



Numbers: Wandering in the Wilderness

Script References

In the Wilderness

00:00–00:34

Jon: The book of Numbers gets overlooked, partly because it has a really boring name.

Tim: Which is a shame. In the Hebrew tradition, the book's name is Bamidbar (במדבר), which means "in the wilderness." And it's an epic travel log about Israel's journey through the desert on their way to the land promised to Abraham.

Jon: Now, this pilgrimage should only take about two weeks on foot.

Tim: But instead it takes them about forty years.

Jon: That's crazy. It's practically half of someone's lifetime.

Tim: Yeah. It's a very long camping trip with lots of interesting stories. But let's remember, it's most helpful to back up and start with how this book is designed.

Jon: Right.

The Five Sections of the Book

00:35–01:16

Tim: So the book is broken up into five sections. There are three wilderness locations broken up by two road trips that link all the pieces together.

Jon: The first wilderness section is Mount Sinai, right here on the map.¹

1. Numbers 1-10

Tim: And then in the second section, they travel to a region called Paran.²

2. Numbers 13-19

Jon: A whole bunch of things happen here in the wilderness of Paran.

Tim: And then in this fourth section is Israel's road trip to Moab.³

3. Numbers 22-36

Jon: The book ends with a large section in the wilderness of Moab, right across the Jordan River from the promised land.

Tim: Now, through all of these sections, the storyline just flows like a gripping, dramatic movie. Everything starts great, but then the trip goes horribly wrong. And it all ends with the final redemptive moment, the surprising act of God's grace.

Camped at Mount Sinai

01:17–02:20

Jon: So let's jump into the story. It all begins at the wilderness at Mount Sinai. And we've become really familiar with this mountain.

Tim: Yeah. If you remember Israel came here after Egypt, and they formed a covenant with God here,⁴ got the ten commandments here, built the tabernacle here,⁵ and they've been at this mountain for one full year.⁶

4. Exodus 19

5. Leviticus

6. Numbers 10

Jon: And now they take a census to number the people as they prepare to leave.⁷

7. Numbers 1:45

Tim: Right, and they're given these instructions for how to organize all those people in the camp. God's presence in the tabernacle, and then the tribe of Levi and the priests around it, and then the rest of the tribes around them. And this pattern, it's this visual symbol of how God's holiness is at the center of their existence as a people.

Jon: And they are told that when the cloud of God's presence moves, they're to pack up and travel with it.

Tim: Yeah. The ark of the covenant is carried by the Levites out in front, and then the tribe of Judah, and on and on. And this order is also a symbol for how God's holy presence is their leader and guide through the wilderness.

Jon: We begin the second section of the book with enthusiasm as they leave Mount Sinai and travel up to Paran. God's with them, everything's organized. This is going to be great!

The Wilderness of Paran

02:21–03:23

Tim: But it's not great. After just three days on the road, the people are complaining about their hunger and thirst, and then even Moses' brother and sister start badmouthing him in front of all the people.⁸

8. Numbers 12

Jon: Not a great start. But now we're into the third section, the wilderness of Paran. This is where they send the 12 spies to scout out the promised land. Two of those spies come back and they're really optimistic.⁹

9. Numbers 13

Tim: But the other ten are freaked out and they don't trust God, and they go around saying, "We're going to get annihilated in there!" And so they start a mutiny, and they try to appoint a new leader who's going to take all the people back to Egypt. So basically, they are refusing to go into the promised land, and God honors their choice. He says that this generation is going to wander for 40 years and die in the wilderness, and only their kids will get to enter the promised land.

Jon: You know, this story here gets brought up many times in the Bible by different authors.¹⁰

10. Psalm 78:17, 40;
106:14, 26; 107:4;
Ezekiel 20;
Hebrews 3:8-9

Tim: Yeah, and it always serves as a reminder that while God remains faithful to his people and his promises, he will honor their choices. He'll let them waste their whole lives if they choose to live in rebellion.

Rebellion in the Wilderness

03:24–03:59

Jon: Okay, so the trip's been a disaster so far.

Tim: And it gets worse here in this fourth section as they're traveling to Moab. Even Moses has a moment of rebellion and is disqualified from entering the promised land.¹¹ Then there's another rebellion among the people that results in this snake attack.¹²

11. Numbers 20:10-13

12. Numbers 21:4-9

Tim: And what makes all these rebellions even worse is that every step of the way, God has been providing. He's been offering forgiveness, he's been giving them food and water and this crazy stuff called manna.¹³

13. Numbers 11:7-9

Jon: Yeah. What is that stuff?

Tim: No idea! But in spite of all this, they keep complaining, and they say that they wish they had died in slavery in Egypt.

Balaam Blesses Israel

03:08–04:52

Jon: If I was God, I would just give up on these guys.

Tim: You would think, but that's what makes this story in the final section so surprising. Israel has just arrived in Moab. And the King of Moab, he's freaked out that this huge group of people is traveling through his land, so he hires this pagan sorcerer named Balaam to pronounce curses on them.¹⁴

14. Numbers 22-24

Jon: This guy means business.

Tim: Yeah. And so Balaam, he says, "Okay. I'm going to pray to the Hebrew God and let's see what happens." And three different times he attempts to curse them, but each time he finds that he can utter only blessing. Most surprising is the last blessing where he prophesies that out of Israel will rise a victorious king. And this king is somehow going to be connected to God's promise to Abraham to bless all nations through this family.¹⁵ So here's Israel rebelling down in the camp, totally unaware that up in the hills God is protecting and even blessing them.

15. Genesis 12:3

Ready to Enter the Promised Land

04:53–05:12

Jon: The book ends here in Moab. Israel is getting ready to go into the promised land. They count up everyone again just like at the beginning. They're leaving the old generation behind, including Moses.

Tim: But before they leave Moses, he gives them his last words of warning and wisdom. And that speech is what the next book, Deuteronomy, is all about.