

BIBLE BRIEFING

NUMBERS 1-4

“Order At the Border”

Introduction

One month has elapsed between the last chapter of Exodus and the first chapter of Numbers. The Tabernacle was erected and worship was instituted; now they would move forward to war against the inhabitants of the land God was giving them.

Already we have food for our spirits! Worship must precede warfare in God’s service. Our wrestling is not against “flesh and blood.” It is not against the physical; it is against the spiritual, so it must be waged spiritually.

Still, it must be waged. Israel must march against her foes. Numbers is the book that describes the preparations for the march.

All was made ready and the march began. Kadesh-Barnea, on the borders of the Promised Land, was reached. **They could see it!**

But they feared to enter; there were giants in the land. God let them know that this was a defining moment; they must now go in or they could never go in - even if they repented. They refused; then repented. But it was too late for them. They remained God’s people, but fell short. Forty years of wandering set-in, until all from that generation have fallen dead in the wilderness. God renews His offer to their descendants and a renewed generation begins to take God at His Word.

The Israelites had been slaves in the land of Goshen; their tasks were appointed, and their taskmasters compelled their obedience. Their difficulties had been great, their bondage cruel, but they were free from the necessity of thought and arrangement. They found freedom difficult.

Numbers describes their tragedy and their triumph. It is all for our example, that we might not fall short of taking hold of any of God's promises.

The book falls into three major divisions which tell the story I've summarized:

1. From chapter one through chapter ten, verse ten, the original exodus generation is prepared to enter the Promised Land. It is the March from Mount Sinai.
2. From chapter ten, verse eleven, through chapter twenty-five, verse eighteen, Israel's failures are reported – including early on their failure to enter the land. It is the Mutiny at Kadesh.
3. The rest of the book records the preparations of the next generation to enter the Promised Land. There they Muster at Moab.

Chapters one through ten cover a mere fifty days. The remainder of the book covers a long thirty-eight years!

Chapters one through ten form a unit as God prepared His people. Those chapters, by the way, are not in chronological order. Chapters seven, eight, and nine preceded chapters one through six. The Jews celebrated their second Passover prior to their march – fitting as we emphasize worship first, then war.

Regardless the chronological order, chapters one through four specifically deal with God numbering His people:

Numbers 1:1 Now the Lord spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on the first *day* of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying:

Numbers 1:2 "Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male individually,

Numbers 1:3 from twenty years old and above - all who *are able to go to war* in Israel. You and Aaron shall number them by their armies.

Numbers 1:4 And with you there shall be a man from every tribe, each one the head of his father's house.

The Jewish title of the book is *In the Wilderness*, from the opening

verse. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, it was given the title *Numbers*, because in it there are two distinct numberings – one of the exodus generation, and the other of the next generation.

The numbering of chapter one was primarily to determine military strength. The phrase, “able to go forth to war,” is used some fourteen times in this chapter. It presents the man-power of the newly formed nation.

They took inventory of their resources for war. It’s good to know the condition of the people. Too often Churches burden the people by reaching beyond their resources.

We also must see, that as in the case of Levi, there are some things that can’t - or shouldn’t - be counted. Israel had to appreciate that some of the most important things can’t be counted!

On a personal level: True, the battle belongs to the Lord. But you must hone your spiritual skills as His soldier.

Notice, too, the emphasis on families. “Each one the head of his father’s house.”

Israel was organized according to the tribes that descended from the original twelve sons of Jacob. Twelve tribes are mentioned, but not the tribe of Levi; yet the number twelve is maintained because from Jacob’s son Joseph, two tribes came (Ephraim and Manasseh). The descendants of Levi will be discussed separately.

Heads of each tribe are listed in verses five through sixteen; then, in verse seventeen, you read,

Numbers 1:17 Then Moses and Aaron took these men who had been mentioned by name,

Numbers 1:18 and they assembled all the congregation together on the first day of the second month; and they recited their ancestry by families, by their fathers’ houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, each one individually.

