

# Numbers

## The Brazen Serpent



I think you would agree with me that the reason many of us don't like the numbers, names, genealogies, or the censuses in the Bible is because we just don't really understand them. Numbers, for some reason, are confusing if you do not understand numbers. But if you are a person who is into numbers and understand the value of numbers, it is a fascinating field of study. Let me give you some numbers that are really important; 10 for 10, versus 13 for 24. That was huge! Now, let me put a name with those numbers. Yukon; 10 for 10, and University of Kentucky; 13 for 24. The context is free throws. Yukon, 10 for 10, was national champions, and Kentucky, 13 for 24, was runner-up for the fourth time. But, we just don't like to hang runner-up banners.

The numbers in the book of Numbers tell a story. Just as the government takes the census every ten years in the United States to understand the strength and the resources of the nation, God takes a census of His people so that the nation can plan for the next ten years. According to Moses in the beginning of the Exodus, Seventy people went down into Egypt. Joseph was already there. Now, as the children of Israel get ready to leave Sinai and head to Kadesh-Barnea on the banks of the Jordan to take the Promised Land, God has them take a census. There were 603,550 men of war. Can you imagine? You started out with a total of seventy, and now, when you just count the men who are 20 years old and up, men who are able to fight, there are 603,550 people. This did not count women and children. That means there were roughly two and a half to three, possibly four million people getting ready to take possession of the Promised

Land. Is that amazing, or is that amazing? When you think of Numbers, I want you to think of four things:

### **1. Israel trusted God to get them out of Egypt.**

Egypt is now behind them. They have been to Mount Sinai, they have received the Law, and they have received the Tabernacle; it has been constructed. God is getting ready to speak to them again from the door of the Tabernacle. Notice where they are in Numbers 1:1; they are in the wilderness. Now in English, we call this book the book of Numbers because of the two censuses that are taken in the book. One of the first generation, and then one of the second generation in Numbers 26. But the Hebrew's do not call this the book of Numbers. In their Bible, they call it in 'The Wilderness.' Now don't picture the wilderness of the Amazon with plenty of animals, a lot of water, and trees everywhere. Picture the desert. That is what the wilderness was in this part of the world. Now remember, in order for God to get them to get them to where He wanted them to go, He had to get them through.

### **2. Israel did not trust God to get them through the wilderness.**

Why is this important? Because when they did not trust God to get them through the wilderness, what they did not trust was God's plan for their life. Did anybody catch that? Do you remember Exodus 13:17-18? God made a strategic decision not to take Israel by the way of the Philistines because He knew they were not ready for war. He took them by way of the wilderness to the Red Sea so that when they got to the bank, they would be equipped for battle. From God's perspective, there were not 603,550 men who were equipped for battle and are ready to take the Promised Land. Why? Because God not only wanted to get Israel out of Egypt, He wanted to get Egypt out of Israel. So He took them by the way of the Red Sea through the wilderness, and as they were in the wilderness getting to know Him, they would learn to do things His way instead of their way.

But Israel did not trust God to get them through the wilderness. When we read the book of Numbers, it is going well. First we have the census, and then we redeem the first born by God choosing the Levites. He sets them over the Tabernacle, which is where God's presence is going to dwell and where God's Word will be revealed. God chooses 22,000 Levites out of the nation of Israel to minister in the Tabernacle, to guard the Tabernacle, and to transport the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was like an RV, a pop-up, so to speak. It took 22,000 men to transport, guard, and minister in the presence of God. Then God gives a vow to a person who wants to be specially dedicated to Him, the Nazarite vow. Once that Tabernacle is set up, God takes an offering from His people. For twelve days, a chief from a different clan would step forward and bring an offering to the Tabernacle so that the Levites had plenty of resources to minister on behalf of God to the people, and then it happened. You knew it was coming, right? When you don't trust, you know what you do; you complain. When you don't trust, you get nitpicky. When you don't trust, you become critical. Ultimately, when we don't trust, it means we really don't know.

We used to sing a song in the small church I was raised in: "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." Do you know why trust leads to obedience? It is because trust comes from knowing, and knowing comes from being around. The whole purpose of this wilderness journey was to let Israel hang out with God, because they had been hanging out with Egyptians for over 400 years, and God wanted them to hang with Him. As they hung with Him, they would get to know Him, and as they got to know Him, they would learn to trust Him. As they learned to trust Him, they would obey Him. When you don't obey, when you gripe, complain, bellyache, or bicker, it is a sign of a lack of trust.

