

# **Fusion** \ˈfjuːzhən\ n.:

**the merging  
of diverse,  
distinct,  
or separate  
elements  
into a  
unified whole**

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# **Numbers**

\ˈnəm bərz\ n.:

**a theme throughout Scripture**

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by David Petersen

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Manufactured in the United States of America

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>The Counting God</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Three-in-One: The Number of God</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Two and Four: Creation Counted</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Five and Ten: Keys to God's Word</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Seven and Twelve: Numbers in Revelation</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Forty and Eight: A Generation of Mercy and the New Creation</b>	<b>72</b>

# INTRODUCTION

An abstract background consisting of various overlapping lines, rectangles, and shapes in a light gray color, creating a complex, geometric pattern that resembles a technical drawing or a modern architectural sketch.

## About the Fusion Series

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Fusion—the merging of diverse, distinct, or separate elements into a unified whole. Fusion is a word that speaks of energy and excitement, whether you are talking about a style of music or a nuclear reaction.

God's Word is filled with fusion. The Old Testament bears many hints of events to come in the New Testament, yet we often miss the connection. The Gospel message of the Savior is seen time and time again in the Old Testament. Through this series you will come to connect—fuse—those events and messages for yourself and your participants.

Each study in the Fusion Series gathers stories from Scripture—both Old and New Testaments—around a common theme. Through the study of that theme, we pray that you come to a deeper understanding of the Gospel message of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

## Fusion—Numbers

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This study will show how God uses numbers in the Bible, along with words, to reveal His love and plan for us in Jesus Christ. It will show how numbers play off of and build on one another to demonstrate God's design for creation and redemption.

What may not be clear at first is that the inspired authors of the Scriptures used not only words but also numbers to repeat and echo the theme of grace back and forth between the Old and the New Testaments. Numbers are always symbols. They are a way of speaking and writing meant to convey reality. They themselves are not the reality, but they represent or communicate what the reality is. God uses numbers and number symbolism in the Bible to convey the truth of His love. Some of that reality has to do with quantities, such as how high or wide

Noah's ark was, or how many loaves and fish were present. Often the quantities are meant to remind us of how God's grace intervened in the lives of His children in history. The ultimate reality God wants to show us is always who Jesus Christ is for us.

If this seems a bit strange, remember how Jesus explained the Old Testament to the disciples in Emmaus. Luke writes: "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). Read also what Luther said about the Scriptures and their content:

Thus all of Scripture, as already said, is pure Christ, God's and Mary's Son. Everything is focused on this Son, so that we might know Him distinctively and in that way see the Father and the Holy Spirit eternally as one God. To him who has the Son Scripture is an open book; and the stronger his faith in Christ becomes, the more brightly will the light of Scripture shine for him. (AE 15:342)

The Bible's purpose is to reveal God's love for us in Jesus Christ. This study will focus on numbers as a theme and springboard to study the Bible more closely, but its ultimate purpose is to talk about who Jesus is for us. It desires not only to show specific ways that numbers reveal God's plan for us in Jesus Christ, but also to help instill in the participants a desire to know Christ in all the Scriptures, for when He is known, the "Scripture is an open book."

## Using These Materials

Fusion Series Bible studies are designed to challenge your participants to develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of Scripture. These studies work for either large-group presentation or small-group Bible study. While there are six sessions outlined in the book, there are no suggested time limits for each section of the lesson. The level of participant interest, discussion, and further questions will help establish the length of time to spend on each section. This flexibility also allows you to use this material for more than six one-hour sessions. You can easily adapt this material to twelve or more hour-long lessons.

Each session contains reproducible participant pages. These pages may be given to participants as you work through the lesson together in class. As an alternative, you may give copies of these pages to participants in advance of the session so that they may complete their personal study before coming to class.

The leader's materials work through the questions from the participant pages and provide additional commentary and insights for the Bible class leader. You will want to study these notes as you prepare to lead each session.

It is assumed that the Bible class leader will have the usual basic equipment and supplies available—pencils or pens for each participant and a chalkboard or its equivalent (white board, overhead transparency projector, or newsprint pad and easel) with corresponding markers or chalk. Encourage the participants to bring their own Bibles so that they can mark useful passages and make notes to guide their personal Bible study and reference. Do provide additional Bibles, however, for visitors or participants who do not bring one. The appropriate participant pages should be copied in a quantity sufficient for the class.



# THE COUNTING GOD

## **Lesson Focus**

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There are lots of numbers in the Bible. There are especially a lot of threes, sevens, tens, twelves, and forties. You can probably think of lots of things from Scripture that come in those numbers. It almost seems like nothing ever happens in the Bible that is not somehow related to one of those numbers. This lesson will begin to open up these numbers. We will begin to look for patterns and start to see how numbers communicate more than a mere amount. We will especially look for repetition and relationships between various events in the history of God's people.

