

Bible Study Course

Numbers

Introduction

The name “Numbers” is taken from the Greek, and is derived from the fact that on two occasions a census was taken (chapters 1-4 and 26) the first at Sinai, and the second on the banks of the Jordan. The Hebrew title comes from the opening sentence of the book, “In the Wilderness,” and this title is the more appropriate of the two, as we shall see.

Numbers describes events before and after the wanderings in the wilderness (of which we have little knowledge), taking us from Mt. Sinai, where the book of Exodus ends, to the borders of Canaan, at the River Jordan, near Jericho, where Joshua begins. It takes us right up to the point prior to the crossing into The Promised Land.

In Numbers we find that God has taken another step in the realizing of His purpose – He speaks not “out of the Tent of Meeting” to Moses but He speaks to Moses “in the Tent of Meeting.” For the first time we are viewed as being within the House of God in a responsible way and we are also shown that everything depends upon His faithfulness and our responsibility.

Authorship and Date

It is, generally, the work of Moses.

Numbers 1:1 “The Lord spoke unto Moses...”

Numbers 36:13 “... which the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses...”

It was written somewhere between BC 1440 -1300 and covers a period of about 38 years, as can be seen from the following dates: -

Numbers 1:1 “1st day of 12th month in the 2nd year”
(Compare Exodus 40:17)

Number 10:11 “20th day of the 2nd month in the 2nd year:”
The cloud lifted

Numbers 33:38 “1st day of the 5th month in the 40th year”
Aaron died

Deuteronomy 1:3 “1st day of the 11th month in the 40th year”
Moses farewell

Notice that no dates are given between the 2nd and 40th years.

This book can be chronologically divided into the following: -

Numbers 1 – 14	1 year
Numbers 15 – 20	36 – 37 years
Numbers 20 – 36	1 year

It is interesting to note that the wilderness wanderings, for the most part, are not on record.

The Key to the Book

It is hard to find in Numbers the key, for we find so much running through it, e.g. God’s faithfulness, and our failure; warfare and conflict; rebellion and division; pilgrimage and service; trial and probation. In Numbers 1:1 and 12:7, however, we find what it is that God is drawing our attention to – “... in the Wilderness... in the Tent of Meeting.” And he is faithful in all Mine House.”

It appears that responsibility is the key – responsibility toward the Lord, responsibility over the things of God. This responsibility, furthermore, is on probation, and wherever we turn in Numbers we discover that all are on trial as to this question – Moses, Aaron, Miriam, the Priests, the Levites, the Princes, Elders, and the people.

We ought to note that the book begins and ends with a numbering of the people from 20 years old, and upward. This reveals the desire and intention of God that all should grow up, and take full

responsibility for and in God's House. Taking inward and practical responsibility for the things of God and the people of God, for His Dwelling place, is, in fact, the heart of true service. We ought to note also that the Levites occupy a very prominent place in this book. In the Bible they always represent responsibility in the House of God. Their service toward God in an especial way began with the incident in Exodus 32:25-29 cp Number 3:11-13

We see, then, in Number, three things – responsibility, probation, and rebellion but shining through all, the faithfulness of God (see Psalm 78 for a commentary on Numbers)

The Outline of the Book

I. Responsibility basically dealt with 1-8

- a) The conflict over the House of God 1:1-54
Note:
 - i. All are responsible in this warfare e.g. 1:2,3
 - ii. The Levites – especial case 1:47-54
- b) The position of the House of God 2:1-34
Note:
 - i. The House of God central. 2:2 all homes to be in right relation to the dwelling place of God.
 - ii. This is to be the fundamental position and attitude for our life.
 - iii. Note that nothing is left to chance, or self-will, or self-opinion. Everything has its place and order. Everyone has his function. Every home and business has to be rightly related to the Lord.
- c) The nature of responsibility 3:1 – 8:26
Note:
 - i. The especial numbering of the Levites see 3:14 cp 1:47-50
 - ii. They represent the heart of the matter; warring the warfare in the work 4:23; 8:24. The Hebrew uses a word connected with war, or armies, often translated in AV as “hosts”; keeping the charge 8:26; bearing the burdens 4:47
- d) Responsibility and sin 5:1-31
The leper; trespass against the Lord; jealousy over wife.
- e) The motive for tasking responsibility 6:1- 7:88
It must be from a heart of love, freely offered.
 - i. The Nazarite Vow 6:1-21 it is freely entered into, but once made, it must be wholly observed.
 - ii. The prince's offering 7:10-88 this was a free will offering made to the Lord. Note that it was connected with the altar. All true giving must start with the Cross. It is not for self-exhibition, or self-advance.
- f) Responsibility for the lamp stand and the Levites' separation 7:89-8:26
Holding the testimony of Jesus costs everything. It means an utter separation to the Lord.

