



MORE THAN ARITHMETIC

Numbers 1–4

In these opening chapters of Numbers, we see God preparing His people for their journey to the promised land. He not only begins preparing them for the military operation to come; He also stresses the spiritual priorities that will make them successful in their daily lives.

As we begin our journey through the Old Testament book of Numbers, I think I hear some of you saying, “Oh, no, the Book of Numbers! Can any good thing come out of Numbers?” Well, maybe that’s because you’re intimidated by numbers, especially if you’re like I was back in high school, where I failed Algebra I and had to take it again in summer school in order to get into college. And I barely passed the course the second time and got into college on probation. I had a problem with numbers.

Now, how did a book of the Bible get a title like this? The simple answer is that many centuries ago when the Old Testament was translated from the Hebrew language into the Greek language, the translators

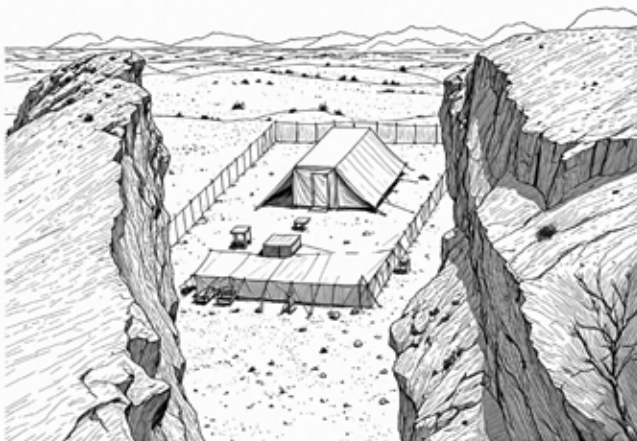
gave this book the name *Arithmoi*, which gives us our word *arithmetic*, and is translated into English, “Numbers.” This title was chosen because a national census—a numbering of the people—opens the book, and then another one occurs at the end of the book.

The Hebrew title of this book is *Bemidbar*, which means “in the wilderness.” That name was chosen because the book opens in verse 1, “The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai.” Everything that takes place in the book of Numbers is entirely in the wilderness.

For Moses and the people of Israel, the Sinai wilderness was a place of spiritual challenge and discipline. Sometimes we find ourselves in a “wilderness” of our own making. At other times God leads us into a “wilderness” to strengthen our faith.

And for all of us, the way out of our wilderness is to trust and obey the Lord. Because Israel will fail to do that, they’re going to spend a long time in the wilderness.

By the way, the only survival skills you need in the wilderness, beloved, is trust in the will of God and obedience to the Word of God.



Model of the Tabernacle



Well, right here at the beginning of this book, we have the first numbering of Israel and the reason for it, as the Lord speaks in verses 2-3:

“Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans ... according to the number of names, every male ... from twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war.”

Israel was facing war with all the nations of people who lived in Canaan, the land God had promised to give the children of Abraham centuries earlier and to which He was now leading them. The Canaanites had polluted this land with their wickedness and idolatry.

Now these wicked nations knew what was coming and who was coming their way. They could have chosen to lay down their weapons, repent of their sins, and submit to the Lord. But they're not about to do that, just as the world today isn't about to surrender their lives to the Lord. They would rather fight against God than lay down their arms and follow His leadership.

So here, the Lord is numbering His people in preparation for war. And all the way down to verse 46, the men capable of joining the army are enumerated at just over 600,000. The rest of the chapter explains that the tribe of Levi, Israel's priestly tribe, is exempt from military service because they are assigned to take care of the tabernacle.

Now as we move into chapter 2 of Numbers, there's a military tone to what the Lord instructs here. Verse 2: “The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses.”

Each tribe has its own logo, so to speak, embroidered on its own tribal flag. The rest of this chapter tells how the camp is to be arranged, with the tabernacle in the middle, and three tribes encamped on the east, three tribes on the west, and so on.

Note this little detail we are given here at the end of verse 2: “They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side.” The “tent of meeting” is another name for the tabernacle. This is the place where the visible presence of the God of the universe is manifested in the pillar of smoke and fire. Every tribe is to be positioned so that the flap of every household tent opens toward the presence of God. They couldn't possibly start their day without seeing the cloud of God's presence.

They couldn't go one day without being reminded that God was their Commander-in-Chief. He was personally leading them on this journey through the wilderness to the promised land.

Now in chapters 3 and 4, the military tone is set aside, and the focus is on the tabernacle and the worship of God. Chapter 3 begins by identifying the two remaining sons of Aaron and ordaining them into the priesthood. The rest of the chapter focuses on the descendants of Levi, and we're given here in verse 8 their specific job description: “They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle.”

Then in chapter 4, every aspect of setting up the tent of the tabernacle is assigned. Every single tent peg,

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all the tent coverings, the boards, the frame, the curtains—all of it could be set up and taken down in a matter of a few hours. The tabernacle came together like a puzzle whenever they set up camp. Everyone had his place of service, and the guy who drove in a tent peg was just as important as the guy who hung the curtain in the Holy Place.

What a great illustration this is of the church in this New Testament dispensation. Every believer has a part to play and a gift to use in service as we work together in worshiping the Lord and offering the world the genuine worship of God through Jesus Christ.

Now let me pull these four chapters together and see if we can get past all the numbers and details down to where we live.

First, I want you to notice how God gave just the right amount of information to Israel before they left on this journey. They might have wanted to know more about what was ahead—after all, God is numbering them for *battle*. But God gave them just enough information to get started.

You might want more information from the Lord right now about your walk of faith—some answers about the next step of faith—but God never lets you see around the corner, does He? The Christian life has a lot of corners you can't see around, until you get there. Well, just like the Israelites, you can trust God to give you just enough information to take the next step.

Second, during Israel's journey, every time they began a new day, they faced the sanctuary, the tabernacle of God. That's a great reminder for us to not walk out our front door each day without looking to the Lord for wisdom and direction.

¹ William Williams, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah."

I am reminded of that great hymn of the faith that calls us to depend on our gracious Lord as He faithfully leads us around every corner in life. It goes like this:

*Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with Thy pow'ful hand.¹*

Who in your life fits the description of the nations, Israel was going to encounter? What has kept you from relating to them to gain the right to the share the gospel with them? Why is praying for them an effective way to prepare both you and them for what wants to do in each of your lives? (Matthew 9:26-38)

Consider your daily routine. How intentional are you to remind yourself of God's presence in your life (Psalm 63:1)? Why is such a reminding exercise important for you, and those you may encounter today?

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