Israel did not trust God to get them through the wilderness. I mean, guys, they were so close being where they were supposed to be. But they were still going through, still in the wilderness, and it just started like this: *I am so tired of this bread, we have been eating it every day! Man, we were in Egypt, and at least we had meat!* Are you kidding me? Have you ever heard of that straw that breaks the camel's back? That was the straw that

broke Moses's back. He now goes before God and said, are you kidding me? After all I've done for them, you've still got me leading them? Hey God, did I conceive them? Did I give birth to them? Did I raise them? This is just more than I can stand! If this is the way it is going to be God, why don't You just kill me? Would a congregation of God's people ever wonder what it would be like to be the shepherd and have this thought: I'd rather be dead as lead those people! Now when God calls a man, He's not going to let him out of the call, but God said, okay Moses, you can't handle this, so here is what I'm going to do. We're going to elect seventy men, and they are going to be elders; they are going to help you. I'm going to take some of your spirit and put it on them, and you are going to give them some authority, so you've now got some helpers. Now get back to what I've called you to do, and that's to lead my people into the Promised Land. Now all of a sudden, when the spirit comes upon these elders, they prophesied like Moses did. But there were two guys that were not at the tent, and they prophesied later. Then Joshua comes and tells Moses about it, and Moses said, are you jealous? Would that all of God's people prophesy, meaning, I wish God called all to be prophets.

In the next chapter, Miriam and Aaron turn on Moses, and they just ask this question: Is Moses the only one God speaks through? Doesn't He speak through us too? Why isn't anybody recognizing it? And the Bible tells us that the reason they murmured against Moses and brought a leadership question was because they never liked their sister-in-law. It's amazing what we will do sometimes to mask what is really the problem. I can't tell you how many times God's people will not deal with what is really wrong. And boy, God showed up and confirmed that Moses was the only prophet He had that He spoke mouth to mouth and face to face with. Moses beheld the glory of God, and Moses gets them to the bank.

Now guys, this is important. You have to understand, they were there, at the bank; they were ready to take the Promised Land. But before they take it, God wants them to see how good this land that He's been telling them about is, so He has them to choose 12 spies, one from each tribe, and they are going to send the spies in for 40 days. That is a big number; that's a good number. That is an important number because this is the book of

Numbers. Why is 40 important? In the Bible, 40 seems to stand for a time of testing. It also sometimes speaks of a generation. So this number, 40, is very important. They go in the land for 40 days, and they are supposed to check out the land and come back and say that the land is the way God said it was. They go into the land, they check it out for 40 days and they come back. They say it is as God says it is, but then, oh boy, did they mess up... (Can I just call a time out here and say this? If you are ever on a committee in church, make sure you do what you are supposed to do, and only what you are supposed to do.) The committee altered their assignment. After they brought the report, only Caleb and Joshua said let's go do it. But the others said, we can't, "*...for we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.*" Did anybody catch that? The reason that Israel did not trust God in the wilderness to get them through is because Israel really had their eye on themselves instead of on God. When you have your eye on yourself and form an opinion of yourself based on how you see yourself, you think everybody else sees you the same way. The ten spies saw themselves as grasshoppers when they saw the inhabitants of Canaan and they thought, if we see ourselves as a grasshopper, they must see us that way too. Why are so many of us tucking and running? It is because that's how we see ourselves, and we think that is how the one we are running from sees us too. It is a lack of faith.

In a couple of weeks, we will study the book of Joshua. I want to point out what Rahab told the spies who went into Jericho. She said, where have you been? We've been waiting forty years for you to get here. What were you doing in the wilderness for forty years? They said, well, we were afraid of how big you all were. She said, you were afraid of how big we were? We have been afraid of how big your God is!

### **3. They did not trust God to get them into the land.**

Yes, the wilderness journey is about us, but more than that, it is about our God. So the Israelites are now standing on the bank, but when they were in the wilderness, they wished they had died in Egypt.

Guys, this is what the redemption was all about. Their redemption was all about getting them out so God could get them in. The journey from there to here was so that when they got there, they would be ready to be there. And according to God, they were ready, but they didn't see themselves ready. So now they were saying, if we take the land, we are going to die in the land by the sword. So we would really be better off if we just died in the wilderness!

This is that straw that broke the camel's back...now God is ticked. Earlier in the Bible, when Miriam and Aaron questioned Moses leadership, he was the meekest man on the earth; that is strength under control. Now, God is telling Moses that He is going to wipe out Israel and make a mightier nation of him than He even would have of them. I don't know about you, but I think right here would be the time for Moses to say, *God I think you are right. Let's just wipe them out and start all over with me and my family. I'm in.* But, no not Moses. Do you know why? It was because for the most part during the journey, (unlike the people) Moses did not have his eye on himself. Moses had his eye on God, and he was not worried about his reputation; he was only worried about God's reputation. So Moses said, God, if you kill them all right now as one man, here on this side of the bank, all of the nations who have heard about Your fame will think You brought them out, but was not able to bring them in. What will this say about You? Moses gets it, amen? And you know what God does, He spares His judgement. But on the sake of His life, God said, As long as I live, (and boy when God says as long as I live, it's going to come to pass) everyone of this unbelieving generation will die in the wilderness. And for every day the spies were in the land, I'm going to multiply it by a year, and you will wander for forty years in the wilderness. And you grumbled that your kids would die, but they aren't going to fall prey. They are going to be the ones to take the land. So now Israel changes their mind and decide to go in. Moses told them they had better not, but they do and they get whipped.

