebrew for *Graves of Craving*.

One pastoral application should be made here because we are often led to liberally criticize the OT church for their behavior as well as their failure to remember; however, we (the NT church) are more like them than we may want to believe. The grace of God is here revealed not when he gave them what they wanted, but when he had previously left some of their desires and longings unfulfilled. When God leaves us to pursue our illegitimate cravings and shows no restraining influence through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we find that we are feasting on a banquet in the grave. God’s grace is sometimes revealed to us not through the provision of what we need, but through the deprivation of what we want.

Part Four: *The Disappointed Generation* – in chapters 13 and 14 of Numbers we are given the sad and disappointing account of God’s OT church crossing the proverbial line, the final straw of their rebellion, the exacting of judgement as declared from their own lips. At the command of the Lord, Moses identified twelve spies one from each of the tribes and commissioned them to spy out the land and bring back word regarding six things: 1) if the people who dwell there are strong or weak; 2) whether the people are few or many; 3) whether the land they dwell in is good or bad; 4) whether the cities they dwell in are camps or strongholds; 5) whether the land is rich or poor; 6) whether or not there are trees in the land. Each of these six characteristics provided vital information for preparing battle. When the

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spies returned from exploring the land, they brought back the following report: *“We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large...We are not able to go against the people, for they are stronger than we are...we seemed ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them”* (Numbers 13:27-28a;31b; 33b). Even though they had personally witnessed God’s miraculous deliverance from the land of Egypt as well as his attentive care in the wilderness, they were convinced of utter failure should they seek possession of the land promised to them and their forefathers. The key verse is the last: *“...we seemed ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”*

As a result of the lack of faith among God’s people, they were forbidden to enter the land of Canaan, and were destined to troll the wilderness for another forty years until the entire adult generation had passed. The hopes of inheriting the land of promise were now placed upon their children as they lived the remainder of their days in wandering, paying the heavy price for their unbelief. The severity of this reward can be seen once more in the book of Hebrews where the author states, *“For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So, we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief”* (Hebrews 3:16-19). So, the generation that witnessed the great deliverance, redemption from Egyptian bondage were not able to enter the rest (Shabbat) of God because of their unbelief. This became part of the rebuke of the prophet Ezekiel later in Israel’s history. He states, *“Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes, but rejected my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live; and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned”* (Ezekiel 20:12-13).

Shortly after their rebellion, there is an account of a man found gathering sticks on the Sabbath. They put the man in custody and waited to see what God would say should be done to him. God instructed Moses, *“The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.”* This is one of the few instances in scripture in which an individual was put to death for violating the Sabbath. The severity of the punishment may seem extreme until one considers the placement of this account subsequent to the story of Israel’s rebellion. Failure to make holiness in space (by obeying God and doing as he requires) is a reflection of Israel’s unwillingness to make holiness in time (by faithfully observing and submitting to God’s sovereignty over the whole of life).

Part Five: Responsibility, Ritual and a Red Heifer – The last three chapters of our required reading (Chapters 19-21) offer accounts of ritual – what Israel is to do in the event of a state of ritual impurity; responsibility – the only time in scripture that Moses doubts and disobeys God costs him entrance into the land of promise. A red heifer – the red heifer was an animal needed for the purification of those ritually impure, its ashes would be mixed with water and sprinkled on the objects being cleansed. So, what do all three of these convey to God’s people? Quite simply they convey that God takes seriously the spiritual condition of those who approach him.

When Israel continued to complain about their wilderness expedition speaking against both God and Moses the Lord plagued them with fiery serpents. These were probably desert vipers commonly known throughout the Middle East as painted carpet vipers. God provided a remedy by instructing Moses to make a serpent of brass and hang it upon a pole, *“...and anyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live”* (21:8).

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Conclusion: As we conclude our study of the first part of Numbers, it is helpful to elaborate on the importance of faith for the OT as well as the NT people of God. We identified four major themes from the book of Genesis that have continued to re-surface as we make our way through the Pentateuch. These themes are: 1) seed – as promised to the patriarch and immediately fulfilled through the descendants of Israel; 2) land – the Promised Land, land of Canaan, which Israel is now on the brink of inheriting. 3) Promise – partially contained in the Mosaic covenant, continued until the fullness of the Covenant of Grace is witnessed in Christ. 4) City of God – God dwelling among his people. We have spent a good deal of time in Leviticus and now Numbers exploring what that means for the people of God. Indeed, all the laws and rituals of both books have highlighted the all-consuming nature of God dwelling among his people, even defining a new word – holiness, which is as it relates to man, of a dependent nature. Even though the first three things are characteristics of the divine covenant to which God has sovereignly promised to see to completion, and the fourth is the purpose behind God's covenant this does not mean human responsibility is absent from the implementation and fulfillment of each of these motifs. The seed would have never been given apart from Abraham and Sarah's willingness to copulate. It would have been needful to repeat the promise to each generation if it had not been passed verbally from one generation to the next. In like manner, possession of the land was not possible unless the people of Israel under the direction of God marched on the walled villages and strongholds of the enemy's territory.

Faith, God's gracious gift enabling man to believe, has remained an indispensable variable in the fulfillment of these promises. By faith, *"...the people of old received their commendation"* (Hebrews 11:2). Faith was the distinguishing virtue that God was seeking to instill within his people while they wandered forty long years in the wilderness. One might wonder, "How could Israel have witnessed the miraculous provision of God as they did, and remain in unbelief?" The answer is hinted at by the Psalmist who centuries after Israel had taken possession of the land wrote, *"For forty years I loathed that generation and said, 'they are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.' Therefore I swore in my wrath, 'they shall not enter my rest'"* (Psalms 95:10-11). This verse was quoted earlier by the author of Hebrews to make the point that Israel did not enter into the Sabbath of God because of their unbelief. One might make a very strong case for the fact that Israel was confined to wander the wilderness until they could learn the ways of the Lord. As we will see next week, becoming familiar with God's ways often isolates God's people from the rest of the world. A change occurred not simply in Israel, but also in the people of the surrounding nations. Israel saw themselves differently as they rose to assume the calling of a nation set apart for God. Consequently, the surrounding nations were filled with fear.