We also want to consider numbers that describe strange things. The Bible records details like 144,000 saints in heaven and four six-winged, multi-faced creatures. Those quantities are very exact and we want to think about what they describe, how literal they are, and again, how they relate to other numbers in the Bible. Since every word of the Holy Scriptures is meant

for our learning, and nothing has been written by accident or coincidence, these numbers have meaning. In beginning to unpack the meaning, this lesson will serve as a foundation for the lessons that follow.

## **Opening Prayer**

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Blessed Lord, since You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and take them to heart that by patience and comfort of Your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(Collect 165, *LW*, p.156)



## **God Counts and Biblical Numbers**

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### **What are some common numbers in the Bible? Are there any patterns?**

Ask the students for numbers from the Bible. You might start with "How many days and nights did it rain when Noah went into the ark?" Then see if they can think of other numbers or groups of numbers in the Bible. Ask if they can think of other major repetitive numbers. Since you've asked about the flood, they'll probably get forty right away. Try to get a couple of examples also for three, seven, ten, and twelve. You might have to prompt them. If necessary, try asking questions like "How many commandments are there?" or "How many days was Jesus in the tomb?" Your goal is to get them to see how these numbers repeat and tie the story of creation and salvation together.

Here is a list of some of the major numbers and events in the Bible. You and your students will probably think of even more. We do not want to unpack these numbers just yet, but merely

raise awareness of them. There are also other numbers this study will consider, such as two, four, five, seventy, and one thousand. The purpose here is merely to get the students to recognize there are patterns.

Forty: years that Israel wandered in the desert; days of our Lord's fasting and temptation; days and nights of rain at the time of Noah; days from Easter to the Ascension. (While not in the Bible, some students might also note that Lent is forty days long.)

Three: Trinity (Matthew 28 and baptismal formula); days until Jonah's deliverance from the great fish; the inner circle of the disciples (Peter, James, John); days Jesus was in the tomb. ("Three days" was a Jewish idiom meaning the day after tomorrow. Three days equaled part of Friday [1], all day Saturday [2], and part of Sunday [3], as opposed to three twenty-four-hour days equaling seventy-two hours.)

Seven: days in the week (creation); years of good harvest and then of famine in Egypt; number of churches in St. John's vision; number of

gifts of the Spirit. (Again, while not in the Bible, some students may notice the Easter season is seven weeks long.)

Ten: Commandments; plagues in Egypt; lamp-bearing virgins in the parable; lepers seeking mercy.

Twelve: Jacob's sons; tribes of Israel; disciples; baskets of leftover bread and fish after the feeding of the five thousand; months (the Hebrew year had twelve months like our modern calendar).

### **Symbolism Based in History**

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**Do numbers mean more than what they count? What do the numbers 1776 and 1492 mean to you? What about thirteen stripes and fifty stars on an American flag? How many shots in a twenty-one gun salute? What does it mean?**

The United States Constitution was signed in the year 1776. Christopher Columbus sailed from Spain in 1492. The thirteen stripes on an American flag represent the thirteen original colonies and the fifty stars represent the current states. Because of those events or truths, those numbers are all important to Americans. Numbers can be literal, and yet at the same time speak to something more. A Fourth of July party might have a cake with fifty or thirteen candles. The number would be literal, but it would also be representative, symbolic of the United States.

A twenty-one gun salute is seven guns firing three times each in unison. It is a literal twenty-one shots, but it sounds like three. Most hearers can't tell the difference between a twenty-one gun salute (with seven guns firing) and an eighteen or a twenty-four gun salute (with six or eight guns firing). But we want a twenty-one gun salute. That is the right number. A twenty-one gun salute calls to mind a sense of fullness and completion. It signifies a full military honor.

Most of the numbers in the Bible are literal. They actually measure something. For instance, we believe that Jesus fasted for forty actual days in the desert. He might have been a bit short of nine-hundred-sixty hours (forty days times

twenty-four hours). He might not have started the first day until 8:00 in the morning, or even 12:00 noon—it would still have counted as a day. Jesus might have eaten the evening of the fortieth day. Nonetheless, these were forty real days. That number helps tie Jesus' fast to the history of Israel. The number of days is not accidental. It is literal and symbolic. It is meant to remind us of Israel's wandering in the desert, the days and nights of rain that caused the flood, and so forth. It connects Jesus to His people. But even that is no coincidence. For it could have rained thirty-eight days and thirty-eight nights; the Israelites could have wandered for thirty-seven or forty-two years. Forty symbolizes fullness in creation. We will explore this more fully later in this study.