Do we want to be there as a church? In our daily Scripture reading, the first Scripture was 1st Corinthians 10. It teaches that the Church has the

same tendencies that Israel had. Have you ever had someone who really knows you well tell you that you were like your daddy, or like your momma? I mean like maybe that person you are married to...They aren't talking about the ten things that are great about your momma or your daddy. They're talking about that thing your momma or daddy does wrong, and now you've just been told you do it too. How come we are the only one that sees that and you don't?

You see, there were a whole lot of people that came out of Egypt, but some of them came out for the wrong reason. They really didn't come out because they had faith in God. I don't mean to be critical here, but it is kind of like the old revivals, you know, 25 people came down after the first one came down. The first one probably meant business, but somewhere in the other 25, about half of them just got in on what was going on because they thought it was the right thing to do. It was harder to sit where you were with all the sinners going down there, so it was just better to join them. But a lot of them went back to their seat, just like they were when they went down. It is the same way in Vacation Bible School; when that first seven year old goes, you can't keep the class from going.

To be totally honest, if I were a Hebrew slave in Egypt, when the train started moving, I would have got on the train. God knew that not everybody that came out would go in. That is why He took the time on the journey for them to truly get to know who they were following. But when they get to the bank, they reveal who they really are; they don't trust. They didn't trust His plan, they didn't trust the process, they didn't trust His person, and they didn't trust His Word. Therefore, because they didn't trust, when they got to the bank, they didn't go in.

Let me just say that if you are not trusting what God is doing with you through the wilderness, when you get to the bank, you will not go in. Because if you don't have faith in the wilderness, you will not have faith on the bank. Quit trying to cut out the wilderness! Quit trying to speed up the process. The author of the plan is the author of the process.

## **4. They died in the wilderness because of their unbelief.**

I can't imagine this. You have the possibility of living in the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey and you choose not to believe, therefore you die in the wilderness. So what do we learn from this as a church? First, we learn to trust in God's plan. Then, we must trust God's process. After we have trusted God's plan and God's process, we must also trust God's presence. And then we must trust God's Word. The wilderness journey for us is about believing this. He has a plan for us. His ultimate plan is for us to be like Jesus. God has some stops along the way, and in those stops, we are to stand still, see the Lord, and understand what in me still thinks like Adam would think, instead of thinking what Christ would think.

Then I have got to trust God's process. Now listen, God didn't take me the same way He took some of you. The reason why some of you wives can't understand your husbands is because God's plan is the same, but His process is different. God's process is different because our pasts are different. If your husband or your wife has a different past than you have, God's plan to make you like Jesus will be the same, but the process to get both of you there will be different. So, what we learn to do is trust His presence. God has given us His Son and He has placed Holy Spirit within us. There is not a place we go where He does not go with us. Then, we have got to trust His word.

### **Redemptive Markers**

We're going to review the redemptive markers in a moment, but here is one of those redemptive markers. In the wilderness, God told the children of Israel to put a tassel on the corner of their garment and put a blue cord in the tassel. God told Moses that Israel has eyes and a mind that whore after what it wants instead of wanting what He wants. So He said to remember when you see the tassel, "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of Egypt." This is saying that Israel needed a daily reminder in their life to remind them to not look at life from their point of view, but to look at life from God's point of view.

We need God's word. We have got to be reprogrammed, so that we can think like God thinks. Does that make sense? If not, some of us are going to die in the wilderness and never see the Promised Land.

There is a story in here that just shook me. Ninety-nine percent of his life, Moses did it right. But after a while, leading that many people doing their own thing, he got so frustrated! He goes before God, because again they have no water. God said, Moses, take the stick and just go speak to the rock and when you speak to the rock, I will bring forth water. Moses stands before the rock, gathers the people around, takes the stick, but instead of speaking to the rock, he took the stick and smacked it two times. You have to get this point. This wasn't a woot, woot, praise the Lord...it was a WHACK, WHACK! I think meaning, God is going to give you water, but I don't think you deserve water, so I'm not going to speak to the rock. I'm going to strike the rock. Now, I don't know about you, but if I was God, (I'm not, but if I was) Moses would be dead. I mean He killed Nadab and Abihu! Now the man of God stands before God's people and does not do it God's way, he totally does it another way. Our gracious God gives the people water anyway, but poor Moses....God told Moses that because you didn't obey Me and you struck instead of speaking to the rock, you will not lead these people into the Promised Land.