Numbers 1:19 As the Lord commanded Moses, so he numbered them in the Wilderness of Sinai.

The numbers are listed through verse forty-three; then you read, in verse forty-four,

Numbers 1:44 These are the ones who were numbered, whom Moses and Aaron numbered, with the leaders of Israel, twelve men, each one representing his father's house.

Numbers 1:45 So all who were numbered of the children of Israel, by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and above, all who *were able to go to war* in Israel -

Numbers 1:46 all who were numbered were six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty.

There were a total of 603,550 fighting men among the twelve tribes. It is from this number that scholars estimate the total number of people in the camp – anywhere between two- and six million.

Think of it for a moment: All these would die in the wilderness, except for Joshua and Caleb.

The Christian life is a battleground, not a playground! There are enemies to overcome, and territory to win.

You do not volunteer for battle; you are conscripted. If you are born-again, you are a soldier. You can't opt-out, or go a.w.o.l. without serious spiritual consequences – to you, but also to others in the battle. Sometimes we don't think enough about those we are abandoning to fight alone, without our help.

The Levites had a special place in the battle:

Numbers 1:47 But the Levites were not numbered among them by their fathers' tribe;

Numbers 1:48 for the Lord had spoken to Moses, saying:

Numbers 1:49 "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor take a census of them among the children of Israel;

Numbers 1:50 but you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the Testimony, over all its furnishings, and over all things that belong to it; they shall carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings; they shall attend to it and camp around the tabernacle.

Numbers 1:51 And when the tabernacle is to go forward, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall set it up. The outsider who comes near shall be put to death.

Numbers 1:52 The children of Israel shall pitch their tents, everyone by his own camp, everyone by his own standard, according to their armies;
Numbers 1:53 but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel; and the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony.”
Numbers 1:54 Thus the children of Israel did; according to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so they did.

The three sons of Levi were Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (Genesis 46:11). Moses and Aaron were descended from Kohath, and Aaron was Israel's first high priest; his sons, the first priests. Only sons of Aaron could be priests; the other Levites assisted them:

1. The priests performed the sacrificial, ceremonial, and spiritual ministries of the Tabernacle.
2. The Levites were assigned to the material of the Tabernacle itself – with erecting it, transporting it, preserving it, and otherwise maintaining it.

These guys didn't carry weapons and go hand-to-hand. But you mustn't think of their place in the battle as insignificant or less significant. It may have been the most important!

Worship and warfare go together. In the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the Lord is receiving worship in heaven the whole time He is waging war on the earth. Unless we are right in our worship, we will go wrong in our warfare.

Psalms 149:6 *Let the high praises of God be in their mouth,
And a two-edged sword in their hand,*

Chapter two continues their preparation by assigning the order for making and breaking camp:

Numbers 2:1 And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:
Numbers 2:2 “Everyone of the children of Israel shall camp by his own standard, beside the emblems of his father's house; they shall camp some distance from the tabernacle of meeting.

It would have been chaotic if not for strict ordering of their camping. There is nothing wrong with order in God's Church, either! The Holy Spirit can be spontaneous, in an orderly way.

Everything God does is orderly. It may not seem that way to us; but think of our limited understanding. What seems random has been providenced by God from before the foundation of the earth!

As with the Levites and priests, each of the twelve remaining tribes had a specific camping spot around the Tabernacle. The exact order and numbering is given in verses three through thirty-nine.

1. The tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun camped to the east with a total of 186,400 men. They were at the entrance to the Tabernacle.
2. The tribes of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad camped south of the Tabernacle with 151,450 men.
3. Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph. Their descendants camped to the west, along with the tribe of Benjamin – a total of 108,100 men.
4. On the north were the tribes of Dan, Asher, and Naphtali, with 157,600 men.

