

# *Old Testament Core Seminar*

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## NUMBERS

### **Introduction**

Good morning again. We are about a quarter of the way through our study of the Old Testament. We are taking 26 weeks to work our way through each book of the Old Testament. We are basically just getting an overview of each book, and then diving into the texts at certain key points. The hope is that you'll have a bit of introductory knowledge of each book – enough to then study the Old Testament on your own, or with your family or in your small group. And as we are taking this approach, we are always looking forward into the New Testament to see how the Old Testament teaches us about Jesus Christ, the gospel, and His Church. Today, we will get into the book of Numbers where we will learn, for the first time really in this course, about the Holy Spirit. We will also consider, more than we have so far, what the Promise Land is, and what its role in redemptive-history is. And, as in every class so far, we will learn a little bit more about God's plan of redemption and about the gospel.

### **[PRAY]**

### **Context**

You'll remember that the setting for our last two studies was at Mount Sinai where Moses received the 10 commandments and the laws for the new nation of Israel, as they formally entered into a covenant with Yahweh, a further development of the same covenant Yahweh entered into with Abraham. We said that this occurred in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century BC. In Numbers, now, we are going to see the people of Israel pack up camp from the foot of Mount Sinai and move toward the land of Canaan, the fertile land just east of the Mediterranean Sea which was promised to Abraham and his descendants nearly 500 years earlier! The story will then span 40 years, because, as we'll see, the people won't go straight into the land but wander around in the wilderness those 40 years. The book will end as Israel is camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan river, looking across the river at the promise land. So the setting for much of the book is "in the wilderness." It was written by Moses, somewhere around 1400 BC.

The book of Numbers is crucial in understanding redemptive-history because it is the first time since Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden that we see the people of God attempting to occupy a physical, geographic territory where they can worship Yahweh in peace and rest. What I mean is this: The garden of Eden was the area where God ruled over His people in a special loving relationship. With the fall into sin, that perfect environment and fellowship with God was lost. Ever since, God has been working His plan of redemption to restore the created universe to that original pristine environment, so that His people could dwell there under His rule and blessing again. As we've seen so far, and I'm sure you're already aware of, this plan of redemption is a long and tedious one. It's a long time between God's first initiation of that plan (in Genesis 3:15!) and the actual arrival of the New Heavens and the New Earth where God's people will again dwell in a peaceful land of rest, in fellowship with God and each other.

Well, here in Numbers is another step forward in that plan. Yahweh intends to use the land of Canaan and His people, Israel, as a foreshadowing of that New Heavens and New Earth. The land represents, in a pale way, what Eden was and what the New Heavens and the New Earth will be.<sup>1</sup> And Israel represents God's people living in that land under His rule and blessing, in fellowship with Him and each other. Of course all of this is a faint shadow of what the greater reality will be at the end of time (what we call the "eschaton").<sup>2</sup>

So the land is not an end in itself. It's a pointer to the past and to the future. And the book of Numbers is a movement in the direction of Israel gaining a real, historical experience of living in that pointer, in that land. But what we are going to see today is that they cannot occupy the land. And we will learn that that which kept them out of the land is the same thing that would keep anyone today (and in the future) out of the New Heavens and the New Earth. And that is: *unbelief*.

## [TAKE QUESTIONS]

### Theme

Here is our theme sentence for Numbers:

*Yahweh is still faithful and still with His people, even though they battle with unbelief, distrust, and disobedience, as they clash with the pagan nations and commit idolatry, resulting in their failure to enter the Promise Land.*

Basically, two thematic ideas are juxtaposed against one another in the book of Numbers. One is the unbelief, rebellion, and disobedience of the people. Then, over against that is the faithfulness, patience, and grace of Yahweh. Yahweh is here moving Israel towards the land of promise, but because they don't trust Yahweh, and they fear the nations, they won't be able to go in. Instead they are going to wander in the wilderness and fall to the temptation of idolatry. Nonetheless, Yahweh will still dwell among them, and He'll give the land to the next generation, a generation that trusts Him and believes in His promises.