I heard a story this week that the man who pastors the largest church in the world has being indicted for embezzling. Another church in Ft. Lauderdale Florida has a church that has grown, since 1985, to now over 20,000 in attendance, and they just discovered the pastor has been having multiple affairs for several years. We want to ask, how does the work of God go on? It goes on despite God's leaders, but don't think God won't judge those in leadership, He will. But when He judges them, the work of His body, the work of His nation, the work of His kingdom goes on because it is not about us, it's about Him.

Let me give you some quick redemptive markers:

1. Chapter 1:2-3; 46: The Census
2. Chapter 6:23-27 The Blessing of God's Name

This is God putting His name upon Israel so that He could bless them. If you have ever watched Robert Schuller, he would end every broadcast and say the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. And that was God's plan for His people. That is what God's presence brought to His people.

3. Chapter 14:28-35: The Consequence of Unbelief

4. Chapter 15:37-41: The Tassels

5. Chapter 27:12-23: A New Shepherd

When God tells Moses that he won't lead His people in, the plan didn't stop with Moses. God raised up a new shepherd and that shepherd's name is Joshua.

## **Jesus in Numbers**

Did you see Jesus in the book? I want to tell you two of the places I saw Him. The first place was in the wilderness. The wilderness has been designed by God to reveal who we are. So on God's side there are tests, but on Satan's side there are temptations. In the wilderness, God allows us to get in positions and when we do, He uses that position, that circumstance, that person, to reveal who we are.

I see it all the time. It happens to you in business. It happens to you in relationships. There is a man I have known ever since I was little bitty. He was one of my principles when I was in school. He does not attend the Baptist Church. He attends another church, but he has always attended church. I was in a business this week and I saw this man walk out. I had no idea what he had bought. He had gone out, and in a little while, he came back in. When he came back in, he opened up his sack and gave the receipt to the lady. They pulled everything out of his sack and she said, "wow, I can't believe you brought that back, but no, you didn't pay for it." It was less than two bucks. What would you have done? She had made a mistake in his favor. A Christian took back what he didn't pay for, even though somebody else made the mistake. I can't tell you how that spoke to

my heart. I wanted to get one of those big horns and say CHRISTIAN, CHRISTIAN; CHRISTIAN. EVERYBODY LOOK, HERE IS THE REAL DEAL! I don't know if that was a temptation from Satan or a test by God, but a man stepped forward and revealed who he really was; He was honest. And we want to complain and bellyache about having to go back to take back something, because somebody else made a mistake!

Israel failed miserably in the wilderness, and every man does. Israel complained about no food, no water, and how tired they were. According to Matthew, chapter 4, before Jesus did His public ministry as the son of man, He went to the wilderness. He was not lured there by Satan, He was driven there by the Holy Spirit, and Satan was there and tempted Him for forty days. For forty days before Satan showed up, so it would be a fair fight, so He could really represent us, with no water, no food, exhausted, and in a state of total weakness, Jesus was tempted three times. But because He believed in God's plan for Him, because He believed in God's process for Him to go to the cross, because He believed in God's presence, because He believed in God's word; He came out of that victorious!

And secondly, I see Him on the cross. Did you see it? Israel is griping, complaining, and God sends snakes; snakes biting everywhere. They cry out for a savior and Moses prays to God. God said to just put a serpent on a pole and anybody who will look will be healed. Can I just say that in this day of scientific discovery...that is the stupidest thing I've ever heard? Sounds like an old wives tale to me. Tell me how looking at something on a pole can heal you from a disease? NOT possible! And while all things are impossible with men, all things are possible with God. Do you know what it took to look at the pole? It took faith. So every person who had the bite of sin in them, the snake bite, was healed.

This is why Jesus said to Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so I must be lifted up, for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life." What is the context? God loved us so much that He put His Son on a cross because we had been bitten by the snake bite of sin, and the only cure is to look to the One hanging on the cross. That doesn't make scientific sense, and it will not make sense to you

until the Holy Spirit of God moves on your heart, opens your eyes to your situation, that you are going to die in the wilderness in a state of unbelief and never enter into the Promised Land. Oh you are in the crowd, you are on a committee, you are serving in the ministry, but you have never acknowledged you have a problem. You are a sinner. You are just trying to get in among everybody. Being among everybody, will not change who you are until you who are in the wilderness, come to the One who went through the wilderness for you, so He could go to the cross and die in your place.