### **God Counts in Love**

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**Read Genesis 1:1–2:3. How are the days counted? How does this relate to Sunday morning worship?**

The Bible is full of counting. At the very beginning, God was already counting. The first thing He did was to create light and count the first day. It was very orderly and structured. It was a mathematical creation, one day upon another, so that two followed one and three followed two, and so forth. Each day added up to get to the total. Finally there were six days. God finished creation. When He reached the seventh day, He rested.

Ask the students if the days of the week have meaning in the life of Christ. Think particularly about Holy Week. They'll probably come up with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter pretty quickly. You might want to remind them of the times Jesus healed on the Sabbath and how He rode into Jerusalem on a Sunday. They may not realize that Judas made his deal with Caiaphas on a Wednesday. Because of what happened on those days of the week, they are important to the Church.

In the Early Church, Christians fasted especially on Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent. They did this because those were the days of Jesus' betrayal and death. The Church Year revolves around Easter. Unlike Christmas, which is always on December 25 but can be any day of the week, Easter is always on a Sunday. The calendar day can change, but the weekday cannot. The Church associates Easter with the Jewish Passover because Jesus was crucified as the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the temple (John 19:14). The problem is that, in Bible times, the Jewish Passover was the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. It was like Christmas. It was tied to a calendar date. It fell on a different weekday every year. The year Jesus died, it fell on Friday, so three days later was Sunday. In figuring out how to celebrate Easter, Christians decided the day of the week took precedence over the calendar date of the Passover. They wanted Easter on Sunday. That is why today Easter is the Sunday that follows the "first full moon after the spring equinox." It always falls between March 25 and April 25 (*Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, p. 171). It is complicated, but that seems to be the best way to get Easter on Sunday, Good Friday on Friday, Maundy Thursday on Thursday, and Palm Sunday on Sunday. It wouldn't have to be this way. But the Church has historically found meaning in the days of the week. Her wisdom suggests we contemplate certain events of our Lord's life on the day of the week that they happened.

The life of the Christian finds its ultimate meaning and source in the life of Jesus Christ. We worship on Sunday mornings as a weekly reminder of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not merely that Jesus rose on a Sunday. It is that in rising He inaugurated our coming resurrection. We too will rise. We come to church on this day as a remembrance of how He bought and won us and as a sign of the victory to come. Understanding and counting these days of the week in the life of Christ helps to give meaning to our worship and to encourage us in our daily lives.

**Read Matthew 10:28–31. What does this tell us about God?**

God cares about details. He leaves nothing to chance. He counts the sparrows, but, more than that, every hair on your head counts to Him. God loves you more than sparrows!

**Read again the familiar words of John 3:16. How does God love you? What does the word *so* mean in the phrase *God so loved the world*?**

Our God does not love us the way that some people love cats or chocolate. It is not a generic or even a general love. His love is intimate, precise, and individually specific. It is fatherly love, custom-made for each child, accurately cut and fit to each personality. Every hair on your head counts to God. It counts to Him even more than it counts to you. He loves you more than anyone else does. He loves you more than you love yourself, more than you are even capable of loving yourself. He loves you right down to the very last hair.

That love has been shown to us in a very specific way. The word *so* in John 3:16 is an adverb. The word *so* is often used in English to modify a verb in degree. Thus *He was so tired* is meant to be more emphatic or to indicate a greater degree of tiredness than simply *He was tired*. This is the way that *so* might sound to us in John 3:16. It might sound as though it reads "God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son." But that is not the word behind *so* here. It is not an adverb modifying degree. In Greek it is the word *houtos*. It means "thus" or "in this way." This is the way we use the word *so* when we say "Say it isn't so!" or "Is that so?" John 3:16 could be translated very literally as "God loved the world this way: He gave His only Son." This is how God has loved us. He didn't sit in heaven and think nice things about us or scribble our names on His notebook only to hide it from His mother. He gave His only Son into death to win us. It is that same love—that did not love His own life—that loved us to the end—that causes Him to count the hairs on our heads.

There is another important little word in this verse. It is the English word *that*. Behind this word is the Greek word *hoste*. It means "so that" or "therefore." It is a bit like the word *because* in reverse. The word *because* requires the effect to be stated first. The cause comes after *because*. We say "I bought bread because I was hungry." We do not say "I was hungry because I bought bread." That would be backwards. The word *that* in John 3:16 is used in an archaic way to translate *hoste*. It means "such" or "so." In this way the cause comes first and the effect follows the word *that*. Whereas we would say "I bought bread because I was hungry," we would say "I was hungry so I bought bread" or we could say "Since I was hungry I bought bread." The word *hoste* works like the word *since*. The thing to notice in John 3:16 then is that the way God has loved us (giving His only Son into death for us) came about because God loved us. He loved us so He gave His Son or we might say "since He loved us He gave us His Son."