You remember that God dwelt among them. There was over the Tabernacle a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. Whenever God 'moved,' the Tabernacle was deconstructed. The ark of the covenant was carried in front, following God, by the priests. Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun marched behind it, followed by the descendants of Gershon and Merari carrying the Tabernacle materials. Next came Reuben, Simeon, and Gad, followed by the descendants of Kohath carrying the Tabernacle furniture. Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin were next; Dan, Asher, and Naphtali were rear-guard.

Each tribe had its own standard, and each family its own banner. We are nowhere in Scripture told the colors or the emblems. Jewish tradition says they matched the colors of the precious gemstones on the breastplate of the High Priest. We speculate that four of the emblems are listed in Ezekiel and Revelation, assigning the lion to Judah, the ox to Ephraim, the man to Reuben, and the eagle to Dan.

It must have been quite a sight! In fact, you read in Numbers 24:5 & 6,

Numbers 24:5 “How lovely are your tents, O Jacob!
Your dwellings, O Israel!
Numbers 24:6 Like valleys that stretch out,
Like gardens by the riverside,
Like aloes planted by the Lord,
Like cedars beside the waters.

Israel and the Church are not to be confused with one another; but we can glean principles and insights from Israel’s camp. We ought to be a pilgrim people following the Lord, with His glory at the center of everything and His presence leading our way. We should be one people, in unity; but we each have our own special place in the Church.

Chapters three and four assigned duties to the Levites. There are two numberings of the Levites – those one month old and older, and those twenty years old and older.

We start with the priests:

Numbers 3:1 Now these *are* the records of Aaron and Moses when the Lord spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai.
Numbers 3:2 And these *are* the names of the sons of Aaron: Nadab, the firstborn, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar.
Numbers 3:3 These *are* the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he consecrated to minister as priests.
Numbers 3:4 Nadab and Abihu had died before the Lord when they offered profane fire before the Lord in the Wilderness of Sinai; and they had no children. So Eleazar and Ithamar ministered as priests in the presence of Aaron their father.

Eleazar would be chief over the Levites (Numbers 3:32) and eventually replaced his father as High Priest. Ithamar had received the offerings for building the Tabernacle (Exodus 38:21). He was in charge of the Gershonites and Merarites (Numbers 4:28, 33).

Numbers 3:5 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:
Numbers 3:6 “Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him.
Numbers 3:7 And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle.

Numbers 3:8 Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle.

Numbers 3:9 And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they *are* given entirely to him from among the children of Israel.

Numbers 3:10 So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall attend to their priesthood; but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

Numbers 3:11 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

Numbers 3:12 “Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine,

Numbers 3:13 because all the firstborn *are* Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I *am* the Lord.”

The firstborn - which was always thought to be the best and the favored - always belongs to God; so instead of giving the firstborn of Israel to God in sacrifice, the tribe of Levi was “given” to God as in place of each of the firstborn sons of Israel.

The Levites were God's gifts to the priests, ministering as their spiritual firstborn sons. We'll see in chapter eight that Levites began to serve at age twenty-five. They were numbered at age twenty, so it is likely that a Levite had a five-year training before serving.

They had a great deal to learn; and it was dangerous (deadly even) to make a mistake!

If you read through these two chapters, here is what you will find:

1. The Gershonites were numbered at 7,500 with 2,630 old enough to serve. They camped on the west. Eliasaph was their leader. They were responsible for transporting the coverings, hangings, and framework of the Tabernacle, and all equipment pertaining to them. They had two carts and four oxen. A priest, Ithamar, supervised their work.
2. The Koathites numbered 8,600 with 2,750 old enough to serve. They camped on the south. Elziphan was their leader. They were responsible for carrying the furniture in the sanctuary. Eleazar was the priest in charge of these guys. Chapter 4:1-20 describes and explains the elaborate procedures they followed.