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<sup>1</sup> This is why the land is described with such metaphorical language as "a land flowing with milk and honey." Such language is meant to exemplify the abundance and prosperity that will be unparalleled in the New Heavens and the New Earth. (Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 13:27; 14:8; 16:13-14; Deuteronomy 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20; Joshua 5:6; Jeremiah 11:5; 32:22; Ezekiel 20:6, 15) Then there are a number of other such eschatological descriptions of the land as well. (Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:17-25; Hosea 2:21-23; Joel 3:18-Amos 9:13-15; Micah 4:4)

<sup>2</sup> [This footnote was included in the second class, but it is worth repeating here in light of the discussion about the land.] Everything in the Old Testament needs to be understood as foreshadowing greater realities in the New Testament. And those New Testament realities need to be understood as a return to the Edenic conditions God's creatures once enjoyed. So here is an illustration that the teacher may find helpful and can use if he deems it necessary: Consider a slide-projector. It has a light inside which shines through a slide, and projected up on the screen is a large beautiful picture. Well everything in the Old Testament (land, seed, blessing, kingdom, king, priesthood, sacrifices, tabernacles, temple, prophets, etc) are like the slide in the projector. By themselves they aren't very exciting. They are small and hard to see. You certainly can't see any detail. Well, they weren't meant to be viewed by themselves. They are all intended to go into the projector and be illuminated up on the screen. Then you can see all the colors and shapes and details that go into making a beautiful picture. So it is with the Old Testament. The land, the king, the priests, and so on, were never meant to be ends in themselves. They are meant to project forward to something far greater. It's as though the light behind them is the experience of Eden, they, as the slide, serve as the pattern, but it's the New Testament reality that is the goal of the whole projector idea. As it says in Colossians 2:17: "These are a shadow of the things what were to come; the reality however is found in Christ."

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[This outline does not need to be gone over. The class only needs to be told that it is printed in their handouts so that they could have a little guide for their own study.]

### Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Numbers 1-25 – The First Generation
  - A. Chapters 1-10: Obedience
  - B. Chapters 11-25: Disobedience
- II. Numbers 26-36 – The Second Generation  
Renewed Obedience

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### Theme texts

Numbers is the story of two generations. Turn to chapter 1. You'll see in verse 2 there is a census taken. Turn now to chapter 26. There, in verse 2, another census is taken. This second census is of an entirely new generation. The first had perished. Why they perished is what we'll consider right now.

### Chapters 1-10

In chapters 1-10 we read of this first generation, the very generation that was rescued from Egypt; the generation that saw the glory of the LORD descend onto Mount Sinai and then into the tabernacle. In these chapters they are still at the foot of Mount Sinai, ready to break camp. The chapters are very optimistic. This was it! This was their moment. They'd received the laws, they're in covenant with Yahweh, He dwells among them, and now they were going to up and take the land of Canaan to be their home, to be their resting place. They are exciting chapters, full of anticipation.

Chapter 1 is the census, and chapter 2 is the manner in which the various tribes of Israel were to organize themselves when they camped. What's interesting about the camp is that the tabernacle was always positioned perfectly in the middle of all the tribes. Hence, the people were always reminded that Yahweh was dwelling with them, always in the center of their camp. The following chapters, then, describe some further duties and vows for certain groups of people.

Then, at the end of **chapter 6**, there is this blessing that Aaron and his sons are to bless the people of Israel with. Look at **verses 22-27**. [READ] It's a benediction of optimism and hope. It reminded the Israelites that Yahweh is for them, and not against them; that He is pleased with them; that it's a good and joyous thing to be Yahweh's people.

The following chapters further describe the tabernacle, and the Passover was celebrated. To guide the people in their travels we read this in **chapter 9, verses 15-18**. [READ] By this they knew that Yahweh was leading them to the Promise Land.

As I said, it was an exciting and optimistic time. And at the end of chapter 10 we see them setting out from Sinai. Look at **chapter 10, verses 35-36**. This is what Moses said when

they would set out and when they'd camp. [READ] Exhilarating stuff! All signs look good. The people are obedient, and Yahweh is among them, guiding them.

## Chapters 13-14

But then, suddenly, starting in chapter 11, the climate changes entirely. The people begin to grumble, then they lose faith, until finally they just out and out rebel against Yahweh and against Moses. Let's look at the one instance of unbelief and rebellion on which the whole quest to take the land hangs, and falls.

Turn to **chapter 13**. Here Yahweh has instructed Moses to send spies into the land. Their mission, as we are told in verses 17-20, was simply one of fact gathering. Twelve spies went in. Of their return we read this: look at **verse 27**. [READ THROUGH VERSE 29] That was not exactly the report that Moses was hoping they'd bring back. He was hoping they'd say something more like this: look at **verse 30**. [READ] Those are the words of *faith*! However, Caleb and Joshua were a minority in this group of spies. Most of them were of this persuasion: look at **verses 31**. [READ THROUGH VERSE 33] These are the words of *unbelief*. They sized up the inhabitants of the land, and they sized up themselves. Then, through their own logic, they came to the conclusion that they cannot take the land from these people. They'd forgotten that their possession of the land will depend on the presence and power of Yahweh in their midst, not their own strength of arms. Had they not just seen what Yahweh did to the Egyptians? Where was their faith? Where was their trust? Where was their confidence in Yahweh, who dwelt among them?