It is not as though the cross changed the way God feels about us. He has always loved us. It is not as though He hated us because we were sinners, but then He gave His Son to die for us and changed His mind because of it. He has always loved us! The giving of His Son, His suffering, death, and resurrection, do not make the Father love us. Rather they show us the Father's love. This is how God has loved us. He has not changed, but we have. He did not change His mind about us, He changed our minds about Him. He showed us His love by paying for our sins, by dying in our place, by loving us to the end. Now we are free to believe in Him and not perish but have everlasting life. He loves us more than sparrows and lilies, indeed.

**Read Luke 15:4–7. How many sheep are there? How does the shepherd know?**

The shepherd counts the sheep. There are supposed to be one hundred and each one is precious to him. There are only ninety-nine. One

lost sheep is a mere one percent of his total flock, but it is valuable to him. He is willing to suffer whatever trouble and danger it takes to get that single sheep back. The other parables in Luke 15 echo this same idea. These include the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10) and the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–32). In all three parables, we see how God counts and keeps track of each soul. Again, the number of sheep, one hundred, and the number of coins, ten, are numbers of completion. We will deal with that concept more fully later in the study, but for now it is worth pointing out these numbers as common repetitions. Since these are parables, we do not expect that they had to be actual historical events. Thus we see the details, including the numbers, to often represent more than merely an amount.

**Read Ezekiel 40–41. How many times does the word *cubit* occur? How about *rod*? What numbers are mentioned? What else? Why are the measurements so precise?**

The measurements are precise because God cares about the details. He is precise in his dealings with man. This does not mean that God is a micro-manager, interfering with our lives and denying us freedom. Rather He is intimately and personally involved. He cares if you have a hangnail or a bad hair day. He cares if your boyfriend was rude or you feel dumpy for no real reason at all. Nothing about you is trivial to Him. Everything about you, and this world, matters to Him. He did not send His Son in vain. He sent Him in perfect love. He counts the hairs on your head and you are worth more than sparrows. We'll come back to this text later and consider what the numbers remind us of; for now let it be enough to show how precise God is in His dealings with men.

### **God Counts the Innumerable.**

The Greek word for "numbered" or "counting" in Matthew's Gospel is the word behind our word *arithmetic*. We might say, "God does the math." He even does the math when it is impossibly hard.

**Read Psalm 40. What is the number of God's merciful works? What makes David sing? Pay special attention to verses 11–13. How many evils surround David? Who can count them? What is the familiar phrase in this psalm?**

Notice the counting. David cried out that his troubles were without number (12). These evils that surrounded him include his own sins. They were more than the hairs of his head. Yet the Lord was pleased to save him (12–13). What David asks for in verse 13, help and deliverance, is personified in the Messiah. The Messiah is the Helper and Deliverer. David points this out in verse 17b, for God Himself is the Messiah, "You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God!"

Some of the students may notice the echo in verse 13, "Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me! O LORD, make haste to help me!" with the opening Versicles for Matins and Vespers. In Matins and Vespers, we pray: "Make haste, O God, to deliver me" and "Make haste to help me, O Lord." That prayer comes from the first verse of Psalm 70, another psalm of David, so the echo is not surprising. This is something David liked to pray. He was always praying for help and deliverance. He found it in His own descendent born one thousand years later to the Virgin Mary.

David has a new song to sing (40:3) because sins and trouble have been removed. Though they were beyond the reckoning power of men, innumerable for him (verse 12), they have been counted by God and countered with innumerable mercies and grace. In Christ they don't count! One time David's sins did count. So did ours. Every one of them counted when Jesus was scourged by Pilate's soldiers and was nailed to the cross. Every one of them counted when He hung in agony and sacrificed Himself. David's sins counted. So did ours. But now they are gone. They have all, every single one of them, David's and ours, been counted and forgiven by the Deliverer.

## **Sinners Count to Him.**

**Read Luke 7:37–39. Think to yourself about Jesus' words about counting the hairs of our heads while you read this. How does that color what the woman does to our Lord's feet with her hair? Now read Luke 7:44–50.**

Every hair counted as it brushed across those dirty feet. Those feet would soon be pierced and bleed. The blood that came from them would wash this woman clean. Indeed, she loved much. But she did not love as much as the One who counted and loved those hairs. Every hair on her head counted! Every hair was felt and known. Every hair was honored and loved as it brushed across Jesus' feet. Jesus was more aware of her, of the hairs on her head, than she was. She went in peace that day because Jesus went to the cross, anointed by oil, tears, and hair to be her forgiving King, because she counted to Him even though she didn't count to the Pharisees. That is the peace that passes all understanding.

