

Numbers Chapter 1 v 1 - 3

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[0 : 00] Reading from verse 1. For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.

They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. Their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

Do not be idolaters, as some of them were. As it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did.

And in one day, 23,000 of them died. We should not test Christ, as some of them did, and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did, and were killed by the destroying angel.

[1 : 18] These things happened to them as examples, and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

So if you think you're standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. No temptation has overtaken you, except what is coming to mankind. And God is faithful.

He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out, so that you can endure it.

Though we read from 1 Corinthians 10, I'm going to ask you actually to turn in your Bible back to Numbers.

Numbers in chapter 1. Because what I hope, God willing, is over the coming months, to be able to take a journey through the book of Numbers.

[2 : 20] And so I'm going to read the first two verses, just the first two verses of chapter 1 this evening. And then we're going to have a bit of an introduction for ourselves. So Numbers in chapter 1, that's page 133.

Page 133. Just the first two verses. The Lord spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt. He said, Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one.

Numbers. It's a rather off-putting title, isn't it? Unless, like Barry, you're a great maths aficionado and love Numbers, or you're an accountant or something like that.

Numbers. It doesn't strike the heart with immediate excitement or thrill, even as a believer. It doesn't make us want to open it up and read it.

[3 : 31] I wonder, I'm not going to ask, how many of us have actually read the whole of Numbers all the way through? And if we did it once, is that the only time we've ever done it? Even those books that have titles that we don't understand, like Deuteronomy and Leviticus, if we don't know anything about them, they've got an air of mystery about them, something a bit different about them, rather than Numbers.

But that isn't the original title of the book. That comes from the Greek translation, known as the Septuagint, which was put together even before the time of our Lord Jesus.

And in that Greek translation, the book is called Arithoi. Arithoi, which makes you think of the word arithmetic. Arithmetik. That's where we get our word arithmetic from.

In fact, the Hebrew title for this book is a lot more exciting. It's called In the Wilderness. That'd be great. Wouldn't that be a much better title for us to call this book?

In the Wilderness. Because, of course, that's how it starts, don't we? The Lord spoke to Moses in the tent in the wilderness, or the desert of Sinai. It sounds something like a sort of Arabian Nights, doesn't it?

[4 : 48] An adventure. Or even Lawrence of Arabia. There's that sense of something happening, something going on in the desert. And it would perhaps make us feel all the more excited about reading it.

In fact, that is really the whole theme of the book. It's not just about numbers. It is about what happened to God's people as they traveled through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land over the course of 40 years.

It's an adventure story. It's a travelogue in one sense. It's a road movie telling off these lives that were so affected and changed and what happened to them along the way.

Yes, there are some numbers, of course, that are there in the first few chapters and perhaps a little later on as well. But they're just a small part of this great portion of God's Word.

But you may even still be, after my seeking to enthuse you with the idea of numbers, going, well, why are we still reading it anyway? It's 3,000 years ago in a part of the Middle East that none of us have probably ever been to or ever will go there.

[5 : 57] And we're 21st century Christians living in North Yorkshire or wherever we are. So how does it got to do with us? The very fact that the weather is ever so different is enough in itself to want us to feel as if we shouldn't be reading it.

And, of course, the landscape, nothing like ours. Well, apart from the very obvious reasons why we should be studying numbers, it's part of God's Word, isn't it? And all of God's Word, we're told, in 2 Timothy 3, is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.

Also, it's God's Word which is written for our encouragement. Romans 15, verse 4. It was all written for our encouragement and perseverance. That's God's Word. We believe the Word of God is that which breathes out, that tells us, that lives, that is a blessing to us.

This is, God has given us the book of Numbers to be a blessing to us, as he has all his words. And also, of course, it's part of our heritage in the faith. That's why when Paul began that chapter 10, he said, I want you to know about your ancestors.

Now, they weren't the very literal ancestors of those people in Corinth, because they were all Gentiles, not Jews. But our ancestors by faith, our spiritual ancestors, our spiritual forebears in the faith, we're part with them.

[7 : 24] We're one church, one people. Old Testament, New Testament, we are one church and one people, saved by God's grace, saved for heaven. We're going to rub shoulders with them when we get to heaven.

And so, the things that happen in their lives have an effect and an interaction with our own lives. But, more than that even, as well, Numbers is often spoken of and mentioned, the events there, in the New Testament.

That's why I read there from 1 Corinthians 10, because in that portion, Paul writing to first century Corinthian Christians, they're not in the Middle East, they're in Europe, and he's talking to them, and what does he say?

