

Numbers Chapter 1 v 52 - Chapter 2 v 34

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[0 : 00] that we've been enjoying too. The Apostle Paul, as he was nearing the time of his death, wrote to Timothy in his second letter and he said this, The time for my departure is near.

I fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

We are on a journey, we're running a race, and we're marching to Zion. And our first hymn reminds us of that, 682, Come we that love the Lord, we're marching to Zion, onward to Zion.

Amen. And his heaven. Let's pray. Thank you, O Lord, that we can sing, because we are those who love the Lord.

And we do love you, O Lord. We love you because you first loved us. We love you, O Lord, because you are so lovely. Even as we thought this morning, you are beautiful in your holiness.

[1 : 22] O Lord, there is nothing about you which is spoiled or ugly or tarnished or marred. But Lord, you are the supremacy of perfection in the most marvelous way.

And Lord, we thank you that there is a day coming when we shall be with you. Yes, Lord, we thank you that you are with us through the Lord Jesus Christ. But what a day it will be when we shall be with you in the glory, when we shall gaze upon you with sinless eyes, when we shall enjoy your company through all eternity.

Lord, when we think of these things, when we speak of these things, we find ourselves almost daydreaming, drawn away from this world. Yet, Lord, we're here at this time to live for you, to march for you, to walk and run for you.

And so we pray that in our time together this evening, you would strengthen us and help us, that we might be faithful as we continue in the paths of righteousness that you've set before us, that we might walk in your ways, that we might walk by faith.

For we ask these things in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. In chapter 2, which we began just a week or two ago, and it was great to have Andrew Walker with us last week, but we're back into Numbers in the evening.

[2 : 49] And next week we're back to Luke in the morning. And Numbers, the reason we're looking at it, as I said last week, and into the introduction, is that we are like the people of God in the Old Testament.

They were journeying. That's why we sang what we sang. They were journeying on their way to the promised land. And we too are those who also are on this great journey to the promised land.

Those are not an earthly land, but a heavenly one. Their earthly one was but a reflection, a shadow of what was to come. We're going to pick up from chapter 1, and we're going to read from verse 52. Now, I know that's sort of in the middle of what we looked at the other week, but we're going to actually go through from 52 into chapter 2. Now, what I'm going to do is, I'm not going to read all the names and all the numbers, so you're going to have to try and keep up with me, but I'm not going to keep telling you what verse we're on.

But hopefully you'll get the drift when we get into chapter 2. So verse 52 of chapter 1 of Numbers. The Israelites are to set up their tents by divisions, each of them in their own camp under their standard.

[4 : 00] The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the covenant law so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelite community. The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the tabernacle of the covenant law.

The Israelites did all this just as the Lord commanded Moses. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, The Israelites are to camp round the tent of meeting some distance from it, each of them under their

standard, holding the banners of their family.

On the east, towards the sunrise, the divisions of the camp of Judah are to camp under their standard. Verse 5, the tribe of Issachar will camp next to them.

Verse 7, the tribe of Zebulun will be next. Verse 9, all the men assigned to the camp of Judah, according to the divisions numbered 186,400, they will set out first.

On the south will be the divisions of the camp of Reuben, under their standard. Verse 12, the tribe of Simeon will camp next to them. Verse 14, the tribe of Gad will be next.

[5 : 08] Verse 16, all the men assigned to the camp of Reuben, according to the divisions number 151,450, they will set out second. Then the tent of meeting, and the camp of the Levites will set out in the middle of the camps.

They will set out in the same order as they set up camp, each in their own place, under their standard. On the west will be the divisions of the camp of Ephraim, under their standard.

Verse 20, the tribe of Anassar will be next to them. Verse 22, the tribe of Benjamin will be next.

Verse 24, all the men assigned to the camp of Ephraim, according to their divisions number 108,100, they will set out third.

On the north will be the divisions of the camp of Dan, under their standard. Verse 27, the tribe of Asher will camp next to them. Verse 29, the tribe of Naphtali will be next.

Verse 31, all the men assigned to the camp of Dan, number 157,600, they will set out last under their standards. These are the Israelites, counted according to their families.

[6 : 18] All the men in the camps by the divisions, number 603,550. The Levites, however, were not counted along with the other Israelites, as the Lord commanded Moses.

