

Through the Bible Numbers 1-17, Psalm 90

Introduction

- Where are we? In the desert next to Mount Sinai
 - This book of the Bible is not actually called Numbers, it is called *Be-midbar*, "In the Wilderness" or "In the Desert"
 - Notice that the Torah was given to Israel in the desert, it was not given to them when they were in the land
 - Why? It was to teach them, and us, that the Torah is available to everyone, and the teachings don't belong just to one tribe of Israel.
 - We are told by the sages that we should make ourselves open, *hefker*, like the desert, to accept the teachings of the Torah.
- When? On the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt
 - That would be one week after the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which ends on the 21st day of the first month)
 - What's going on at that time? Counting the Omer (the days between Passover and the next holiday "Shavout" (49 days so also called Pentecost)
 - Due to the yearly reading cycle, this part of the Torah is always read the week before Pentecost in the synagogue

Numbers 1: The Census

- A census was taken, and this is the reason why this book is called Numbers in Christian Bibles
 - However, the sages say that counting people, assigning numbers to them, cheapens their value
 - You have greater value than a number you have been assigned
 - Tradition says that instead of counting people, Moses and Aaron counted coins, shekels, that they brought to the Tabernacle
- Why was a census needed?
 - To know the size of the army
 - To know how to organize the tribes (we will see that in a moment)
- When God tells Moses to count the people, he actually says:
 - שָׂאוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ כָּל־עֵדֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם
 - Raise up the heads of the people of Israel in their families

- Rabbi Dov Lipman says that this comes to teach us that every one of us has the ability to be a head of something, to lead something, but especially to lead their families
- However, don't get a big head
 - At the end of chapter 1, God says that the Levites are supposed to camp around the Tabernacle, and to camp/around form a barrier between the Tabernacle and the other tribes.
ASK: What does this mean?
 - By keeping unauthorized people from getting too close/desecrating it, they protect the Hebrews from the Lord's anger (1:53)
 - Notice the text says, "So the Israelites did everything just as the Lord had commanded Moses." (Numbers 1:54) They did not demand that they be given the same honor the Levites received
- What were the totals?
 - Reuben - 46,500
 - Simeon - 59,300
 - Gad - 45,650
 - Judah - 74,600
 - Issachar - 54,400
 - Zebulun - 57,400
 - Joseph (Ephraim) - 40,500
 - Manasseh - 32,200
 - Benjamin - 35,400
 - Dan - 62,700
 - Asher - 41,500
 - Naphtali - 53,400
 - Who is missing? The Levites! Why? They are caring for the Tabernacle (Numbers 1:47)
 - total able to go to war - 603,550
 - this is the fighting men only, which means the total population of Israel was somewhere in the **2-3 million range!**/some argue that this number is much less, maybe 40,000
 - they make this argument because the word "eleph" which means 1,000 everywhere else in scripture, they say means clans here
 - Some things to consider about this many people:
 - More Hebrews than Egyptians
 - Largest mobile population in history

- Crossing the Jordan River will take DAYS
- Crossing Edom (land) would be a line 50-100 miles long!
- Imagine circling Jericho!!! (still to come)
- When is a census acceptable? When God determines that it is! [David did not have permission to do a census, but he did it anyway. Things didn't work out for him...]

Numbers 2: Arrangement of the Camps

- Everyone had their own specific place to camp. Why?
- First, this is a lesson about *seder*, order...Orderliness is how we worship God, the key to success (and the key to managing this many ppl in the wilderness)
- Note the position of the Tabernacle, and by extension, the Torah, exemplified by the tablets in the Ark of the Covenant: Right in the middle of the camp, equidistant from all of the people
- This is to show us that the Torah is for all of us and should be central to our lives
- In the same way, we see that the Tree of Life was placed in the center of the Garden of Eden
- The Torah is connected to the Tree of Life through the teaching about Wisdom in Proverbs 3
 - "A tree of life it is to those who take hold of it, and happy are those who hold on to it. Its ways are pleasant ways, and all of its paths are peace."
- In synagogues today, this is symbolized by the placement of the *bema* (bee-muh), the table where the Torah scroll is placed when it is being read, which is right in the middle of the room (different from how we present Scripture in modern churches from the front of the room)
- Who was the closest to Moses?
 - Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun
 - Judah was the righteous tribe from which the King (David, and later Messiah) would come. See also the description of Issachar and Zebulun in Deuteronomy 33:18–19
 - The sages say that those who are righteous have an influence on those around them. Surround yourself with righteous people, understand the influence of those who love righteousness
 - The opposite is also true