Well, it wasn't only the spies who lacked faith. Listen to the response of the people when they heard this report. Look at **chapter 14**. [READ VERSES 1 THROUGH 4] Yikes! It's mutiny! And worse, they want to return to slavery! But Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb make an appeal to the people based on the promises of God and on His power and might. Look at **verses 7**. [READ THE QUOTATION THROUGH VERSE 9] Unconvinced, the people respond in **verse 10**. [READ THE FIRST PART OF THE VERSE] Thus, it becomes clear that their rebellion is not only against Moses and the other leaders, but against Yahweh Himself.

Well, Yahweh is having none of it! His wrath is kindled. Look at how He protects Moses and pronounces His sentence against the people, continuing in **verse 10**. As I read this, take particular note of Yahweh's displeasure with their unbelief. [READ THE SECOND HALF OF VERSE 10 THROUGH VERSE 12] And so, just like we saw with the golden calf incident in Exodus, Yahweh is ready to blot them out, and cast them off from being His people. This is a long way from what we read at the end of chapter 6: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." What a tragedy. And it's because of their lack of faith.

But still there is hope. For Yahweh is also slow to anger; abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion (cf. v. 18). And this instant will be another opportunity for us to see the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, as Moses, once again, prefigures and foreshadows Christ by what he does next. Look at Moses' prayer of intercession on behalf of the people, starting in **verse 13**. And notice Moses' appeal to Yahweh's glory and fame. Do you remember why Yahweh rescued them from Egypt in the first place? Think back to the first class on Exodus. [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] Yeah, for His glory and His own name sake. Now

let's read Moses' prayer on behalf of the people. [READ VERSES 13-19] Smart man, that Moses! Basically he's saying, "Oh Yahweh, we've seen your power in dealing with the Egyptians. Now, please, let us also see how powerful Your grace and compassion are. And in so doing, uphold your glory and Your fame."

Now, just as we saw with the golden calf, this turns out to be an effectual prayer. Yahweh will not cast His people off entirely. Nevertheless though, there will be real consequences for the people's rebellion. Look at **verses 20 through 23**. [READ] Jump down to **verse 31**. [READ THROUGH VERSE 32] Hence, the taking of the land is delayed. It's a real sad note in the history of Israel. But the point that should be emphasized is that Yahweh is still moving forward with His plan of redemption and still fulfilling His promises. They are delayed a little, but that's just fine with Yahweh. The consequences for this unbelief are real; this generation will all die in the wilderness. They will never see the land. But the promises are still strong; even the people's sin cannot stop Yahweh from His plan of redemption and showing Himself as a covenant-faithful God.

### [TAKE QUESTIONS]

Now, we have to ask, "What difference does it make to us that these people did not reach the Promise Land because of their unbelief?" Well, remember what the Promise Land represented. What did I say, at the beginning of this class, that the Promise Land represented? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] Heaven: the newly created universe. I called it "The New Heavens and the New Earth." That is, in simplest terms: heaven, the world to come. So this generation and their actions, and the consequences of their actions serve as a major theological launching pad for the author of Hebrews. Turn to **Hebrews, chapter 3** with me. We'll start reading in **verse 12**. [READ THROUGH 4:2] It is important to point out the very sober warning here. Hebrews is telling us that we can be exposed to much power, and grace, and teaching of the LORD, and still fall away because we lack faith. So be warned. You can come to church for decades. You can know the Bible inside and out. You can be a leader in the church. You can be a part of small groups, and outreach ministries, and missions trips, and so on...and still miss heaven because it was all never mixed with faith. You never believed.