So the Israelites did everything the Lord commanded Moses. That is the way they camped under their standards. That is the way they set out, each of them with their clan and family.

Okay, going to come back to that a little later on. So back to Numbers, particularly chapter 2, but as I mentioned when we read, we looked a little bit at chapter 1 as well, at the end of chapter 1.

The things that are very precious to us, the things that are important to us, we protect.

Well, in one sense, we encircle. If you're like me and a great lover of the old westerns, whenever the Indians came to attack the settlers, then they would form all the coaches, the carriages, the wagons, into a circle.

[7 : 31] All the family and the children would be safe, sort of in the middle, and the cowboys and the settlers would be around the outside protecting them. This seems to be something very comforting about having a circle, a surrounding, a protective layer, we might say as well.

But it speaks about putting the things that are precious to us, things that matter most to us, are placed in the center. I'm sure that very few of you will have done this, but if you've been to a nightclub or a discotheque at any time in the past, all the ladies put their handbags in the center and they dance around in a circle to protect their handbags.

Scouts camping will have the fire in the middle and themselves around. And of course football supporters, that which is most precious than their team, is in the center of the pitch and they sit in the stadium all around.

Now it wasn't out of security, wasn't out of some natural instinct to protect, but it was because it was God's command that the tabernacle, the house of God, was in the very center of the camp of God's people, as we read about it here in Leviticus.

Notice there, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, the Israelites are to camp round the tent of meeting. God's command was given to them and the order about how they would surround the tent of meeting and in what order and where they would go and so on.

[9 : 11] And God doesn't do anything without wisdom. He doesn't do anything unless he has a purpose in it, a reason in it. And therefore we're to remember that when we look at the Old Testament, we look at events like this which seem to be, well, you know, interesting but not all that informative or not all that relevant.

They are relevant to us. There are things that we can learn here. That's why we're studying numbers at this time. Yes, there are differences. Of course there are differences between the Old Testament believers and the New Testament church.

But we are one people and ultimately we are on one journey heading to one eternal home. And that's why what we learn here is for our instruction.

That's what Paul has to say in 1 Corinthians, isn't it? These things all happen for our instruction, our learning, as examples to us. Not only good examples that we might heed but bad examples that we might avoid.

And there's two very simple lessons I think that we can draw from Numbers chapter 2 this evening. And each of them reveals something about how God has always dealt with his people, how he has dealt with his church.

[10:29] Now as I've said already, when we read here, we see that the tabernacle was in the very center of the camp. And what we're meant to understand is this, is that the Lord himself is at the heart of the church.

The Lord himself is at the heart, the center, the pinpoint, as it were, middle of the church. all the people were to camp around the tent of meeting.

Whether that was a circle or whether that was a square, we're not told. We're told that there was some on the west, the north, the east, the south. Whether they sort of curved the edges, we don't know.

But they all circled the tabernacle. And what was the tabernacle? It wasn't just a tent. It wasn't just like a community center or shopping precinct.

It was the very representation of the person of God. It's where God dwelt. It's where God lived, if we can put it that way.

[11:29] God didn't separate himself from the people and say, well, you live over there because you're sinful and wicked and I will pitch my tent, as it were, my tabernacle over here. But rather, God goes right for the center, dwells in the very midst of the people.

So everything they did in their daily lives, the tabernacle was there to remind them. When they went out to hang out the washing, there was the tabernacle. When they went out to collect the manna, there was the tabernacle.

When they went out to play as children, there was the tabernacle. God was in the midst of them.

Everything they did, every day, they saw the presence of the Lord.

But notice as well that they were not completely, as it were, next door to the tabernacle. If you look at verse 2, the Israelites had a camp around the tent of meeting some distance from it.

So although God was in the midst of them, he was also making a clear demarcation, as it were, from them. They were some distance. I'm not told how much distance there was, but it's clear that there was some distance.

[12:41] And in fact, between the ordinary camp of the people and the tabernacle tent, there were the Levites. So it was almost like a, like a, if you were to look at it from a satellite or look at it from above, an eagle's view, there would be the center, the bullseye would be the tabernacle.

Then an outer ring would be the Levites, an inner ring. Then an outer ring would be the people. A bit like a target. Levites there, we told, that's why we included verses 52 of chapter 1.

That the Levites, verse 53, however, to set up their tents round the tabernacle of the covenant of law. So what do we understand from that?

