

Numbers: A Census of Rebellion

As we progress through the Bible in our journey to God, we leave Leviticus and turn our attention to Numbers. It is often referred to as "the book of wanderings," in reference to the punishment received by Israel for its unfaithfulness, but obtains its name from two censuses taken of Israel, one at the beginning of the book and the other at the end. The book could have been entitled "Numbers: A Census of Rebellion," because it records Israel's persistent rejection of God's providential care manifested in complaining, sacrilege, open rebellion, and adamant refusal to trust the God who called them out of Egypt.

The book opens with a census of every non-Levite male "from twenty years old and above—all who are able to go to war in Israel (Num. 1:3)." The Levites were counted according to two separate dictums: all males "from a month old and above (Num. 3:14)" and those "from thirty years old and above, even to fifty years old" who were of age to enter "the service for work in the tabernacle of meeting (4:35)." The results were 603,550 men of Israel who were old enough to fight and 22,000 Levite males, of which 8,580 were of age to serve. The Levites were not to fight with the army, but to serve God in the Tabernacle, and satisfied God's requirement that Israel shall "consecrate to Me all the first born, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel (Ex. 13:2)," a recompense, as it were, for Israel's redemption from Egyptian bondage by the death of the firstborn of all Egypt. The Levites would have no portion in Canaan, but would be given certain cities proportionately divided among the remaining tribes, and would be supported in their work before the Lord through tithes.

As chapter 9 opens more than a year has passed and Israel, still encamped at Sinai, observes the second Passover since escaping from Egypt (Num. 9:1-14). The following month, "the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle of the Testimony (Num. 10:11)" and Israel departed for the Promised Land. All preparations had been made to create a theocratic nation from the stiff-necked mob that God called to Himself out of Egypt. Israel had been wrested from the control of the most powerful nation in the world by mighty works, the Egyptian army had been destroyed in the Red Sea through which Israel had passed on dry ground, they had experienced punishment for various acts of rebellion and unbelief, the Law had been given to them in the midst of God's powerful presence, a mobile home had been built in which the Lord would dwell as He traveled with His people, a priestly order and a system of animal sacrifices had been established to deal with Israel's sins, God had demonstrated that He could and would sustain their nation of over two million people in a desert wilderness, and His presence among them was always evident by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Israel was complete as a nation and fully equipped to undertake any task that God placed before them. But, when the time came to take the land, in an act of extraordinary unity and faithlessness, they refused to go.

When Israel arrived at the border of Canaan, they sent in twelve men, one from each tribe, to spy out the land. When they returned they truly

reported that the land "flows with milk and honey (13:27)," but, its "cities are fortified and very large (13:28)." Furthermore, they reported that giants, the descendants of Anak, dwelled there and that "we were like grasshoppers in our own sight (13:33)." Disregarding the pleas of two faithful spies, Joshua and Caleb, and believing the fearful report of the other ten, all of Israel rebelled against Moses and Aaron (14:2). Ignoring all the great wonders that God had performed in their presence, Israel, in an incredible act of defiance that rejected the God that had made them "a special treasure to [Him] above all people (Ex. 19:5)," proceeded to "select a leader and return to Egypt (Num. 14:4)." Fearing man more than God, they prepared to return to the land of their enslavement, not unlike "a dog returns to his own vomit (Pvb. 26:11)."

This was the last offense that God would endure from this wicked and perverse generation. Except that Moses, the appointed mediator for Israel, interceded once again on their behalf, all of Israel would have died on the spot. But Moses pleaded, "The Lord is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but by no means [clearing] the guilty... pardon the iniquity of this people... (Num. 14:18-19)." The Lord granted the request of his servant Moses, but He issued a death sentence upon all those who were twenty years of age or above, declaring that "the carcasses of you who have complained against me shall fall in this wilderness (14:29)." The Lord further announced that "your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised (14:31)." These descendants of Abraham, who had witnessed such great wonders at the hand of God, would wander in the desert wilderness for forty years until all, excluding Joshua and Caleb, were dead. They would never experience the fullness of God's goodness. That generation disappeared in the historical record, little being said about Israel until the chronicle resumes forty years later in Chapter 20. They were lost in the numbers of their rebellion.