

TALKS FOR GROWING CHRISTIANS TRANSCRIPT

A Census of the Children of Israel, After They Came Out of Egypt

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

⁵ "These are the names of the men who shall stand with you: from Reuben, Elizur the son of Shedeur; ⁶ from Simeon, Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai; ⁷ from Judah, Nahshon the son of Amminadab; ⁸ from Issachar, Nethanel the son of Zuar; ⁹ from Zebulun, Eliab the son of Helon; ¹⁰ from the sons of Joseph: from Ephraim, Elishama the son of Ammihud; from Manasseh, Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur; ¹¹ from Benjamin, Abidan the son of Gideoni; ¹² from Dan, Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai; ¹³ from Asher, Pagiel the son of Ocran; ¹⁴ from Gad, Eliasaph the son of Deuel;^[a] ¹⁵ from Naphtali, Ahira the son of Enan." ¹⁶ These were chosen from the congregation, leaders of their fathers' tribes, heads of the divisions in Israel.

¹⁷ Then Moses and Aaron took these men who had been mentioned by name, 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. ¹⁹ As the LORD commanded Moses, so he numbered them in the Wilderness of Sinai.

²⁰ Now the children of Reuben, Israel's oldest son, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ²¹ those who were numbered of the tribe of Reuben were forty-six thousand five hundred.

²² From the children of Simeon, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, of those who were numbered, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war:

²³ those who were numbered of the tribe of Simeon were fifty-nine thousand three hundred.

²⁴ From the children of Gad, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ²⁵ those who were numbered of the tribe of Gad were forty-five thousand six hundred and fifty.

²⁶ From the children of Judah, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all

who were able to go to war: ²⁷ those who were numbered of the tribe of Judah were seventy-four thousand six hundred.

²⁸ From the children of Issachar, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ²⁹ those who were numbered of the tribe of Issachar were fifty-four thousand four hundred.

³⁰ From the children of Zebulun, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ³¹ those who were numbered of the tribe of Zebulun were fifty-seven thousand four hundred.

³² From the sons of Joseph, the children of Ephraim, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ³³ those who were numbered of the tribe of Ephraim were forty thousand five hundred.

³⁴ From the children of Manasseh, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ³⁵ those who were numbered of the tribe of Manasseh were thirty-two thousand two hundred.

³⁶ From the children of Benjamin, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ³⁷ those who were numbered of the tribe of Benjamin were thirty-five thousand four hundred.

³⁸ From the children of Dan, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ³⁹ those who were numbered of the tribe of Dan were sixty-two thousand seven hundred.

⁴⁰ From the children of Asher, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ⁴¹ those who were numbered of the tribe of Asher were forty-one thousand five hundred.

⁴² From the children of Naphtali, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: ⁴³ those who were numbered of the tribe of Naphtali were fifty-three thousand four hundred.

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. 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— ⁴⁶ all who were numbered were six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty.

⁴⁷ But the Levites were not numbered among them by their fathers' tribe; ⁴⁸ for the LORD had spoken to Moses, saying: ⁴⁹ "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor take a census of them among the children of Israel; 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. 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. ⁵²

The children of Israel shall pitch their tents, everyone by his own camp, everyone

by his own standard, according to their armies; 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."

⁵⁴ Thus the children of Israel did; according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so they did."

Background Notes

The fourth book of the Bible, Numbers, was written by Moses. Moses also wrote the other books of the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. The book of Numbers begins a year and a month after the Israelites left Egypt, and one month after the Tabernacle was set up (according to the date given in Exodus 40:17). At the end of the book, the Israelites were located on the plains of Moab, opposite Jericho, just before they crossed over Jordan at the time of the conquest of Canaan. Numbers 36:13 - *"These are the commandments and the judgments which the LORD commanded the children of Israel by the hand of Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho."* Thus the content of the book of Numbers has to do with the events and experiences of the children of Israel, from their time at Mount Sinai until they were ready to enter the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua.

The time span of the book is approximately 40 years, and it includes the wanderings of God's people because of their unbelief. Thus, one of the themes of Numbers is "Wilderness Wanderings," and there is a lot of practical application in this book for wandering Christians.

The book is entitled "Numbers" in our English Bible because there are two "numberings" in the book – in chapter 1, before the wilderness wanderings, and in chapter 26, after the wilderness wanderings.