Three very simple reminders because God was in the midst of them that are true for God's people then and they are especially true for us. God is with us.

God is with us. He was there, God, with them in the desert. He didn't sort of say, well, I've delivered you from Egypt and now you're under Moses' care and I'll sort of meet you when you get to the other side of the Jordan.

[13:50] You know, I'll be waiting for you. No, God was with them every step of the way. And by his presence with them, he was acknowledging that they were his people.

God with us. But also, as I've seen, we saw there, God was making some declaration about his holiness. They couldn't come too close.

Yes, he was with them. Yes, they saw the tabernacle. Yes, they knew it was his presence, but they couldn't come and approach him. The Levites, as it were, were the mediator.

They were the ones who went between the people and God. There was necessary to have someone who, as it were, by which they could come to God. The Levites. He was holy.

There was a declaration of that, but also, of course, not only was he with them, not only was he holy, but also that he was merciful. The primary function of the tabernacle, the ministry of the Levites and the priests, was to offer sacrifices on God's behalf, sorry, on the people's behalf, to God, so that they would not suffer his wrath.

[15:00] Again, verse 53 of chapter 1. Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the covenant law so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelite community.

God has provided the tabernacle and provided the Levites so that the people in which he dwelt would not be consumed because of their sin. They would not be destroyed by this holy God, but God was merciful.

God had made a way for them to live with him and him to live with them. Well, how does that all relate to us today? Well, when I think about that and as I was thinking about this and preparing this, it came to my mind that event, that vision that John has at the beginning of Revelation.

You might like to turn there for a moment, keeping your finger in Numbers and chapter 1 and 2. Revelation and chapter 1, do you remember John? He's in the Spirit and he has this incredible meeting with the Lord Jesus Christ and he hears this voice speaking to him and the Alpha and the Omega was and is and is to come.

And then in verse 12 of Revelation 1, which told this, I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. When I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands and among the lampstands or in the midst of the lampstands was someone like a son of man dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet with a gold sash around his chest.

[16:30] We know who this is. This is the glorified Lord Jesus Christ in all of his majesty and splendor. But where is he? He's in the midst of the candlesticks or the lampstands. And later on in verse 20, we're told what they were.

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand of the seven golden lampstands is this. Seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

There's Jesus in the midst of the churches. They're represented as lightbearers, lampstands. And here he is. John looks and sees Jesus speaking from being in the very middle of them, amongst them.

And surely that's the wonderful promise that we have. That when we meet together as a local church from Matthew 18 verse 20 where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them, in the middle of them, amongst them.

That's why we meet together. Yes, we thank God for the wonderful blessing of personal prayer, of putting ourselves in a secret place and seeking his face but why is it that God has put us into churches, into local gatherings because he's in the midst.

[17:44] He's amongst us. There's a special blessing to be had whenever we meet together as God's people. There's a sense of his presence and the nearness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And the wonderful thing for us of course and this is where some of these differences come out and like the Israelites of old we aren't kept at arm's length from the Lord God Almighty.

We're not kept at some distance. We already have a mediator. We already have a great priest through whom we can draw near to God and fellowship with him.

Isn't that that wonderful promise we often open our times of worship with in Hebrews 10. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus. That tabernacle was of course a multitude of tents in one sense. A tent with inside a tent with inside a tent. The people could only come relatively near.

[18:43] They couldn't go into the holy of holies. They couldn't go into the place where the covenant was and the ark and the law. They could have to stand back. But what do we read here? By a new and living way opened for us through the curtain.

There was that curtain, that thick curtain that hung between the holy of holies that is his body. And since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God.

So we have something even more wonderful that we are able daily not only to see the tabernacle which represents the presence of God, but every day we are able to enter into the presence of God with nothing to separate because Jesus, our mediator, has paid for all our sin.

He's born at God's wrath on our behalf. He's taken away God's anger from us completely. He has offered himself as a sacrifice so that we are cleansed and holy in his sight.

We're washed by that precious blood. So Paul, as he writes to the Christians at Ephesus, is able to say to them, now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

[20 : 04] Something we must never ever take for granted, that when we gather we are in the presence of the living God. We're in the presence of the Holy One of Israel. We're in the presence of the one who stood amongst the candlesticks, of the one who revealed himself as a pillar of fire and clouds.

cloud. How can we ever treat church and gathering together as a sort of take it or leave it, a sort of, well, it's sort of okay and it doesn't really matter and we're just going to go along to church for an hour.

