

The Arrangement of the Tribes of Israel in the Wilderness

Numbers 2

Numbers 2 - *"And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 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. ³ On the east side, toward the rising of the sun, those of the standard of the forces with Judah shall camp according to their armies; and Nahshon the son of Amminadab shall be the leader of the children of Judah." ⁴ And his army was numbered at 74,600.*

⁵ "Those who camp next to him shall be the tribe of Issachar, and Nethanel the son of Zuar shall be the leader of the children of Issachar." ⁶ And his army was numbered at 54,400.

⁷ "Then comes the tribe of Zebulun, and Eliab the son of Helon shall be the leader of the children of Zebulun." ⁸ And his army was numbered at 57,400. ⁹ "All who were numbered according to their armies of the forces with Judah, 186,400—these shall break camp first.

¹⁰ "On the south side shall be the standard of the forces with Reuben according to their armies, and the leader of the children of Reuben shall be Elizur the son of Shedeur." ¹¹ And his army was numbered at 46,500.

¹² "Those who camp next to him shall be the tribe of Simeon, and the leader of the children of Simeon shall be Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai." ¹³ And his army was numbered at 59,300.

¹⁴ "Then comes the tribe of Gad, and the leader of the children of Gad shall be Eliasaph the son of Reuel." ¹⁵ And his army was numbered at 45,650. ¹⁶ "All who were numbered according to their armies of the forces with Reuben, one hundred and fifty-one thousand four hundred and fifty—they shall be the second to break camp.

¹⁷ "And the tabernacle of meeting shall move out with the camp of the Levites in the middle of the camps; as they camp, so they shall move out, everyone in his place, by their standards.

¹⁸ "On the west side shall be the standard of the forces with Ephraim according to their armies, and the leader of the children of Ephraim shall be Elishama the son of Ammihud." ¹⁹ And his army was numbered at 40,500.

²⁰ "Next to him comes the tribe of Manasseh, and the leader of the children of Manasseh shall be Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur." ²¹ And his army was numbered at 32,200.

²² "Then comes the tribe of Benjamin, and the leader of the children of Benjamin shall be Abidan the son of Gideoni." ²³ And his army was numbered at 35,400. ²⁴ "All who were numbered according to their armies of the forces with Ephraim, 108,100—they shall be the third to break camp.

²⁵ "The standard of the forces with Dan shall be on the north side according to their armies, and the leader of the children of Dan shall be Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai." ²⁶ And his army was numbered at 62,700.

²⁷ "Those who camp next to him shall be the tribe of Asher, and the leader of the children of Asher shall be Pagiel the son of Ocran." ²⁸ And his army was numbered at 41,500.

²⁹ “Then comes the tribe of Naphtali, and the leader of the children of Naphtali shall be Ahira the son of Enan.” ³⁰ And his army was numbered at 53,400. ³¹ “All who were numbered of the forces with Dan, 157,600—they shall break camp last, with their standards.”

³² These are the ones who were numbered of the children of Israel by their fathers’ houses. All who were numbered according to their armies of the forces were 603,550. ³³ But the Levites were not numbered among the children of Israel, just as the LORD commanded Moses.

³⁴ Thus the children of Israel did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses; so they camped by their standards and so they broke camp, each one by his family, according to their fathers’ houses.”

Background Notes

I hope you weren’t bored with what may have appeared to be mere repetition as we read through this chapter! In fact, what we see here that God is a God of **order** and **purpose** – just as we see in the Creation account in Genesis. There is **design** and **beauty** and **wonder** in the way our orderly God arranges things.

God arranged the people of Israel around the Tabernacle, in four tribal groupings of three tribes each. When they camped, the tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun camped on the east side of the Tabernacle and the tribes of Reuben, Simeon and Gad on the south side. On the west side of the Tabernacle the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin were camped, and the tribes of Dan, Asher and Naphtali set up camp on the north side.

Why did God choose these particular tribal groupings? In general, the twelve tribes were grouped according to their closest family ties. For example, the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin were camped together. Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph, and Joseph and Benjamin were the sons of Jacob’s wife, Rachel. Closer family ties would normally result in greater harmony and efficiency in camping, marching and fighting.

In verse 32, notice that the total numbers for the tribes and tribal groupings all add up to the same overall total as in Numbers 1 -- 603, 550. Only the Levites were not part of this overall total. We’ll see their total number in Numbers 3.