Numbers 4:1 Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:
Numbers 4:2 “Take a census of the sons of Kohath from among the children of Levi, by their families, by their fathers’ house,
Numbers 4:3 from thirty years old and above, even to fifty years old, all who enter the service to do the work in the tabernacle of meeting.

Among the males of the family of Kohath, only those between thirty and fifty were allowed to actually do the work of the sanctuary. In some ways, this was thought to be the “prime” of a man’s life (combining both wisdom and physical strength) and God wanted the best from the family of Kohath.

Numbers 4:4 “This *is* the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of meeting, *relating to* the most holy things:
Numbers 4:5 When the camp prepares to journey, Aaron and his sons shall come, and they shall take down the covering veil and cover the ark of the Testimony with it.
Numbers 4:6 Then they shall put on it a covering of badger skins, and spread over *that* a cloth entirely of blue; and they shall insert its poles.
Numbers 4:7 “On the table of showbread they shall spread a blue cloth, and put on it the dishes, the pans, the bowls, and the pitchers for pouring; and the showbread shall be on it.
Numbers 4:8 They shall spread over them a scarlet cloth, and cover the same with a covering of badger skins; and they shall insert its poles.
Numbers 4:9 And they shall take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand of the light, with its lamps, its wick-trimmers, its trays, and all its oil vessels, with which they service it.
Numbers 4:10 Then they shall put it with all its utensils in a covering of badger skins, and put *it* on a carrying beam.
Numbers 4:11 “Over the golden altar they shall spread a blue cloth, and cover it with a covering of badger skins; and they shall insert its poles.
Numbers 4:12 Then they shall take all the utensils of service with which they minister in the sanctuary, put *them* in a blue cloth, cover them with a covering of badger skins, and put *them* on a carrying beam.
Numbers 4:13 Also they shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it.
Numbers 4:14 They shall put on it all its implements with which they minister there—the firepans, the forks, the shovels, the basins, and all the utensils of the altar—and they shall spread on it a covering of badger skins, and insert its poles.
Numbers 4:15 And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is set to go, then the sons of Kohath shall come to carry *them*; but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die.
“These *are* the things in the tabernacle of meeting which the sons of Kohath are to carry.

Numbers 4:16 “The appointed duty of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest *is* the oil for the light, the sweet incense, the daily grain offering, the anointing oil, the oversight of all the tabernacle, of all that *is* in it, with the sanctuary and its furnishings.”

Numbers 4:17 Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:

Numbers 4:18 “Do not cut off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from among the Levites;

Numbers 4:19 but do this in regard to them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint each of them to his service and his task.

Numbers 4:20 But they shall not go in to watch while the holy things are being covered, lest they die.”

When the camp was about to move, Aaron and his sons would enter the holy place, take down the veil, and use it to cover the ark of the covenant. They would put over this a protective covering of skins and then a cloth of blue. They then put the wooden poles into the rings on the ark so that four priests could carry it ahead of the marching nation.

Once the ark was safely covered, the other pieces of furniture were moved in a similar manner. The various implements and vessels were properly packed.

These guys did not have wagons. The furniture was born on their shoulders. It was not, however, a burden – it was a blessing!

3. The Merarites numbered 6,200, of which 3,200 were the proper age to serve. They camped north and had Zuriel as their leader. They carried the heavy boards of the Tabernacle, as well as the bars, pillars, and silver sockets into which the pillars fit. They had four wagons and eight oxen for their work. Ithamar was priest supervising them.

Conclusion

God wants His work done orderly, as He has set out in His Word. God’s work must be done God’s way.

However, don't confuse organization with spirituality. You can be too organized; organized in a way that is not godly. The Church is not an *organization*, but a living *organism*.

He wants it supervised and overseen – two different things. There were priests and Levites. We see something of this in the Elders and Deacons of the Church.

He **appoints** you to the work; you do not choose it yourself. You receive gifts as the Holy Spirit sees fit.

All of us working together as an organized organism can be an awesome sight – provided God remains at the center.