This is something amazing. Familiarity breeds contempt, doesn't it, for us? God is in the midst of us. Oh, would you, you know, where would you like to be tonight? In front of the telly, watching the footy. Where would you like to be tonight?

In the presence of God. You could be in the presence of God. Wow! That's astonishing, isn't it? And so it is. It's not just a, not just idle talk, it's a reality.

[21 : 11] The Israelites, yes, they could see the tabernacle. Dear friends, by faith we see Jesus. We see the Son of God. By faith we see Him with us and experience Him with us.

Meeting, talking, fellowshiping. Dear friends, do we recognize that? Not only in our worship together, but as a local church, as God's people in this community, do we recognize that at the very heart, the very focus of all that we do is Jesus, God?

does everything that we do revolve around Him, our most precious possession? As a church, when we seek to make decisions, when we meet as members together, do we ask ourselves questions like this?

Does this or that action bring honor to the Lord Jesus? Does it show that we're in union with Him and that He is the very focus and center of what we're about?

when we meet together on a Sunday and we sing praises and read God's Word, it's the very reason we're there because we're saying, Lord, we've come to glorify You.

[22 : 23] We've come to honor You. We've come, Lord, to lift Your name high and make Your name glorious. Even more, dear friends, what about in our own lives, day by day?

Do we live, as the Israelites did, with that constant sense of the presence of God in our midst? when we get up and get dressed and go to work or go to college or to university or to school, is there that sense that we are in the presence of the Lord wherever we are?

You see, wherever they traveled through the desert over those 40 years, what one thing was certain, there was the Lord with them in the very middle of that great sort of convoy of tents and baggage and camels and donkeys and whatever there was and people in the very middle, did you hear that?

In the middle was the tabernacle. They never left God behind. He never left them. As they marched and traveled in their daily duties, not just in their worship and prayer, but in everything they did, the Lord was in the midst.

He was the center and the focus. There's something else here as well which I think is very helpful and applicable for us too. We see here that in God's dealings with his people, he placed his people where he chose.

[23 : 50] He placed his people where he chose. A few years ago, it's not the same now, I know, but a few years ago if you flew on one of the budget airlines, unless you were willing to pay a lot of money, basically it was a free-for-all of what seat you were going to get.

Nobody was given a seat, nobody was given a ticket number, he just told, there's 400 seats in this plane, find yourself a seat. And usually it was a bit chaotic at times as people rushed here and there to get the best seat by the window or the toilet or the aisle or wherever it may be.

How on earth could God take a rabble of two million people and get them to a promised land unless they were organized?

How were they ever going to get there? What a logistical nightmare it would have been to move two million people several hundred miles.

God put them where he chose. He put them in order. He put them in the right place. When we had the Olympics here in 2012, as you know, the Olympic torch was taken and walked quite a long way around the whole of the United Kingdom over months and months and months.

[25 : 08] Only one person was carrying that torch but there were 350 people organizing each step of the way and 12 vehicles in the procession just to carry one torch with one person.

So to prevent chaos, every time the people traveled or camped, God gave down very clear instructions as to who went first, who went second, you know, when we read that, who went third, who would camp next to who and so on.

Again, imagine if God had just left people to do what they wanted. It would be a bit like that plane. Everybody would make their own decisions. Everybody would be fighting over the best spot. I'm sure if you've been to a campsite there's been that situation or, you know, where people have gone and put their tent, they want their tent right next to facilities, next to the pool, next to the restaurant, to wherever it may be.

And other people, they want it really quiet so they go in another part of the campsite. And, of course, if you're all related to one another, you can imagine, well, we don't want to camp next to them.

[26 : 21] Have you ever had to organize seating at a wedding? I haven't, thankfully, yet. But I can imagine what it's like. You go through the list. Well, Aunt Beatrice, she hasn't spoken to Aunt Gertie for 50 years.

They can't sit next to one another. They'll have to be over there. And you can, oh, goodness me. Prod Moses, what a headache it would have been if it had been left to him to organize all the people in the right place and the right tribes.

So God appoints, doesn't he, chooses. He places each one in exactly the right place in the convoy, exactly the right place where their group of tents would be around the tabernacle and so on.