He says to them, I want you to think about the things that happened to God's people all those years ago in the desert. And so, he goes over several events that happened there, doesn't he, in verses 6 and following.

Again, in Hebrews 4, there is reference as well to the events that took place in Numbers, and warning there to encourage Christians to keep on going and not to turn back, not to give up, but to faithfully follow the Lord.

[8 : 38] And Jude, in his letter, again, also, in verse 11, mentions, and for instruction, things that happened in the book of Numbers. So, for the New Testament writers, the book of Numbers was very important.

It taught them and helped them to teach relevant, in contemporary, truths, and commandments in their day. And, indeed, many of those stories that perhaps we learned in Sunday school, or perhaps that we've heard about, they come from Numbers.

The story of the bronze snake on the pole, that symbol that still is on paramedic vehicles, particularly in the States, I don't know about, in the UK. We meet with a donkey that can talk there, in the book of Numbers.

We read about water flowing from a rock, a staff that grew and budded and lived, and many other things as well. Great insights into God's dealing with his people, great stories, but more than that, great realities about the God who cared for his people there.

But, above all, and this is why I want us particularly to be studying and will be, God willing, in the next several Sunday evenings, this book of Numbers. There's a very strong link, a similarity between the way that we live as Christians today and the way that those believers lived then.

[10:11] You say, well, how can that be? They didn't even know what rain was and they were in a desert and they had a great big tent which was sort of like their temple and tabernacle and they had this cloud and this fire.

It doesn't seem to have anything to do with us, but it does. Before we get there, let's remind ourselves how they got to where they were in Numbers and chapter 1.

We're given a very specific date, aren't we? The first day, the second month of the second year after they'd come out of Egypt. They'd been one year in one spot.

been camping at the base of Mount Sinai for that year. And in that year, God had called Moses to come up to the mountain and spoken with him and spoken with him about the laws that God wanted the people to obey and to direct them and instruct them and also he gave them the picture and the illustration about how the tabernacle was to be built and how the offerings were to be brought and so on and so forth.

And of course, before that, they'd just come out of Egypt. This is only a year or so after 400 years being slaves in Egypt, they were set free by the amazing miracles of God, these plagues that drove Pharaoh eventually to his knees and recognized that he couldn't fight against God anymore and they had been brought out and brought out into that place where they crossed the Red Sea.

[11:39] and all of the enemies of God's people, those powerful Egyptian soldiers and their chariots were destroyed. All these things have taken place and now 13 months later, here they are in the middle of nowhere, no man's land and surely they must have been thinking, how much longer are we going to stay here?

Is this all that we've been brought out to? Is this all that God has for us? Just this amazing campsite with a lovely mountain view at the back of our tent but that's not really what we left Egypt for.

But all that had happened was just preparation. All that had gone on in that year and previous to that was God preparing the people for what he had next in store for them.

Something which would blow their minds. Something which was so incredible and wonderful. He was preparing them. And so to prepare them he asks them to be counted.

That seems a little strange. Perhaps on the surface we read it there, take a census, that's what a census is, it's the counting of all the people. We have one I think every 10 years in the United Kingdom. Everybody has to be accounted for by the government so we know how many people are here on our little island.

[12:59] Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans. Clearly it wasn't for God's benefit that they were being counted, was it?

God knew every one of them. As Jesus tells us, God knows the very number of hairs on our heads so he certainly knew every single person. God didn't need Moses to count him so that God could put it down in his book because he didn't know.

This was clearly for Moses' benefit, for the people's own benefit, that they were to be counted. because God commanded them to be counted he was reminding them of two very important things, two essential truths that we need to be reminded of as well.

First of all, it showed that God's people were indeed God's people, that he was their king, he was their God, he was their ruler, and every ruler and every government including our own has the right to call a census.

Remember even before Jesus was born, there was a census, wasn't there, of the Roman world which meant in God's wonderful order and providence that Jesus' mother and father would be there in Bethlehem for his birth.

[14:12] So God was saying, I want you to count them because they are mine. It's a sense of ownership, isn't it? Perhaps you've got lots of dolls or soldiers or cars in your toy box and from time to time you might get them out and count them and see how many you've got.

Or perhaps you've got a collection of various things and you count them to see how that collection is going. It's a sense of ownership. But also, by the people being counted, God was reminding them

of the promise he'd made to Abraham all those generations earlier in Genesis chapter 12. Do you remember what he said to Abraham? I will make you a great nation. In fact, he took him out and he said, look at all the stars in the sky. If you can count them, then you can count all the children you're going to have.