Numbers 3 & 4: Levites

- What is a Levite? (what do we remember about Levi and Levites to this point:
 - Levi and Simeon slaughtered Shechem after the rape of their sister Dinah (Gen 34)
 - Levites chose the Lord's side after the Golden Calf in Ex 32
 - V. 29 Moses tells them they have ordained themselves for the service of the Lord
- What was their job in the Tabernacle?
 - Besides what we covered above (camping near and caring for it)
 - Redemption of firstborn sons
 - **READ NU 3:11-13**
 - See also NU 3:40-51(also referenced in Ex 13....including the Broke neck donkey)
 - Family of Gershon: the tabernacle and the tent, its covering, the curtains, and the ropes
 - Family of Kohath: the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the utensils of the sanctuary with which they minister, and the curtain between the two parts of the sanctuary
 - Note that they were not allowed to use any wagons or beasts of burden. They carried the holiest pieces of the entire Tabernacle, and had to hold onto the frames that carried the sacred objects with their hands. (I'm sure there's a homiletic lesson in there...)
 - Family of Merari: the framework of the tabernacle, its bars, its pillars, its bases, all its equipment, and the pillars around the courtyard with their bases, their pegs, and their ropes
- Again we see clear organization and guidelines for the care and transport (and RESPECT for the Tabernacle and its furnishing)
- Chapters 1-4 complete Israel's "registration"

Chapters 5 & 6: Purity & Nazirite vows

- Chapter 5 reiterates what to do regarding:
 - Disease
 - cleanliness vs uncleanness (both physically and spiritually)

- Marital faithfulness and suspicion of unfaithfulness
- Chapter 6 covers Nazirite Laws
 - Nazir is Hebrew for separate
 - Optional special vow to set self apart for the Lord (could even be in thanksgiving) and could be taken by man or woman
 - Requirements (for this optional vow)
 - No wine or alcoholic drinks (including vinegar)
 - No grape juice
 - Nothing from grapevine: grapes, raisins, seeds, skins etc
 - Never cut hair for the period of the vow
 - Stay away from a dead body for the period of the vow
 - If accidentally exposed to dead body, must shave hair and make an offering and rededicate themselves to their vow (start over)
 - After the completion of the vow: go to entrance of Tabernacle, offer sacrifices (including their shaved hair)
- Ch 6 ends with the “Priestly Blessing” also called “Aaronic Blessing”
 - Aaron and his sons were to bless the people of Israel with this:
 - Lord bless you and keep you:
 - not just a general blessing but the specific protection of the Lord
 - to “keep you,” words that have the sense of guarding or watching over someone...for Israel, this would have had a very practical application as they were surrounded by enemies, and God had promised to protect them as long as they were faithful to Him
 - The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you:
 - This had to do with experiencing God’s favor
 - Ancient Israel could expect God’s loving, gracious response to their calls for help
 - The Lord turn his face toward you and give you his peace:
 - the “face” of God and has the idea of His people receiving His full attention
 - Peace (*shalom*) is more than just an absence of warfare but a completeness or wholeness and maturity

- This shows us God's heart and love for his people, his faithfulness toward them and the nature of their relationship if Israel would remain faithful to God

Chapter 7: Offerings of Dedication

- Moses anointed the Tabernacle and set it apart as holy (Nu 7:1) along with its furnishings and the altar and utensils
- The rest of the chapter covers the offerings brought to Moses by the leaders of each tribe in dedication of the Tabernacle
- Notice: each offering included a silver platter and a silver basin.
 - We already know from Ex 32 that Israel melted down their gold to make a golden image to worship
 - AND Ex 35 & 36 tell us that the people had given so many gifts (objects of gold, fine threads and linens and that "all who had silver and bronze objects gave them as sacred offering to the Lord" until Moses had to tell them not to bring anymore gifts for Tabernacle construction (Ex 35:24 & 36:6)
 - And yet they still have this many silver items???
 - They were very rich when leaving Egypt AND how much did these items weigh them down?
- It ends with v. 89 "Whenever Moses went into the Tabernacle to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the Ark's cover – the place of atonement – that rests on the Ark of the Covenant."