Doctrinal Points

1. God expects His people to maintain order.

In verse 3 we see that the census in Numbers 1 was primarily for military purposes. All the males from twenty years and upward were to be counted: *"all who were who are able to go out to war."* This was not the first census taken of the children of Israel. In Exodus 30:11-16 we read about a census that was taken for the purpose of financial support for the Tabernacle. Exodus 38:26 tells us that the total number of men who were twenty years and older in the earlier census was 603,550 men: *"a bekah for each man (that is, half a shekel, according to the shekel of the sanctuary), for everyone included in the numbering from twenty years old and above, for six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty men."* This is the

same total in Numbers 1:46 - *"all who were numbered were six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty."*

So, although it appears that a census was taken on two different occasions, we have the same number in Exodus 38 as in Numbers 1. This is not surprising, however, because the census taken in the book of Exodus was actually taken only about nine months before the census in Numbers. Most likely, the number of nineteen-year-olds who turned twenty during this interim was about the same number of older men who died.

What possible doctrinal points can we glean from Numbers 1? Certainly one lesson from this chapter is that God expects His people to maintain order. God didn't want His people to be a disorganized mass of Bedouin, traveling around in the desert! No! Each tribe was numbered, and every person was registered by name, according to their families and their households.

God expects His people to maintain order today, especially for worship and for service. In 1 Corinthians 14, instructions are given about worship in the church. The passage concludes with this admonition: *"Let all things be done decently and in order"* (v40). The Holy Spirit will not be limited or quenched when worship and service to the Lord are done properly and in an orderly manner. God expects His people to maintain order.

2. God expects His people to maintain holiness.

In verses 47-54, the tribe of Levi had the special responsibility of caring for everything associated with the Tabernacle. In fact, the Levites were to protect the Tabernacle from any desecration. They were to maintain the holy character of God's dwelling place in the midst of His people.

This is also true today. God expects His people to maintain holiness. Some believers in Corinth died because they participated in the Lord's Supper without confessing their sin. The holy character of the "Lord's Table" was not being maintained. 1 Corinthians 11:29-30, *"For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body."³⁰ For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep."* That is, they had died. God had taken them home to heaven by disciplinary death, because the holy character of the Lord's Supper was not being maintained.

God must judge His people when they fail to maintain holiness, and this applies to all areas of life. 1 Peter 1:15-16 says *"but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,¹⁶ because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."*

For example, what about maintaining holiness in the area of jokes? God has a sense of humor, and He has made us with a sense of humor, so there are times and places for jokes -- but there are also times and places where jokes are not appropriate. As you know, jokes can sometimes go too far, and they can lower the holy character of sacred things. Even Christians are not immune from desecrating holy things by inappropriate talk and actions. So let's be careful! God expects His people to maintain holiness.

Practical Application

“Assume the Clarity of Scripture.”

“**Assume the clarity of Scripture**” is a principle of biblical hermeneutics, that is, biblical interpretation. Assuming the clarity of Scripture means to we should assume that the clearest and most straightforward meaning of a passage of the Bible is very likely the correct interpretation. This principle of hermeneutics certainly applies in Numbers 1, in reference to the big numbers in this chapter. If there were 633,550 men twenty years of age (v46), then there must have been several million people total in the camp of Israel when they left Egypt.

Some scholars have trouble with such a large number of people coming out of Egypt and surviving in the wilderness for forty years, so they try to lower the totals given here for the different tribes. They try various ways -- but they can't do it without tampering with the straightforward meaning of the text! They're not assuming the **clarity** of Scripture. But there's no problem with these large numbers of people surviving the Exodus and the wilderness, if you believe what the Bible clearly says about how God miraculously led His people through the Red Sea and miraculously provided for them in the wilderness!

A few years ago I heard a lecture given by a biblical scholar who didn't believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. He was trying to build a case that the number of Israelites who left Egypt at the Exodus was not several million people, but only a relatively small number of people. In his view, many of the Jews were already in the land of Canaan – in fact, they had never gone down to Egypt at all! Well, I just happened to be reading Numbers 1 in my devotional reading, and God used it in my life at that time. I realized that ignoring the **clarity of Scripture** results in having to tear whole chapters out of the Bible!

So don't practice “bad hermeneutics”! Assume the **clarity** of Scripture!