A lot more could be said here, of course. I encourage you think this passage over and examine your hearts. And the key application is that you must have faith, and you must persevere in faith until the end. Don't let sin and unbelief deceive you and lead you to make shipwreck of the faith. Don't play with fire; you're not in heaven yet; persevere in faith!<sup>3</sup>

And so we are warned here, in 3:12, to beware lest an unbelieving heart lead you astray. Our faith must last us our entire lives. But did you remember what we read in Hebrews 3:13: "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." This work of perseverance is not to be done in isolation and solitude. But we need to rely on others, and others need to rely on us so that we can run this race, and not come up short because sin deceived us and led us astray. Eternal security is a community project. We are exhorted to *encourage one another* lest sin's deceitfulness harden

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<sup>3</sup> Also of interesting note is that this section of Hebrews climaxes with Hebrews 4:12ff. Thus, the sin of unbelief arose from "hardening their hearts" when they had the opportunity to "hear His voice." So to persevere in faith necessitates hearing and heeding the word of God. This is further demonstrated in the way the people rebelled against Moses, Yahweh's prophet.

our hearts, and give room for such unbelief. So we need to trust one another, and open our lives to one another, so that we can watch out for one another and say, in a loving way, “Don’t let lust deceive you. Don’t let greed deceive you. Don’t let envy deceive you. Don’t let murmuring deceive you. Don’t let hatred deceive you. Don’t let the hedonistic treasure of America deceive you.” We need to be a community where we are daily encouraging each other to have faith that sees through the deceptions of the world, firm to the end.

## [TAKE QUESTIONS]

### 21:4-9

Well, these chapters in the middle of the book are full of more examples of disbelief and disobedience. Thus, they are also full of Yahweh’s longsuffering and grace. Let’s look at just one other example of this. Turn to chapter 21.

In John 3, Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” What did He mean by that? The answer is in **Numbers 21**.

Let’s start reading in **verse 4**. [READ VERSES 4-5] There they are again grumbling against Yahweh and His appointed leader, Moses. And as always, this sin cannot go unpunished. Look at **verse 6**. [READ] Now look at the pattern here: the people sin and the LORD sends His wrath upon their sin. Next, the people repent, and seek an intercessor to go to the LORD to plead for mercy on their behalf. Look at **verse 7**. [READ] Are you noticing the gospel pattern here?: sin; wrath; repentance; need for a mediator...

Now look at **verses 8-9**, and let’s see if we can figure out what Jesus meant in John 3. [READ] What was Jesus talking about when He said He had to be lifted up like the snake, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] Again, we have an example of “typology” and fulfillment. That’s where an event in the Old Testament is intended, under God’s sovereignty, to foreshadow and prefigure a greater reality in Christ. In this case, the snake on the pole saved the people from death by venom. Christ brings a greater salvation. He doesn’t save from snakes, as bad as that is, but He saves from hell. He doesn’t only save from physical death, but from eternal death.

Now, I have often wondered how *looking* at a snake on a pole could ever cure someone of a snake bite, and what the relationship between that and **Jesus on the cross** is. And the answer I think is this: Clearly what’s going on here in Numbers 21 is a miracle. Yahweh is supernaturally healing these people. But look at the grounds upon which He does it. “Looking” at the snake is the act of obedience that comes from faith in what God has provided. That is to say, if God has given this snake as the means to the cure, then just merely looking at it, as they are told, is an act of trusting in God’s provision for the healing and forgiveness of sins. In the same way, we are called again to trust in God’s provision for salvation. The cross of Jesus Christ was God’s idea. It was God’s design. It was given to us as the one and only way to be saved from our sins – murmuring and disbelieving and distrusting and disobeying that we are guilty of all the time as well. If you seek some other means of salvation, they won’t work. Only belief in what God has provided, His Son dying for your sins, will suffice to rescue you from hell. And in that way Christ is a greater Savior, the way of salvation that God has provided for all who would believe.

Now, before we go any further, let's briefly consider how the people got into this situation in the first place: their sin of murmuring, grumbling, complaining. The application for us is obvious. It is a great sin to murmur against what God has given you. Trust God's provision for you and for your earthly existence. Don't complain about your income, or your car, or your living situation. Trust the LORD. Are you to say to the LORD that He has been unkind to you? Or that He is unwise and you know better what you ought to have? Humble yourself and consider that you, as a creature, have no rights to anything in God's universe. All is His to disperse as He wills. Further, as a sinner, you are doubly indebted to Him. So the next time you think to grumble about your lot in life, remember who you are: a sinful creature. That might help to humble you, and turn your complaining into praising and thanking. And think your own creatureliness, and your own sinfulness. And think of God's wisdom and goodness. Consider Jesus' words in **Matthew 7:9-10**: "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?"