Chapter 8: the Lamps (just a cool connection) & Levites

- God has Moses instruct Aaron that when he sets up the golden lampstands in the Tabernacle, their light is to shine forward
- So Aaron sets up seven lamps that reflect their light forward
- The lampstands were made of beaten gold
- Jesus will later refer to his followers as lamps/lights who must shine their light forward (Mt 5:14 you are the light of the world/Luke 11:14 you don't hide a light you place it on a stand for all to see/Acts 13:47 a light to the Gentiles)
- These followers (us) are formed/beaten by difficulty and trial...we are also precious (like gold)
- Ch 8 ends with (starting in v 10) instructions for the laying on of hands for the dedication of the Levites. This is Israel's recognition of the special status

of the Levites and their offering of them as representatives before the Lord (v. 16 which reiterates the Levites taking the place of the firstborn males of Israel)

Chapter 9: The Second Passover & The Fiery Cloud

- Not only is this the celebration of the second Passover (since the first one where God rescued Israel from Egypt) but it also addresses issues that could arise if someone is unclean/not present for passover...it should be celebrated one month later (with all the other regulations for Passover in place)
- Note: the specific instruction to NOT break any bones of the lamb...later John will refer to this in 19:36 in description of Jesus' legs not being broken
- Also note: those who do not celebrate Passover WILL be cut off from the community of Israel
- Foreigners are allowed to celebrate Passover if they would like to
- Vv. 15-23 we see the pillar of smoke and fire (or fiery cloud) return
- This passage parallels Ex 40:17 and chapters 34-38 and gives additional details about God's use of the pillar of cloud and fire to lead his people through the wilderness
- The fiery cloud, witnessed by even Israel's enemies was a clear symbol of God's glorious presence as they are about to pick up move in the next chapter

Chapter 10: the call to MOVE

- The trumpets were needed to give a clear signal to all of Israel (two trumpets) or to the leaders of Israel (one trumpet) that it was time to receive instructions (not ram's horns, made from silver)
- Trumpets become known for important pronouncements
- When it was time to move, the trumpets were supplemented by the movement of the pillar of cloud
- In this case, the trumpets were blown to begin to MOVE
- Can you imagine living in this tension that ANY day might be the day you move? Each morning, getting up and waiting to see how God leads and just following His leading?
Precisely how we should live
- Leaving Sinai was a pivotal moment in Israel's history
- Now Israel had the law and would be tested as to how they would keep it

- This is the beginning of the march toward Canaan, but is also the beginning of:
 - A season of God getting Egypt out of his people (not just getting people out of Egypt)
 - Freeing them from their slavery mindset (can't go into the land of freedom with a slavery mindset)
 - A "honeymoon" of sorts where the bride grows to know her groom and grows to trust Him
- Specific instructions are given for how to tear down 'camp' and in what order the tribes were to fall into line
- Note 10:33 indicates that the pillar of cloud also showed them where to stop and rest and note what Moses declared each time they started marching or stopped marching (10:35-36)

Chapters 11 & 12: God's Chastening

- We don't have to go far to begin learning how Israel will be tested as they learn to trust God
- Life as nomads in the wilderness is HARD ...Mt Sinai had provided a stable residence of sorts, but the road now has heat and thirst and fatigue
- and soon they begin to complain
- We will see a pattern from this point on through Numbers where God's people complain and God's anger blazes, with Moses as the mediator between
- In this case, the people complain and God sends a fire to range among them, destroying some...Moses' intercession stops the fire from God
- But soon the "foreign rabble" (interesting that foreigners had joined them) begin to crave the good things of Egypt
- This then spreads and Israel begins to crave meat and they remember the fish, cucumbers, melons, etc....and they "curse" the manna God provides them daily
- This is a different story than Exodus 16 when God sends quail to feed his people....they are (or are supposed to be) different people now...people of trust in the provision of God
- The manna is described (among other descriptions) as making pastries baked with olive oil...but they still complain
- Moses can hear all of the families "whining" (v. 10) and he is aggravated. The Lord is extremely angry