God cares about the details. He loves every hair on your head. He loves you more than you love yourself, more than you are capable of containing, so that David also writes "My cup overflows" (Psalm 23:5). God counts, but it seems as though He is a bad mathematician. It is not an exact punishment for each sin and no more. He pays for the sins of those who will not believe in Him (Pharaoh, Judas, Herod the Great, etc.) or receive the benefit of His love. He gives His life for the sins of whole world. We see this same over-generosity in the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:20), in the feeding of His people in the wilderness (Exodus 16:16–18), and in the miracle at Cana. Here He gave more than the people could eat or drink. Jesus created the equivalent of between six hundred and nine hundred bottles of wine at Cana—more than could have been drunk in one night by a village (John 2:1–11). David rightly recognizes a pattern in God's giving mercy when He praises God and says, "My cup overflows." God always gives

more than we can contain. The Good News of Jesus Christ is not equal in goodness to the badness of our rebellion or sins. It is, instead, so great that it is not worthy of comparison, like considering the height of a blade of grass to the height of the Empire State Building.

## **An Introduction to the Symbolism of Biblical Numbers**

**Read Revelation 7:4–9. How many saints does John see? Notice the number in verse 4 and the number in verse 9. What are some clues that this is a symbolic number and not literal? What are its factors? And what does this tell us about how many people will be in heaven?**

One of the ways this counting God reveals Himself and His love for us is through numbers. It is not the only way. It is not even the chief way. But it is an important way. Besides showing us that God cares about the details, the numbers in the Bible also show us a pattern to God's care for us. The numbers in the Bible are usually, but not always, precise measurements of the physical reality. When they are not precise measurements of physical reality, they are symbols of divine counting and are not literal. We can tell this is a symbolic number because of its context. John sees this multitude in a vision. We don't understand all these seals and horses and things to be literal either. They all represent something else.

The 144,000 of verse 4 is not an exact count of the elect. In fact, we expect far more than that in heaven, more than any man can number (verse 9) but which God numbers. God counts them all. Men are capable of counting, adding, subtracting, and multiplying with the number 144,000 even if some of us need a calculator to do it. But in verse 9, John says that no one can number these people. Imagine how great that number is! Imagine all the thousands and thousands of believers, of God's people, from every tribe, nation, and people, from every age and time of the earth. The number 144,000 repre-

sents the great multitude, that is, the large number of saints who will be in heaven. Even more significantly, it represents the fullness of that group—the perfect totality of the elect. Not a single one will be missing. Everyone will be accounted for.

The symbolism of the number 144,000 comes from its factors. A factor is a smaller number that makes up a larger number by multiplication. Three is a factor of six because  $3 \times 2 = 6$ . 144,000 is made up of  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 3 \times 5 \times 5 \times 5$ , but it makes more sense for biblical symbolism to break it up as  $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ . Understanding the symbolism of biblical numbers often means not breaking them into the lowest possible factors, but into the factors that have meaning. In the case of the 144,000, the symbolism comes from the twelve tribes of Israel and the idea of fullness in the number 1000. The twelve tribes represent all God's people and also call to mind how God made for Himself a people from those who were once slaves in Egypt and gave them a land they had not earned or deserved. Remember what God told Moses to tell the people in Deuteronomy:

And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by His name you shall swear. Deuteronomy 6:10–13

The twelve tribes remind us of how God has worked in history and that He will also give us the free gift of heaven.

**If 144,000 is a symbolic number, why can't the six days of creation be symbolic and not literal?**

It is important to notice that most of the numbers in the Bible are concrete, literal measurements. We only consider them symbolic when the context makes it clear that we are dealing with symbolic literature. The books of Revelation, Ezekiel, and Daniel are particularly symbolic books. If they are taken as literal history books rather than symbolic, they are misread. Everyone recognizes this to some degree, but strangely some groups take the numbers in Revelation very literally, believing, for instance, only 144,000 people will be saved or Christ will only rule His Church for 1000 years on earth (Revelation 20:4). Yet the same people understand that the archangel Michael did not come down from heaven with an actual chain and lock the devil down (Revelation 20:2). They pick and choose what is literal, such as the numbers, and what is figurative, such as Michael with a chain. The only way to read the Bible literally is to read it as it is written. Apocalyptic literature—which focuses on the end times—like the book of Revelation, is meant to be figurative.

On the other hand, Genesis is a historical account and description of how the universe came into being. In Genesis 1, the repetition of the phrase “and there was evening and there was morning” (verses 3, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31) along with the counting of the days shows us Moses meant this to be taken historically and literally, just as it is written. God uses the numbers six and seven to symbolize fullness and creation, but that symbolism is based in history, not fantasy. Think of the example of United States history used earlier. When we read in our history books that representatives of the thirteen colonies signed the Constitution of the United States in 1776, we know it is a historical fact. It is not just a convenient, symbolic number. But when there are thirteen candles on a Fourth of July party cake, we recognize it is symbolic of the original thirteen colonies. In the same way, the symbolic

numbers of the Bible often take their cue from the historic ways God interacted with us according to His grace, but that doesn't mean they aren't literal or historic.

