

# NUMBERS

Eden to Exile Leader's Guide

John D. Morrison, PhD

# OT LEADER'S GUIDE

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*OT Leader's Guide: Numbers*

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# OT19

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Greetings! Welcome to our journey through the Old Testament from Eden to Exile! I am so excited about what we are going to learn together and how we are going to grow together as we read God's Word together in these next twelve months.

Our reading the New Testament in a year as a church was a much broader and deeper success than we ever imagined. We saw God work in individuals and in relationships as his Word was made a daily priority. God tells us that his Word is powerful to accomplish his purposes (Isaiah 55:10-11), and we saw that on full display last year.

We believe that all of God's Word is, as Paul tells us, "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). It is our commitment as a church to the whole counsel of God that has led us to read the Old Testament this year.

I am even more excited about this year because of a new and added "twist." Each week you'll read from the Old Testament, but you'll also find a devotional for the end of the week written by a member of our Lakewood Team. These devotionals will draw the connection between what you read each day and the New Testament. We are about to discover more regarding the unity of the Scriptures. God's Word tells us the one story of salvation freely offered through Jesus Christ.

Please keep current and encourage others to read along with you. I would love to hear your thoughts and impressions as you reflect on each day's reading. Please email me at [tsmiley@lakewoodlife.org](mailto:tsmiley@lakewoodlife.org)

We are blessed as a ministry to have such a talented, gifted, and doctrinally sound staff who each have the competency to lead us into a deeper understanding of God's Word. As you read their devotional thoughts and commentary, consider letting them know how their words have impacted your daily walk of faith.

Enjoy our journey from Eden to Exile!

Dr. Tom

# INTRODUCTION

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Numbers covers Israel's forty years of wilderness wanderings from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab. Our English title "Numbers" comes from the title given to the book in later Greek and Latin translations based on the censuses in the book. The Hebrews, however, knew the book by its fifth word, *bemidbar*, "in the wilderness."

The book recounts God speaking to his people in the wilderness, guiding them through their journey and preparing them to enter the Promised Land. All does not go well for God's people, for they repeatedly fail to exercise faith and to obey the Lord. Instead, complaints and rebellion mark their journey through the wilderness. The people, in fact, so gravely fail to trust the Lord that he prevents one whole generation from entering into the land of promise. The generation whom the Lord had redeemed from slavery in Egypt doubted his promise and so failed to enter the land (Ex. 13-14). Even Moses himself failed to obey the Lord fully and so was not allowed to enter the promised land (Ex. 20:10-13).

Yet, in spite of all the failure to believe and to obey, the Lord proves himself faithful. God is the main character of this narrative, and the central message of the book is that God is faithful to fulfill his promises even when his people are faithless. God's faithfulness contrasts sharply with human disobedience, but it is the Lord in his faithfulness that wins at the end of the day. He will keep his promise and deliver his people into the land he promised.

Numbers must be read in the context of the whole Pentateuch. The promises that the Lord is fulfilling in Numbers were first articulated in Genesis. The great nation promised to Abraham now exists. This promised people are journey toward the land that the Lord promised Abraham. At the end of Genesis, Abraham's descendants went down to live in Egypt. By Exodus, they have become a numerous but enslaved people. The Lord redeems them from slavery and delivers them from Egypt. Leviticus picks up the story of this newly-redeemed people as they gather around Mount Sinai to hear from the Lord about how to be his holy people. And now in Numbers, the Lord takes these redeemed and instructed people on a journey

through the wilderness to the promised land. In Numbers, God shows himself to be faithful to his promises.

### **New Testament Connection**

Numbers must also be read in light of the New Testament. In the letters of the New Testament, “the book of Numbers stands as a great warning. . . . Numbers records a trail of spectacular judgments that ought to provoke caution in every believer.”<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul uses the example of the wilderness generation to warn the Corinthians against desiring evil, engaging in idolatry, and indulging in sexual immorality.

Paul can call on believers to stand where the wilderness generation fell because Jesus Christ proved faithful where those in the wilderness were faithless. Following his baptism (which corresponds to Israel’s passing through the Red Sea, 1 Cor. 10:2), Jesus entered into the wilderness for forty days of testing (Matt. 4:1-11). Jesus experienced hunger and temptation, responding with words from Deuteronomy that were given during Israel’s own time in the wilderness. Where Israel failed, Jesus proved to be faithful.

