



Numbers

Transcript

Introduction

00:00-00:31

The book of Numbers. This fourth book of the Bible carries forward the story of Israel after their exodus from slavery in Egypt. God had brought them to Mount Sinai, and he entered into a covenant with them there. And despite Israel's rebellion, God had graciously provided a way for Israel to live near his holy presence in the tabernacle. So the book of Numbers begins as Israel wraps up their one-year stay at Mount Sinai, and they head out into the wilderness on their way to the land that God promised to Abraham.

Chapters 1-10

00:32-01:39

Now, the book's storyline is designed according to the stages of their journey. So the first section begins at Mount Sinai, but then they set out and travel to the wilderness of Paran. And then from there, they travel to the plains of Moab, which is right across from the promised land.

Now, the first part opens with a census where the people are numbered—that's where the book gets its name. And then there are laws about how the tribes of Israel were to be arranged in their camp. So the tabernacle was to be at the center, and then around that, the priests and the Levites, and then around them, the 12 tribes neatly arranged with Judah at their head. Now, this was all an elaborate symbol about how God's holy presence was at the center of their existence as a people.

This is all followed by a whole series of laws that develop the purity laws from the book of Leviticus. If God's presence was going to be in their midst, every effort should be made to make the camp pure, a place that welcomes God's holiness. In chapter 10, the cloud of God's presence lifts from the tabernacle and guides Israel away from Sinai out into the wilderness, and immediately things go terribly wrong.

Chapters 11-20

01:39-03:54

So in chapter 11, the people start complaining about their hunger and thirst and how they want to go back to Egypt. And then in chapter 12, Moses' own brother and sister begin opposing and bad-mouthing him in front of all of the people. This trip is not off to a good start.

The next section begins as the Israelites arrive in the desert of Paran—about halfway to the promised land. And God tells Moses to send out the 12 spies, one for each tribe, so they can scout out the promised land. So when the spies all return, 10 of them say that there is no chance Israel can survive there because the Canaanites will destroy them. But there are two spies, Caleb and Joshua, who say that God can save them. But the 10 whip up the people into a fearful rage, and they start planning a mutiny! They're going to appoint a new leader and head back to Egypt.

So God is understandably angry, and Moses intercedes on the people's behalf. He calls God to be faithful to his promises to Abraham. And so God does, but not at the expense of his justice. He gives these Israelites what they want—to not enter the land. And God sentences this generation to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until they die. Only their children will get to enter the promised land.

Now, you'd think this severe consequence would wake them up, but it gets even worse. So in the next story, there's a whole group of Levites that begin a rebellion, and they challenge Moses and Aaron's leadership, saying that they have gone way too far. So God deals severely with these Levites, and he renews his commitment to Moses and Aaron as Israel's leaders.

Now, as they leave the region of Paran and hit the road, it goes downhill yet again. The Israelites start complaining again about their thirst, and they ask why Moses even brought them out of Egypt in the first place. So God tells Moses to speak to a rock to bring out water for all of the people, but Moses doesn't really do this. He oversteps his bounds. He hits the rock twice and then says, "You rebels! Do we have to bring water out of this rock!?" So Moses dishonors God by putting himself in God's place as the one who brings out the water. And so Moses brings down on himself the same fate as the wilderness generation. He too will die in the desert and never get to enter the promised land.

Chapters 21-36

03:55-06:17

After this, the Israelites rebel yet again, and God brings a very strange judgment on them—venomous snakes to come and bite the people. And so Moses again intercedes on behalf of the people. And God tells Moses to do this, to make a

bronze snake and to lift it up on a pole, so that whoever looks at this snake would be healed of the poisonous snake bite. It's a very strange symbol, but it speaks to the challenge that God has by being faithful to his covenant. He's right to bring justice on the Israelite evil and sin, but even God's justice gets transformed into a source of life for those who will look to God for healing.

From here, the people head into the plains of Moab. And the first main part of this section focuses on the strange figure of Balaam. So the king of Moab is freaked out at this huge group of people traveling through his territory, so he hires a pagan sorcerer, Balaam, to pronounce curses on Israel. And three different times, Balaam finds that he cannot curse them. He can utter only blessing upon Israel. Remember God's promise to Abraham from Genesis 12. So not only can Balaam not curse Israel, but God actually gives him a vision about a future Israelite king who will one day bring God's justice to all of the nations. This vision recalls Jacob's promise to Judah in Genesis chapter 49.

Now, it's worth stopping to reflect on the flow of the book so far. The rebellion stories in the wilderness, they just heap up on one another, getting worse and worse. And while God does bring partial acts of judgment on Israel, he's also kept showing mercy, providing food and water along the way. And so the Balaam story, it shows God's grace in bright colors because here's Israel: They're down in the camp, grumbling and rebelling. But up in the hills, unbeknownst to them, God is protecting and even blessing them.

And it's this contrast between Israel's rebellion and God's faithfulness in the wilderness that's what made these stories so important for later generations of Israel. So the wilderness stories are retold time and again by later biblical prophets and poets, and even by the apostles in the New Testament. And these stories always serve as a warning that while God will remain faithful to his covenant promises, he will also allow his people to walk away in rebellion and face the consequences.

Conclusion

06:17-06:47

After this, the rest of the book focuses on the children of the wilderness generation, and they begin preparing to inherit the promised land. They take another census of the new generation, then they go on and win a number of battles with the people groups around them, and then a few tribes even begin to settle in the promised land. So the book ends with the new generation poised to enter into the land, and Moses is about to deliver his final words of wisdom and warning. But for now, that's what the book of Numbers is all about.