**What about rounding? Read 1 Samuel 17:40. Why five stones?**

It is possible that some numbers in the Bible were rounded off to an even number. The Bible says David picked up five smooth stones from the riverbank. Perhaps David reached down and grabbed a handful, and it happened that five of them filled his hand, no more or less. Or, in recording these events, Samuel rounded the number of stones David took to five in order to make it easier to follow.

The books of Moses were the most important part of the Bible at that time. Whatever else there was at the time of David (Job, maybe Judges) was understood to be commentary or interpretation of Moses. So the Word of God that gave David faith to face up to the giant Goliath came from the five books of Moses. David was acting like Abraham taking Isaac up the mountain (Genesis 22); Joseph in prison after Potiphar's wife's false charges (Genesis 39); or Moses leading the people in the wilderness without provisions (Exodus 16ff). David believed God would provide. David may well have grabbed exactly five stones, or it may have been a Spirit-guided rounding of the number by Samuel. Either way, the number of stones should help us see the connection between Goliath's defeat and Moses' writings. The connection is faith in God's promise to be faithful to us.

If the number was rounded, it was close. It is not as though David only took one stone from the river or took thirty. Rounding numbers is sometimes a convenient way to help readers obtain a better grasp of the event without getting caught in the details. Rounding can also help tie the event to other events and bring the number to bear symbolic importance. Despite the possibility of rounding, we never understand the numbers in the Bible to be a fabrication merely

for the sake of making a point. So did David have exactly five stones in his pouch when he faced Goliath? We don't really know. It is certainly not impossible. But a literal reading of the Bible doesn't require it.

**Read Exodus 12:37–38. How many people would that be with women and children? Is the Bible exaggerating?**

In the Exodus passage above, the text itself says that the number of men was about 600,000. That "about" means this is not an exact number. It also means that it is close. We know this is a rounded number. We assume that it was rounded because it is easier to follow than if the author had told us an exact count of men, say, 597,654. It is rounded, but it has to be close. You can't round from 100,000 to 600,000.

But the number creates some problems. It is an incredibly huge number. If there was just one woman for each man and two children for each couple (and there were surely many more) the group that walked through the Red Sea on dry ground would have been 2.4 million Israelites. It was probably closer to twice this number. On top of the Israelites, there were the "mixed multitude" including Gentile servants who came with them. They also brought their flocks and herds. Imagine how many cattle and sheep 3 million people would need with them. This was an entire nation on the move. The logistics are almost impossible to imagine.

So is it an exaggeration to make a point? No! It was a miracle. These people were sustained by divine intervention. The entire event is miraculous. Imagine all the people in Houston walking at once across the Gulf of Mexico on dry land to Florida. The huge number of people isn't even the most spectacular part of this event.

Over the years, various scholars have tried to lessen the number of people in the Books of Exodus and Numbers to make them less dumbfounding, but none of the attempts are satisfactory. The Bible reports this as a literal number even though it is rounded. The context is

the counting of heads, not visions of heaven. It is possible some evidence could arise showing we have somehow misread these numbers, but no error in translation or understanding will take away the awesome effect of moving an entire nation.

## **Symbolism of Specific Numbers**

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Earlier, we talked about some of the numbers repeated throughout the Scriptures, namely, three, seven, ten, twelve, and forty. Those numbers can all be divided and combined in consistent ways. This section will begin to explore this idea and will be repeated in part in future lessons. The chart the students fill out might also prove useful for future lessons.

### **Prime numbers and God's numbers**

**What are prime numbers? How might they be symbols of God?**

A *prime number* is a positive integer that can only be divided by itself and one. The smaller numbers that divide into larger numbers are called "factors." Prime numbers symbolize sovereignty or immutability. They are made of nothing, factored by nothing. They are not divisible. Therefore they symbolize God, for God is indivisible, sovereign, and exists in perfection without anything or anyone else. The numbers one and three are especially symbolic of God, even though one is technically not a prime number. The number seven is also special to God. It is a prime number but is also a combined number. It combines the number of God (three) and the number of creation (four) and therefore represents fullness or completeness.

### **The Numbers of Creation**

The number two and its multiples (even numbers) represent creation. Two is the number of Adam and Eve in the garden; there they are told to "multiply." Everything divisible by two is part of the creation. Even the animal kingdom knows this division so that also animals are male

and female. Noah brought them on the ark by twos. When they left the ark, they also multiplied and filled the earth. Some biblical scholars argue that it is not two that is the basic building block, but four. There are four seasons and four cardinal directions or winds, north, south, east, and west. Four carries with it the idea of family in mother, father, son, and daughter.