## [TAKE QUESTIONS]

### Chapters 26-36

The following chapters in Numbers, again, have the disappointing stories of Israel's rebellion and idolatry in the wilderness. Then in chapter 26 another census is taken, for that first generation has entirely died in the wilderness. Things then begin to look up again for the rest of the book. The new generation is preparing to go into the land. By the end of the book the nation of Israel is encamped on the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan River from the Promise Land. Once again, the promises of God are poised to be fulfilled. We'll see, in the coming weeks, if this generation has more faith, and trusts in the LORD more than their fathers.

### 11:16-30

Before we close the book of Numbers, though, I want to go back and pick up one more doctrine in chapter 11. It is often asked, "What is the difference between what the Holy Spirit did in the Old Testament days, and what He is doing now?" It is clear that we read a lot more of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, but we also know that He was active in the days of the Old Testament as well. What is the difference between His ministry then and now?

While the Holy Spirit is mentioned as early as Genesis 1:2, we specifically begin to learn more about Him in Numbers 11. Let's start reading in **verse 16**. [READ VERSES 16-17] The first thing you'll notice there is that the Spirit is only given to leaders among God's people, not all of God's people. Now look down at **verse 25**. [READ] What we see here is that the Holy Spirit enabled these men to prophesy. That is, to speak the very words of God. But you'll also notice that such prophesy stopped. This is probably because the Spirit did not stay on them, but left them. You see, often in the Old Testament that the Spirit would come upon someone, and then leave them later. So, He did not necessarily permanently indwell those whom He came upon.

But Moses longs for a better day in the future when the Holy Spirit is more pervasive through the covenant community. Look at **verses 29-30**. [READ] Moses wishes that all could

have direct access to the word of God like he and these other elders do. And this will also be prophesied by other prophets (Joel 2:28f) to soon take place.

In Judges and I Samuel you can read more about the Spirit coming upon people and leaving them again.<sup>4</sup> Often there He would come upon someone to aid them in delivering/rescuing/saving His people. Then, when we get to Isaiah we'll see the promise that someone named the "Servant of the LORD" will have the Spirit in power upon Him, so that He can accomplish a truly great work of salvation for the people of God.<sup>5</sup> Can you see where I'm going with this? In Luke 4 we read this:

<sup>14</sup> Jesus returned to Galilee *in the power of the Spirit*, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. <sup>15</sup> He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. <sup>16</sup> He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: <sup>18</sup> "*The Spirit of the Lord* is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [emphasis added]

So Jesus is the "Servant" whose ministry marks a change in the way the Holy Spirit moves among His people. In the book of Acts<sup>6</sup> (and in Paul's letters<sup>7</sup>) we learn that now the Holy Spirit is given to all the people of God, from the greatest to the least, the oldest to the youngest. While I don't believe that we receive revelation from God through the Spirit anymore, I do, nonetheless, believe that the Holy Spirit aids and helps us to understand the revelation of God that is already given: the Bible. And, as I mentioned last week, the Spirit also conforms us into the image of Christ, little by little, making us more loving and more holy in the world.<sup>8</sup>

So the contract between the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and today is that today He is poured out on all who believe, and He never leaves them nor forsakes them.

Now the challenge is before us to live in the Spirit day by day, to walk in the Spirit and not grieve the Spirit. And so we read in **Ephesians 4:29-32** this.

<sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

As we think about our words being used for building others up, my thoughts go back to the sin of murmuring. When you complain you don't build anyone up to persevere in their faith. You

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<sup>4</sup> Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; I Samuel 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:13-16; 19:20, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 32:15; 42:1; 43:10-12; 44:8; 45:22; 49:1-6; 61:1-3.

<sup>6</sup> Chapter 2; 8:14-17; 10:44-48.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Galatians 5:16-26 as one example.

<sup>8</sup> Sadly, time prohibits a comparison between Numbers 12:6-8 and Hebrews 3:1-6, which goes a long way towards understanding the redemptive-historical finality of Christ's prophetic ministry.

actually discourage their faith. To walk in the Spirit means a lot of things. Today we are learning that we have a special gift from God that these people in the wilderness did not have. And so we don't have to grumble. We can use our words to aid others in persevering in faith.

### **[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

### **Conclusion**

In it all today we've seen the distrust and disobedience of the people serve to highlight all the more the faithfulness and patience of the LORD. And we've seen how all these things in the Old Testament were meant in God's sovereignty to point the way forward to the Lord Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Christ's resurrection and ascension.

Yahweh is moving redemptive-history forward, and continuing with His plan of redemption for the universe and for His covenant people.

### **[PRAY]**