- Moses is frustrated that he is in charge of these people and he has no way to stop their whining because he cannot feed them all...he is one person and the load is too heavy
- God gives Moses instructions to choose 70 leaders (to help carry the load) and he puts his Spirit on these men
- He then has Moses tell the people to prepare for meat...so much it will make them sick
- Moses can't imagine how God will provide this much meat and God responds asking Moses "has my arm lost its power"?
- And then the Lord sends quail...for miles in every direction the quail flew 3 feet above the ground/were 3 feet deep on the ground with no one gathering less than 50 bushels/10 homers/220 liters....2 sites said 475 pounds but lots of arguments if this is exaggerated...the point is: a gag-worthy amount!
- NU 11:33 "while they were still GORGING themselves on the meat – while it was still in their mouths – the anger of the Lord blazed against the people and he struck them with a severe plague."
- That place was called Kibroth Hattaavah = graves of craving/lust/gluttony
- It genuinely astounds me that the people are looking back at their time in 'brutal slavery' with fondness, longing for 'the good ol days'
- But before we judge, we do this too: look back with 'rose colored glasses' and not see accurately how good we have things with GOD and wishing we could go back to the things that were part of our life as a captive
- This reminder is sobering: cravings don't lead me, emotions don't lead me, I choose to put my trust in God, He leads me
- And then we go right into the story of Moses' closest allies, his brother and sister turn on him behind his back and complain about his leadership
- God sends all three to the Tabernacle and visits them in the cloud where he calls out Moses and Miriam and defends Moses as his chosen
- God is angry with them and strikes Miriam with leprosy (once again Aaron dodges the punishment physically, but suffers for how he has participated and he cries out to Moses admitting their sin
- Moses intercedes on their behalf (assumedly forgiving them) and God gives her 7 days of leprosy before allowing her to be "healed"

Chapters 13 & 14: Unbelief

- We are now to the point where Israel SHOULD be entering the land God promised them
- We can see that they are not mature and ready...and God sees that too
- These people don't fully trust God, they don't believe He will do what He has promised
- Spies go in to explore the land
- After 40 days, the report is incredible regarding the bounty of the land and bleak regarding the current inhabitants
- Joshua and Caleb try to encourage the people that with God, they can take the land!
- But the people are afraid and wish they had died already and they rebel against Moses and Aaron (and by proxy, God)
- The root of all unbelief is Fear
- There are many correlations for us to grasp here:
 - We struggle to trust God's word...our fear causes unbelief
 - Instead of claiming Canaan (the promise) we wander in the wilderness of unbelief
 - We live "in between" in our spiritual lives, having been delivered from Egypt but not yet entering into our inheritance in Christ
 - Hebrews 3 & 4 is the NT commentary on these chapters (you can read those later)
- The unbelief of God's people here, is that it robbed them of blessing and inheritance
- God is angry
- Moses intercedes (arguing with God "what will the Egyptians think when they hear?" about God destroying Israel)
- Moses even quotes God TO God! "you said you are slow to anger..."
- The Lord relents and agrees to pardon the people....but only the children under age 20 (or those yet to be born) along with Joshua and Caleb will enter the land
- The Lord has Moses tell the people that they will all die in the wilderness and "your children will be like shepherds, wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. In this way you will pay for your faithlessness until the last of you lies dead in the wilderness" (Nu 14:32 & 33)
- These 40 years are correlated to the 40 days the spies spent in the land, and in the ancient Hebrew world, the number 40 represented testing (CAN YOU THINK OF OTHER 40's in the Bible?)

- Then the 10 spies who gave a bad report were struck dead with a plague..only Joshua and Caleb remained living
- The people are struck with grief..so they decide to disobey AGAIN and try to take the land, but they were immediately attacked and driven back...it was obvious God was not in this battle and was not (yet) giving them the land

(quickly) Chapter 15

- Covers offerings, what happens if you break the Sabbath (again, God is trying to get Egypt out of his people....the land where you must work work work and produce produce produce)
- And it also mentions tassels on clothing as a visual reminder to obey the Lord....fully.....all of his commands
- I couldn't help but wonder how much it might help us obey God with a visual reminder all the time? This one reason why I carry my Bible

Chapter 16

- Describes the terrifying story of Korah and what could happen if you rebel against a leader God has appointed
- Korah (a Levite) gathered 250 others to usurp Moses' authority. The text says he stirred up "the entire community against Moses and Aaron"
- He obviously thought he could do a better job than Moses...a cautionary moment! Because he wasn't just revolting against Moses, but also against GOD
- God is ANGRY
- In spite of the unjust treatment of the rebellion Korah incites, Moses intercedes for all of the people caught up in Korah's rebellion, but Moses declares the judgement Korah will face
- Moses proposed a test to prove the source of his authority/Korah and his followers did not pass the test
- God opened up the earth and swallowed the rebels, their families, and all their possessions
- Furthermore, "fire came out from the LORD" and consumed the other 250 men who were party to Korah's rebellion
- The rest of the Israelites were terrified and fled
- the 250 incense burners the rebellious men uses are hammered into a thin sheet that was overlayed on the altar as a reminder