**How many "natures" does Christ have? What are they? How is it that this number embodies the mystery of the incarnation?**

In the fullness of time, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son, took up human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and became a man. He now and forever has two natures—human and divine. He is fully God and fully man at the same time. The Father and the Spirit are also fully God. But they are not man. They have a divine nature but not a human. Thus, when Christ was joined to creation to be a sacrifice for the sins of the world, He took up the number of man within Himself. He has two natures. Yet because He is still and always also fully God, He also maintains God's number, for there are not two Christs, but only one. He is the only "two" that is not divisible. The Messiah's "numbers" are the number of man and the number of God combined in a wonderful mystery for our salvation. His unique combination of the numbers shows something of the mystery of God becoming man. These numbers will be more fully considered in the lessons which follow.

**Numbers of Completion: Addition and Multiplication**

**What do seven, twelve, and ten, which we talked about earlier, symbolize?**

By adding and multiplying the basic numbers, we get numbers that represent fullness or totality. Earlier we noted the number of God (three) plus the number of man (four) equals seven. Adding to this idea is the reality that seven is the number of days in the week. It is the days of creation (God created the universe in six days) plus

the day of rest or the Sabbath. When Jesus points to Himself as the Sabbath, He is saying more than that He is our rest. He is also the completion of all things, the final piece in the new creation, the fullness of time and of God's purpose. By naming Himself as our Sabbath, Jesus takes claims that He is our completeness, or the totality of God (three) plus creation (four).

In the same way, the number of God (three) and the number of man (four) can be multiplied. Then we get the number twelve. Again the idea is completeness or fullness. Thus there are twelve tribes of Israel, twelve disciples, twelve baskets of fragments left over after the feeding of the five thousand, twenty-four elders ruling heaven (12 X 2 with twelve patriarchs representing the Old Testament and the twelve apostles representing the New Testament), and 144,000 saints in heaven (12 X 12 X 10<sup>3</sup>).

The number five and the number ten are also numbers of completion. The number five is another way of combining God's number and man's number. You can arrive at the number five through the number of God (one) added to the number of creation and the family (four). As an alternate, five can be the number of God (three) and the number of man. There are five books of Moses, five stones in David's hand, and five books of the Psalms (The Psalter is divided into chapters 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; and 107–150.).

Ten is five times two, or seven plus three. The Ten Commandments contain the full will and desire of God for our lives. Humans have ten fingers and toes. When numbers are multiplied by ten they represent fullness as well, such as the number one thousand (10 X 10 X 10). The number one thousand is a complete number (ten) to the power of God, 10<sup>3</sup>. Thus Christ's reign on earth recorded in Revelation 20:4 should not be limited to a literal thousand years. Again, the idea is that one thousand means forever, a full completeness (ten) to the perfect power of God (three).

## Numbers of Incompleteness

### **Read Revelation 13:18. Why 666? How does it relate to the numbers of God and to completion?**

Many interpretations of this number have been put forth. The most satisfying to date is the idea that the number 666 typifies "the unholy trinity of the dragon (Revelation 12), the beast from the sea (13:1–10), and religious beast from the earth (13:11–18)" (*Concordia Commentary: Revelation*, p. 363). That idea places the number firmly in the context of John's vision and takes into account why there are three sixes instead of merely one. The wisdom called for to understand and calculate this number is simply "the wisdom that comes from God and enables the Christian to know and understand what this unholy trinity is and represents at any given time here on earth. This wisdom enables the Christian to discern how the evil forces of the dragon, both secular and religious, are always and everywhere active, at war to destroy the church and her witness to Christ" (*Concordia Commentary: Revelation*, p.363).

So the number 666 is symbolic—not magic. There is nothing to be afraid of in it. At the end of the day, it is only a number. There is no power in this number and there is nothing evil in having 666 as a street address or telephone or locker number. In John's vision, the number is meant to demonstrate the reality of evil.

But why this particular number? Even though it is a number of men, is divisible, and has many factors, it also might be meant to convey the idea of frustration. Instead of reading the number as 666 we can read the number as .666. The frustrating decimal .666 is arrived at by dividing three into two. The answer is not a solid .666. Rather it is a never-ending .6666666. If you multiply .666 X 3 to try and get back to 2, you can't. It is only 1.998. It is forever broken. It doesn't matter how many decimal points you use. Once you have divided 2 by 3 you can never get back. So it is incomplete by itself. And it is frustrated in its constant move outward, always moving but

never really drawing any nearer to fullness and completeness. Not even our calculators or super computers can fix it. It is an impossible number. So also there might be here the idea that the number is not so much .666 as it is  $6\frac{2}{3}$ , which makes it 6.66666666. It is almost seven. The number represents anything in creation, whether an angel like the devil or a man, trying to be God but being essentially unable to fulfill the job and winding up as an exasperating parody of the full complete goodness of God.