When Israel broke camp and traveled in the wilderness, the tribes to the east under the banner of Judah moved out first (v9). The tribes on the south side of the tabernacle, under the standard of Reuben, followed them (v16). Then came the Levites who camped immediately around the Tabernacle (Numbers 3). The Levites carried the holy objects and different parts of the Tabernacle. Following the Levites came the three tribes who camped on the west side of the Tabernacle, under the standard of Ephraim, and bringing up the rear of the march were the three tribes who camped on the north side, under the banner of Dan.

If you draw a diagram of the layout of the various tribes for camping and marching, you'll find that when they moved out in marching array they would simply peel off from around the Tabernacle in a very orderly manner. Remember - we're talking here about as many as two million people (and maybe more!) who would be camped over an area of at least several miles, so setting up camp and breaking camp for traveling were major operations. But Numbers 2 shows us that God was very orderly and efficient in His directives to the people.

Notice that the Tabernacle was in the center of God's people when they camped, and also in the center when they marched – six tribes in front and six tribes in back, with the priests, the Levites, and the Tabernacle in the middle.

Doctrinal Points

1. God desires to dwell in the midst of His people.

Verse 17: *“And the tabernacle of meeting shall move out with the camp of the Levites in the middle of the camps; as they camp, so they shall move out...”*

When Israel camped, the Tabernacle was located in the center of the camp, and when Israel traveled, the Tabernacle was carried in the middle. Why? Because God's great desire is to dwell in the midst of His people! Remember, the Tabernacle was God's dwelling place in the midst of His people. The glory of God (known as the “Shekinah glory”) was focused in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, giving evidence of God's presence.

As God wanted to dwell in the midst of His people in the Old Testament, so God desires to dwell in the midst of His people today. In Matthew 18:20 the Lord Jesus said, *“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”* Although the Lord said this in the context of Church discipline, this statement certainly can apply wherever and whenever God's people are gathered together. God wants to dwell the midst of His people.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16 we read, *“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”* In this verse the word “you” is a plural word, and it refers to the Church - that is, all true believers in Christ. The Holy Spirit not only indwells each individual believer (1 Corinthians 6:19), but also dwells in the midst of the Church (1 Corinthians 3:16), because God desires to dwell in the midst of His people.

Ephesians 2:19 says that the Church is “God's household.” Isn't that amazing? We are the family and household of God! God lives in our midst. Ephesians 2:21 says, *“in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord...”* What a wonderful truth! God desires to dwell in the midst of His people.

2. God desires His people to function as families.

Verse 34: *“Thus the children of Israel did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses; so they camped by their standards and so they broke camp, each one by his family, according to their fathers’ houses.”*

What a wonderful verse! It’s great when God’s people do “all that the Lord commands”!

Notice God’s emphasis on the **family** in this verse... *“each one by his family, according to their fathers’ houses.”* The family is God’s basic social unit. **God** ordained the family unit, and God wants His people to function as families.

In Numbers 1 we saw that the census was taken family by family for the various tribes, and here in Numbers 2 we see that Israel camped and marched family by family, under the banners of their respective tribes. God expected and desired His people to function as families.

This is true today as well. In Ephesians 5 and 6 we see that God has ordained an authority structure for proper family functioning. Children, including teenagers, are to be obedient to their parents, and wives are to follow their husbands in the Lord. God guides and directs His people not only as individuals, but also as families. God desires His people to function as families – about where to live, and about the children’s education, and what church to attend, and where to go on vacation, and what ministry is best for the family, etc., etc. God wants His people to function as families.

There are many broken homes and dysfunctional families today, and many, many situations are not ideal. However - God is gracious! Praise the Lord! He can pick up the pieces and continue to work, even in and through un-ideal situations. But never forget the biblical ideal: God desires His people to function as families.

Practical Application

Count your warriors -- not your pew-sitters!

The strength of any church or ministry is not determined by numbers, but by those who are willing to serve and do the work of the Lord. In the book of Numbers, God had His people counted, and they camped and marched by their **armies**. Notice the recurring phrase throughout this chapter – **by their armies**. The number of those who were able to go out to war was the determining factor in the strength of the nation.

There’s a practical lesson here for us. There are a lot of pew-sitters in the church today “Sunday-Morning-Only” attendees. These folk do not make for a strong church! Strong churches have warriors - an army of people who are willing to work and serve. How is your church doing? Count your warriors -- not your pew-sitters!