And at that time he had none whatsoever, not even one. Here, when we count them all up, we're told there are hundreds of thousands of people.

In fact, if you turn over the page, chapter 1 and verse 46, the total number, 603,550. But that was just the men aged over 20.

[15:22] So when you start adding all the children, the boys and girls, and all the women, it's a few million, I imagine. God was showing them that promise I made all those years ago.

Look at it now. Look at how many you've become. This is God's faithfulness. And then he was counting them and ordering them for that next step.

Imagine if you've ever been on holiday or been out with a group holiday. You all get off the coach and the leader of that holiday group will count the heads.

Or perhaps you've been at school, you've been on a trip and you've got to go to the swimming pool or wherever it is and the teacher will come and make sure count all the heads. Is anybody missing? We left anybody behind? No.

That's good. We could all make our way forward. But the lessons from Numbers are lessons concerning traveling.

[16:25] Traveling. And if you have that sense, again, look at Numbers chapter 1, verses 50, you get this sense that God is preparing them to start moving and traveling. He says in verse 50, Instead, appoint the Levites to be in charge of the tabernacle of the covenant law, over all its furnishings, and everything belonging to it, they are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings and to take care of it and camp around it.

So there's a preparation. They know they're about to be moving. The Levites are being told, your job is to pack up the big tabernacle tent to look after that when we move. The whole book is about moving.

Moving from Sinai in the desert down on the Arabian Peninsula moving up through to the promised land. And that's really the rest of this book.

They're always heading for a goal. They're always heading for the end of the journey. They're looking to the promised land. Sadly, as we shall find as we go through the book of Numbers, they never ever quite make it.

In fact, that sense, this is a very sad book. It's a sad book because it's about how God's people were given this wonderful opportunity to enter into all the promises and the fulfillment of what God had said they could have.

[17:54] And they missed that chance. They missed that opportunity through fear, disobedience, and sin. So surely, this has a lot to say to us as we are journeying on our way to our promised home in heaven.

They spend 40 years in the desert. Again, the reason they were journeying there is because God had promised them this new home, this wonderful place, along with that promise that he would have many children.

Abraham was given the promise to look all around the land and was told by God, I'll give it all to your offspring, to your children, to your descendants. And now, after 400 and more years than that, God's timing was coming.

The opportunity, the window, as it were, for them to enter into the promised land as God had promised them was coming. Now we need to recognize again, there's a close relationship between ourselves and God's people.

We are travelers. You and I, as Christians, well, even all people, whether they're Christians or not, we're on a journey. Life is a journey, isn't it? It's often spoken of. We used to have a game at home, I think, called The Journey of Life.

[19:17] And you had to have dice and spinners and all sorts of things. And you went around the board and you started off and you went to university and then you got married and then you had children and then you bought a house and you had to do all these things.

And whoever got to the end of the journey of life, the richest, was the winner. Not the case, though, is it? It's not reaching the end of the journey of life being the richest.

It's sending the journey of life entering into fullness of life. That matters. We are people on the move. The church of our Lord Jesus Christ is made up of people like the Israelites of old who are journeying.

Journeying often through a wilderness. The world in which we live is a dry and barren place, spiritually for the Christian. And it can feel like a wilderness heading towards a new country. Something that comes out again and again and again in the New Testament when God's people, God's servants write about how the Christians are to live in this world. In 1 Peter chapter 1 particularly, he has a lot to say about it.

[20 : 21] He in fact calls the believers, he writes to exiles. People in one sense who are not in their home, country. People who are outside of it. Other translations use the word pilgrims or strangers or foreigners.

The word really means somebody who is passing through on their way to somewhere else. Somebody who is passing through, not staying there. This isn't our home, this land, this world in which we live.

We're not going to be here forever. Sometimes it may feel like that, but we aren't. We're passing on to a new home. He says as well that this affects how we live in chapter 1 verse 17, he tells us, live your lives as foreigners here.

It's got the same root word as that word exile. Foreigners and exiles. It's a sense of temporarily staying in a land. I'm sure that when you've been on holiday, you've been to a particular part of the country, a particular part of the world, another country, you know you're not staying there to live. You're just there for a little while. Or perhaps you may have even gone on a long trip and you're staying there for quite a while, but it's not your home, not the place that you are staying. And so he says in his second chapter of 1 Peter, I urge you, and he uses both the words, as foreigners and exiles.

[21 : 45] Our attitude to the world in which we live will affect how we live, affect how we treat people, affect what we give our love to, what we give our money to, what we devote ourselves to.