Whatever we say about this strange number is bound to be somewhat speculative. This simply isn't one of the clearest passages in the Bible. But it should be made clear to the students that there is nothing dangerous about this number, we have nothing to fear, and we should not be superstitious about it.

## God Wants Us to Do the Math

### **Read Matthew 18:21–22. How many times should we forgive our brother? Why doesn't Jesus do the math for Peter? Why doesn't He just say 490 times?**

This example helps us to see that God sometimes uses numbers in a symbolic way based on their factors. God would not have us forgive our brother a mere  $7 \times 7 \times 10$  or 490 times. He would have us forgive our brother forever. Jesus demonstrates that this number is symbolic by speaking of it in terms of its factors. Rather than saying "490" He says "seventy times seven." Christ wants us to do more than the math. He wants us to see that the number is threefold, that it is a full number. We should notice also that He chooses seven. As we discussed earlier, both seven and ten are numbers of completion. The number seven particularly carries the idea of divine will and creation and ten of the Commandments. God's will and creation is to forgive transgressions against the Commandments. The meaning then is clearly not literal. Jesus does not teach that we should forgive our brother 490 times and then never again. By

means of this symbolic number and its factors, he teaches that we should forgive him forever, or that we should forgive him until there are no more sins to forgive, until it is completely finished, as full as  $7 \times 7 \times 10$ .

Because of the completeness of this number, there is also the idea here that the number should not be broken. So that every time we forgive our brother we do not subtract one, but rather we start back at zero again. How many more chances does my brother have after the first sin, after I have forgiven him one time? 489? No, 490! Seventy times seven. How many times after I have forgiven him 232 times? It is still 490 times. It never ends. That is the forgiveness we receive from God and it means that what Jesus teaches here is the same as He has taught us in the Lord's Prayer.

The numbers in the Bible do more than measure or count things. They show us that God cares about the details and they help to reveal something of God's perfect love for us in Jesus Christ. They also help to tie the various historical events together and remind us of who Jesus is for us. Numbers alone cannot convey the Gospel, the Good News of the forgiveness we have in Jesus. But, if they are taken seriously, they can help to open the Scriptures for us, and the student who learns to pay attention to them will find comfort through them.

### **Closing Prayer**

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We praise You, God; Your name we bless  
And worship You in humbleness;  
From day to day we glorify  
Our everlasting God on high.  
Of Your great glory do we sing,  
And to Your throne our thanks we bring.

*("All Glory Be to God Alone," LSB 948:2; LW 210:2)*

# THE COUNTING GOD

## God Counts and Biblical Numbers

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What are some common numbers in the Bible? Are there any patterns?

## God Counts in Love

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Read **Genesis 1:1–2:3**. How are the days counted? How does this relate to Sunday morning worship?

Read **Matthew 10:28–31**. What does this tell us about God?

## Symbolism Based in History

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Do numbers mean more than what they count? What do the numbers 1776 and 1492 mean to you? What about thirteen stripes and fifty stars on an American flag? How many shots in a twenty-one gun salute? What does it mean?

Read again the familiar words of **John 3:16**. How does God love you? What does the word *so* mean in the phrase *God so loved the world*?

Read **Luke 15:4–7**. How many sheep are there? How does the shepherd know?

Read **Ezekiel chapters 40–41**. How many times does the word *cubit* occur? How about *rod*? What numbers are mentioned? What else? Why are the measurements so precise?

### **God Counts the Innumerable**

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Read **Psalms 40**. What is the number of God's merciful works? What makes David sing? Pay special attention to **verses 11–13**. How many evils surround David? Who can count them? What is the familiar phrase in this psalm?

### **Sinners Count to Him**

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Read **Luke 7:37–39**. Think to yourself about Jesus' words about counting the hairs of our heads while you read this. How does that color what the woman does to our Lord's feet with her hair? Now read **Luke 7:44–50**.

### **An Introduction to the Symbolism of Biblical Numbers**

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Read **Revelation 7:4–9**. How many saints does John see? Notice the number in **verse 4** and the number in **verse 9**. What are some clues that this is a symbolic number and not literal? What are its factors? And what does this tell us about how many people will be in heaven?

If 144,000 is a symbolic number, why can't the six days of creation be symbolic and not literal?

What about rounding? Read **1 Samuel 17:40**. Why five stones?

Read **Exodus 12:37–38**. How many people would that be with women and children? Is the Bible exaggerating?

## Key Numbers

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7</b>		<b>12</b>
		<b>40</b>

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