Moreover, Jesus fulfills Leviticus. He is a new and greater Moses, who faithfully obeys the Lord and leads his people into true rest (John 6:14; Heb. 3:1-6; Heb. 3:16-4:13). Jesus is the good shepherd, who cares for his people (John 10:1-18; Num. 27:17). Jesus is the life-giving serpent (John 3:14). He is the passover lamb (John 19:36). He gives living water (John 4:10-15; 1 Cor. 10:4). He is manna from heaven, the bread of life (John 6:26-58). Jesus is the glory of God who dwells among his people (John 1:14-18).

Numbers stands as a warning to New Testament believers to hear and to obey the word of the Lord. It is a warning that we can heed because Christ has fulfilled all that God’s people are called to do and to be. If we are trusting in Christ, his perfect, faithful obedience is counted as our own. If we are trusting him, his Holy Spirit dwells within us and empowers us to obey.

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 56.

## Composition

Together with the rest of the Pentateuch, Numbers has been understood to have a divine origin and to be written by Moses. The first words of the book form a common refrain: “The LORD spoke to Moses” (Num. 1:1). Throughout this book, the Lord himself speaks to Moses and to his people.

Dennis Cole highlights four key reasons to affirm Moses as the author of Numbers:<sup>2</sup>

1. Numbers itself draws attention to Moses’s writing down the events of the wilderness wanderings recorded in this book (Num. 33:1-2).
2. As the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses received the best education Egypt had to offer (Acts 7:21-22). Such training would have prepared him well for writing the history of Israel through the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings.
3. All five books of the Pentateuch share an essential unity in themes and purpose that point to a single author.
4. Numbers reflects the cultural and political conditions of Moses’s own day, not a later date.

In recounting the events of Numbers, Paul sees divine activity at work in passing down these written events to future generations. “Now these things happened to them as an example,” Paul explains, “but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). These divinely-inspired words penned by Moses have a particular value for the community of New Testament believers.

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<sup>2</sup>R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2000), 29-30.





# NUMBERS 12-14, 16, 21

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OT19 WEEK 25

This year, we only are able to spend a single week in Numbers, and so these five chapters were selected to give an overall sense of the book. In these chapters, we find some of the key themes of the book. God's people complain and rebel against him, and while he judges them in his holiness, he is merciful and remains faithful to his promises. God will be faithful even when his people are faithless. Chapter 21 contains the account of the Bronze Serpent, which Jesus will draw upon in John 3 to explain his own sacrificial death.

## Discussion Questions

- Numbers 12 - Why did Miriam and Aaron turn on Moses? How did the Lord respond to their speaking against Moses? The NT teaches that we all live under a variety of authorities (Rom. 13:1-2; 1 Cor. 16:16; Eph. 5:21-6:9; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 2:13-18). Most importantly, as believers, we are called to submit to God's Word. In what areas of your life do you find it difficult to live under the authority of Scripture?
- Numbers 13 - Why did ten of the spies doubt the Israelites ability to take the land? Why did Caleb believe they would be able to take the land? What gave him the confidence? Where are you tempted to doubt the clear promises of God? How by God's grace have you been able to exercise faith like Caleb?
- Numbers 14:13-19 - How is Moses's prayer here like Jesus's work on behalf of his people (see Heb. 7:25)? How does Moses make his appeal to God? In other words, on what does he base his prayer? What can we learn from his approach to prayer?
- Numbers 16 - Look at 16:3 — what was the basis of Korah's complaint against Moses? In 16:11, who does Moses rightly identify as the one Korah and his followers are rebelling against? Why does Israel need priests if they were to be a holy nation? The New Testament clearly teaches that there is a fundamental equality among all believers: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all

one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). If all believers are equal and all are “sanctified [made holy] in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2), why is there still room for different roles and responsibilities within the body of Christ?

- Numbers 21:4-9 - What does this incident teach us about how God judges in holiness and yet is merciful? How does Jesus use this account in John 3:1-14 to explain his own ministry? What parallels do you see between the bronze serpent in Num. 21 and the work of Jesus?
- Numbers - As you read the Book of Numbers, consider how often the people are discontent and complain. We do not generally consider complaining to be a serious sin — if we even think of it as a sin at all. Yet, consider how grave the consequences of such sins were for the people of God. In Numbers, we discover that complaining and discontentment are actually acts of anti-faith. That is, they display a distinct lack of trust in God. In fact, with such complaints we act as if we know better than the Lord. It is little wonder then, that Paul lists actions like these: enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy as works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21). That is to say, he identifies them as demonic. As Jesus connects his own work on the cross with Numbers 21, we are reminded that our complaining is a sin for which we needed Christ to die on our behalf. The good news for us is that as he sends his Spirit to live within us, the Spirit bears the fruit of joy and peace (Gal. 5:22) and enables us to say with Paul that through Christ, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (Phil. 4:11).



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