- The following day, instead of being convinced that God had vindicated Moses and Aaron, the congregation began complaining that they had “killed the LORD’s people”
- For this act of rebellion, God threatened to destroy the whole congregation and sent a plague among them
- Moses and Aaron interceded (again) for the rebels and averted a complete catastrophe
- In the end, 14,700 Israelites had died and provision is made for the purification of the rest of Israel

And this is how Israel begins their 40 years of wilderness wandering

A word about the Wilderness

- Before we close out today’s reading, let’s talk a minute about the wilderness/desert, the role of the shepherd and the role of the sheep
- We know the general area where the Israelites are
- This area is:
 - Arid, little to no rainfall
 - Water and food are scarce
 - The elements are extreme (only 2 seasons: extreme heat in summer and warm in winter during day but very cold at night)
 - No shelter from elements
 - No safety/protection
 - Completely exposed and desperate for provision EACH DAY
- In Hebrew, word for literal desert is **mdbr** (pronounced midbar)
*note: no vowels in Hebrew
- Hebrew language uses word trees built off of a root word
- A group of consonants form a root word and then a bunch of words get formed off the root word just by switching the breathing mark which makes the vowel sound
- Remember English relies on definitions, but Hebrew relies on images
- English has about 400,000 words and Hebrew about 8,000 so these words pack a LOT of meaning
- So root word for desert is **mdbr** is **dbr** (debar) which means **WORD**
 - Mdbr=desert
 - Dbr=word

- Next associated word is **dbb(e)r** (pronounced dibair) which means **SPEAK**
- And a big word in this word tree is **mddb(i)r** (pronounced modbeer) which means **SHEPHERD**
- And lastly (for our purposes) we have **d(o)ber** (pronounced dobair) which means **PASTURE**
- **These are all desert words**
- What do desert, word and speak have to do with each other?
- In this culture, the imagery is that we go to the desert to learn how to listen to the Word that is spoken
- And who speaks to us? The Modbeer/Shepherd
- As the shepherd leads with their voice, the sheep, who know voice of their shepherd, must follow in order to be protected and provided for...they will not find pasture on their own
- Reference Psalm 23
 - American version of pasture v. reality..tufts of grass, difficult to get to, difficult terrain, hard to find
 - He leads me to still waters? Not a bubbling brook, puddles of dirty stagnant water
- We have to understand the desert: It is in THIS environment that God's people (his sheep) are having to learn to listen to the voice of their shepherd (in a physical sense this is Moses, but quite literally it is the voice of THE shepherd: God) and obey that voice!
- We don't live in this desert, but metaphorically and spiritually we must all walk through deserts
- Bruce Feiler (Jewish author, speaker and presenter) said of the desert: "Because the place is demanding, it builds character, because it's destructive, it builds interdependence, because it's isolating it builds community and because it's a desert it builds nations."
- We also have to understand the Shepherd: **A Shepherd's roles are to lead, protect and provide for his sheep...even in a place where provision is scarce**
- The Shepherd KNOWS the sheep have to:
 - Eat, sleep, rest
 - The Shepherd knows the sheep can't find their way on their own and must be led
 - The Shepherd knows the sheep are weak to elements and predators and must be protected...he does not need to be reminded of this

- And we also have to understand the sheep. They have **one job: listen to the Shepherd and follow Him**
 - The cruelty of the desert reinforces in the sheep a dependence on the Shepherd
 - They can try to wander off on their own, but they will not survive if they do, they must follow the Shepherd
- And one last thing, the sheep must also learn a principle in the desert: the principle of JUST ENOUGH
 - The desert is not a place of abundance
 - You must learn to be ok in this moment
 - you don't know where the next meal will come from
 - **but what you must learn is if you are with your Shepherd, you will be led to the place where you have enough for right now**
 - In Egypt, God's people had learned to depend on Pharaoh to provide for them as well as their own ability to produce
 - but God didn't just want to get his people out of Egypt, he wanted to get Egypt out of his people!
 - in the desert they now must learn that their provision comes from God alone
 - In the desert God's people learn **that they have what they need for right now**

This is the lesson Israel must learn, and the lesson we must still learn today
 Encouragement to read Psalm 90: MOSES' Psalm!