If we recognize, as the Bible teaches us again and again, that we are just passing through this land, we are going to something which is eternal, then we will be and take the advice of the Lord Jesus. Don't store up for yourself treasures on earth. We're moth and rust, moth and rust, that's it. Moth and rust destroy, and thieves come and steal.

Make treasure in heaven. Treasure in heaven. It's really that sense, that understanding from the New Testament that moved, of course, the imagination and the mind of that wonderful Christian man, John Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress, which we're told is a story which tells the journey of Christian from this life to the next.

As you know, I'm a fan. If you haven't read it, you should have done. It's a wonderful, wonderful book. So we're to view ourselves as travelers in this world. We've got no permanent home here.

[22 : 58] We're passing through. We're on our way to something better, better. Whatever the best experience of life is in this life, it is poultry in comparison to that which is yet to come.

It is rubbish, if I can use that word, rubbish and garbage compared to the treasures and the blessings and the joy which are ours through Jesus to come.

We can get so easily caught up, can't we, as Christians even, in this world, in the trappings of this world, in the snares of this world. We can get into that way of thinking that this is all there is.

All there is that we're ever going to have and enjoy is what we can make for ourselves or what we can buy or what we can earn, what we can work for. We can get caught into this view, dear friends, as Christians, where we lose sight of eternity.

We lose sight of heaven and so we find ourselves becoming greatly distressed and discouraged because if you live for the things of this world, they will always let you down. The people of this world, including ourselves, will always let you down.

[24 : 03] We mustn't lose sight of that heavenly home that we've been called to. We mustn't lose, as it were, sight that we are still on a journey. We're not there yet. It's a wonderful thing to become a Christian.

It's a wonderful thing to put your faith and trust in Jesus. It's a wonderful thing to follow him and to live for him day by day. But oh, it's only just, it's the tip of the iceberg, isn't it? It's not even that. It's the crumb from the loaf. It's only the beginning of something which is eternal and much greater. And if we become short-sighted, if we lose sight of that vision of heaven, then we'll find ourselves

wandering off the path.

That's why I love Pilgrim's Progress because at times poor old Pilgrim, he loses his way. He wanders off the path and he gets himself into all sorts of sad trouble and difficulty and heartache because he hasn't kept on pilgriming on, following on, journeying on.

It's not just Peter who presses this point. Paul as well. In fact, when he writes to the Christians in Philippi, he reminds them in chapter 3 that their citizenship is in heaven.

[25 : 16] You have a passport. That passport has heaven on it. It's not where we are now that matters.

It's where we belong. We belong in heaven. Jesus died to make sure that we're going to go there. Paul himself was a man who knew he was on a journey and he was excited, especially when he knew that he was getting close to that journey's end.

He writes to Timothy, one of his final letters to Timothy 4, 18. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.

He's looking forward to it. He knows that the Lord who has kept him going all these years on the journey, on the pathway through the wilderness, even though things have been hard and difficult, will bring him through and keep him going and bring him into heaven.

I wonder, dear friends, do you have that confidence? Do you have that confidence that the Lord himself will bring you safely to his heavenly kingdom? I'm sure, like me, there are times when you doubt that.

[26 : 29] Not because you doubt God's promises, not because you doubt God's power, but you look at your own heart and life and you feel weary and you feel it's a struggle and you feel like you're plodding away through the sand of the desert of this life and the heat is bearing down upon you and you think, I don't think I can make it.

Don't we need encouragement? Don't we need the encouragement from God's word and from God's people of old to say, keep on going. Don't give up.

The Lord will bring you through to the end. Don't we need to encourage one another, to strengthen one another, that we might press on together.

That's the lovely thing, the wonderful thing, dear friend. You and I are not walking this path alone. We're not traveling through the desert alone. That's why God has put us into churches.

That's why he's put us into families, spiritual families. That's what the church is, so that we can together encourage one another, that those who feel as if they're falling behind can be helped along, that those who think they can rush ahead can be held back a little to help with others.

[27 : 45] That together we may cross that finishing line with the strength and the help that the Lord. How did God keep his people going through the wilderness?

How did he keep them in all the difficulties that they faced? The trials, the enemies, the hardships, the sorrows. How did he encourage them to keep going year after year when the goal seemed so far away?

How did he do that? That's what we're going to find out. That's what we're going to discover. That's what we're going to be encouraged by. To walk with Christ.

With assurance that he will bring us safely into his heavenly kingdom. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.