And actually, if you take your time to look at who was next to who and who was in the southern group, the northern group and so on, you find again that God was putting families together.

The three tribes to the east of the tabernacle were all descendants of Jacob's first wife, Leah. Two of those on the south were also descendants of Leah and Gad and the third tribe of the south was descended from Leah's maid, Zilpah.

[27 : 37] So they were all sort of put relatively together. Then if you think of the tribes on the west of Tabernacle, those three on the west were all descendants of Jacob's wife, Rachel.

And the last group on the north were from Rachel's maid, Bila and Asher, who was also from Zilpah. Again, the maids, children, and families.

Each tribe, each family assigned their place from God to ensure harmony and unity. Now let's apply that. Let's think of that in our own lives.

Let's think of that in the church. Dear friends, we have been placed by God in our certain situations according to his choosing. That's what Paul even spoke to the people at Mars Hill about in Acts chapter 17.

And he wasn't just talking about the church, he was talking about the people in general. He said this. Sorry.

[28 : 43] Verse 26. From one man God made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth and he marked out their appointed times in his history and the boundaries of their lands.

If you read it in some of the other translations, it makes it even clearer that God placed people exactly where he wanted them to be. So for you and I, it's no mistake or accident where you were born or who you were born to or where you lived or where you were educated or where you were brought up or where you live now, that's all been part of God's choosing.

Now we may feel that we've had a great hand in it all and we've had control over our lives and all those sort of things but actually we haven't. And when you think about the local church here, this is all of God's doing.

Dear friends, you are here because God has put you here. You may never, ever have considered that God would put you in Whitby Evangelical Church. You may have even asked him not to put you in Whitby Evangelical Church but here you are.

God has placed you as he saw fit and he saw right. And we take it a step further because we realize and it comes across at the end of chapter 1 and then the end of chapter 2.

[30 : 10] Verse 54 of chapter 1, the Israelites did all this just as the Lord commanded Moses. Verse 34 of chapter 2, the Israelites did everything the Lord commanded Moses.

This wasn't Moses' idea, this was the Lord's commandment. This was his instruction. And God has placed us in local churches and he has given us his clear instructions that we are to obey, that we are to do, that we are to be faithful to.

See the church of our Lord Jesus Christ is not a democracy. Even in an independent church like ours or in a congregational system, we are not a democracy.

Okay, it's not about all the votes counting in that sense. We are a theocracy as Israel was. In other words, the Lord God is our ruler.

Paul makes it very clear to the Colossians in chapter 1 where he says, Jesus is the head of the body, the church. He's the governor. He's the decision maker.

[31 : 20] Our purpose in all that we do is to seek his mind, to seek his will, to seek and to keep his commandments. And we have them, don't we, in the scriptures.

Commandments of the Lord laid out clear for us in so many ways. And we must follow them and practice them. In fact, we can't call ourselves a church if we do not.

To be a church of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be a church of God means that we are those who gladly submit to the will and the commands of God.

If we do our own thing, we can call ourselves the church of Peter Robinson, we can call ourselves the church of somebody else, but we're not the church of Jesus Christ. Now God has put leaders within the church, in each local church, sub-leaders, we might call them, pastors or elders, but they are under the authority of God just as we all are.

Every member is put in their place and position to serve. Each one of us. There's no unimportant, unnecessary members of the church of Jesus Christ.

[32 : 37] You, dear friend, have been placed here by God for a particular ministry and service.

Don't ask me to tell you what it is. You need to seek the Lord and ask him, what would you have me to do?

That's our priority. Where in this great convoy of the church do you want me to walk? We may think that we should be at the front leading the way and first in line, or perhaps we might say, well, I'd prefer to be at the back actually out the way so I don't have to take any flack, but we must be where God has put us.

We are a family. We are a community. We are not simply a group of individuals. We are dependent upon each other to fulfill the role that God has given us to do.

Now close with these words of Peter as he speaks to the Christians in 1 Peter chapter 4. Just listen again.

Verse 7 of 1 Peter 4. The end of all things is near. In other words, we are approaching journey's end. We are getting to glory. Therefore, be alert and sober-minded so that you may pray.

[33 : 58] Above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God.

If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever.

Amen. you need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

For he has said, in just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay. And my righteous one will live by faith.

[35 : 03] And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back. but we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.