II. Responsibility on trial 9-25

- a) Divine provision for the journey 9-10
 - i. The Passover kept 9:1-14
The finished work of Christ basic to all.
 - ii. The pillar of cloud 9:15-23
The guidance and ministry of the Holy Spirit essential.
 - iii. The silver trumpets 10:1-10
The togetherness of God's people always vital.
- b) Responsibility and rebellion
 - i. The orderly departure from Mt. Sinai 10:11-36
 - ii. The burning fire 11:1-3
 - iii. The murmuring (70 elders, quails, plague) 11:4-35
 - iv. The rebellion of Miriam and Aaron 12:1-16
 - v. The spies sent out and the people's reaction (the evil report of 10, the other spirit of Joshua and Caleb; Moses tested; the pronouncement that the ten will die in the wilderness; the people's presumption 13:1-14:45

- vi. Reiteration 15:1-41 provision for the sin; the need of utterness; the need for the fringes of blue (stops fraying and disintegration – blue, to remind them of their heavenly vocation)
- vii. The rebellion of Korah, Dathan, Abram 16:1-17:2 Note they were Levites and Reubenites who formed this faction. It was a rebellion over government and ministry. The earth swallowed, the fire destroyed. This resulted in a rebellion of the people. The rod that budded (vindication of divinely vested authority)
- viii. The provision for the Priests and Levites, and the provision made for contact with death 18:1- 19:22. The latter provision for the contamination and defilement which come from touch with dead things – this world.
- ix. Miriam dies; the people rebel; Moses falls 20:1-13
- x. Three Canaanite tribes destroyed, people rebel again (the fiery serpents – the brazen serpent) 21:1-35
- xi. The subtle attempt to deceive Israel. (Balaam etc, people fall, another plague) 22:1-25:18

III. Responsibility inheriting 26-36

- a) The new generation numbered 26:1-65
- b) The laws of inheritance 27:1-11
- c) The appointment of Joshua 27:12-23
- d) The laws concerning offerings and vows restated to the new generation 28:1-30:16
- e) The Midianites slaughtered 31:1-54
- f) Reuben, Gad and half tribe of Manasseh settle down on the wrong side of the Jordan 32:1-42
- g) The journey in retrospect 33:1-56
- h) The division of Canaan, Levitical cities, cities of refuge 34:1-36:13

The Message of the Book

God's purpose and longing can never be realized without our growing up and taking full responsibility in His House.

Responsibility, however, requires intensive probation and testing. Hence the record of the trial and failure of the people at Kadesh (holy) Barnea, when they refused to enter the land of their inheritance, which, resulted in the consequent judgment on that generation, except for Caleb and Joshua. It also explains the record of murmuring, unbelief, wandering, failure and disobedience, so frequently evidenced in the journey from Kadesh to the Plains of Moab. One kind of man was being tested and rejected. Another kind of man was attested, trained and accepted. It was this kind of man who by the grace of God was to inherit the land.

We are also taught here that nothing is left to us, to our own wills or to our own opinions or ideas. We see that the Lord is Lord of His House, and has absolute and sovereign right over His own. It is this fact more than any other that brings light to the rebellion in us. Nevertheless, given a heart that is for Him, and a settled life position concerning His Dwelling Place, He in faithfulness will bring us through all the trials of our faith to a full inheritance.

Recommended Books

Notes on Numbers
Exodus and the Wandering in the Wilderness

C.H.McIntosh
A. Edersheim

Halford House Tapes

Numbers BS 1

Questions

1. What was it that God wanted Moses and Aaron to find out, when He commanded them to number the people in chapter 1? Why do you think this needed to be done?
2. Why is it that Numbers 15 – 20 covering a period of about 37 years is given so little attention in this book?
3. Read
 - i. Chapter 20:2-11
 - ii. Chapter 21:4-9

What do these passages tell you about the Lord Jesus Christ?

4. Read chapters 3 and 4, what can you find out about responsibility for the things of the Lord from these chapters? Can you see any lessons for us in the Church of Jesus Christ, in chapters 3 and 4?
5. Write a history of murmuring and rebellion, as it is found in Numbers 11 – 12, giving reasons for the murmurings and rebellions. Can you learn any lessons for the Christian life and for church life from these chapters?
6. What can you find out about responsible leadership from the following passages: -
 - a) 9:1-8
 - b) 11:10-17
 - c) 14:1-25
 - d) 15:32-41
 - e) 16:20-24, 41-44
 - f) 27:1-5, 12-23
7. What do you learn about guidance from 9:15-23, 10:11-13, 34 and 12:5? Why do you think God sent the cloud to cover the tabernacle?
8. Read chapters 13, 14 and 33:50-56. Compare also Hebrews chapters 3 and 4. Write down some reasons why it is so important that all of us enter into the promises, in Christ, that God has given to His people.
9. What to you is the most disturbing lesson in the Book of Numbers?
What to you is the most comforting lesson in the Book of Numbers?
10. What was it, in the hearts of Joshua and Caleb that caused God to choose them, to lead the new generation into the promised land (chapter 13, 14)?
11. In a few sentences state how the faithfulness of God is revealed in the Book of Numbers.