

BIB103 OT1: Creation and Covenants

Unit 5a Preparations and Punishments for God's People

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Numbers. Another book of the Bible that's a part of the Pentateuch or the first five books of Moses. As it does for the rest of the Pentateuch, universal Jewish and Christian tradition attributes the authorship of the Book of Numbers to Moses. Moses is the central figure within the book, and in at least two instances, Numbers mentions him recording events by the Lord's commands in Numbers 33:2 and Numbers 36:13. There's some discussion about the definition of the name Numbers. The first explanation is that Numbers is a translation of *arithmoi* from the Septuagint, titled this way because the book contains many statistics, population counts, tribal and priestly figures, and other numerical data. The Hebrew name comes from the first sentence of the book and means in the desert of. And it is perhaps an even more accurate description of the book's content, which follows the Israelites through almost 40 years of wandering in the desert.

Now, there's a second explanation of what the word Numbers means as it relates to this book of the Bible, and it's a Greek title that was used, even though there's really no connection with the numberings. This way of understanding says that the original Hebrew title in the wilderness is much more accurate, a little different than in the desert. Now, because the Book of Numbers is really an accurate history of the events that happened during the period of wandering in the wilderness, it isn't necessarily a book about statistics. The Book of Numbers seems to follow naturally after the Book of Leviticus in the order of the books of Moses in the Old Testament. After the children of Israel received the laws at Mount Sinai, they began the journey as described in the Book of Exodus and they're ready to march directly into the land of Canaan. The Book of Numbers reveals how the children of Israel became prepared and went through various trials and how they were sinful in not trusting the Lord. Their sinful ways resulted in 37 years of wandering through the brash wilderness. The Book of Numbers concludes with the children of Israel once again at the edge of the land of Canaan where they received instructions for the conquest of Canaan and the division of the land. What a journey, if you think about that, ending at the same place you started for 37 years. It gives us an interesting perspective on the Book of Numbers when you run into things like desperation and hopelessness because they did have a hope but it was in a promise that they hadn't seen fulfilled yet. And we'll see that carry over as we look at this book.

So where are we at overall? The events of this book began in the second year after the Israelites depart Egypt. We already mentioned that. Now, as they camped around Mount Sinai, the time period was about 1444 BC. We see that time period referenced in Numbers 1:1. The narrative ends, as we mentioned, 37 or 38 years later in the plains of Moab by the Jordan which was right opposite of Jericho, which most of us understand what happened there. And that was according to Numbers 36:13. You'll

also see it referenced around 1406 BC. Numbers records the people's long wandering in the desert of Sinai, their time at this oasis in the Kadesh Barnea region, and their eventual arrival at the banks of Jordan across from the Promised Land. The Lord directed this message of Numbers toward the younger generation, children of the former slaves who escaped through the Red Sea. Except for Joshua, Caleb, and Moses, the older generation, everyone, 21 years of age or older at the time of the first census died before the completion of Numbers. Why? Due to their disobedience and disbelief (Numbers 14:22-30).

Moses completed the book before his death, and we see that referenced in Deuteronomy 31:24. That older generation had been confronted with the promise of the land. And if you can think about what it was all about, it was a land that would have cities, they were told, that they weren't going to have to build. It was going to have vineyards that they weren't going to have to plant. It was going to have all the resources that they needed, that they were going to get walking or going to be able to walk right into. And so they sent the spies. As the 12 spies went, 10 came back and said, "Man, you're right. It's a rich country. It is rich with vegetation. It is rich with natural resources. It's rich with cities. But there's giants. The army is big. We are so miniscule." In fact, they used the phrase "We're like grasshoppers in their sight." And they *did* have giants and they *did* have big armies, but God had promised them. And how often in life do we question the promises of God, even in our culture today? And we see what happens when a nation questions the sovereignty, the direction, the power, the promises of God.

So why is Numbers so important? Numbers takes the reader on a long and winding path through the desert of excruciating detail. This book records census results for all 12 of the tribes not once but twice. It documents priestly instructions for handling the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle. And it even spells out the placement of the tribes when they were camped. But through it all, we cannot doubt God's unfailing direction over the nation. As a history of a nation not yet established in the land promised them long ago, this book unveils significant events sometimes referenced later in Scripture. Joshua and Caleb alone, among the 12 spies, encouraged Israel to take possession of the land. Now, we see that in Numbers 13 and 14, but we also see it referenced in Joshua 14:7. Moses struck a rock and water spouted forth. Numbers 20:11 also referenced Psalm 106:32. Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole so that the believing Israelites might be healed of their snake bites (Numbers 21:6-9). It's also in John 3:14. And Balaam was rebuked by his donkey (Numbers 22:21-34). That's also referenced in Revelation 2:14. That's a lot of correlation between old and new that we see.

So what's kind of the big idea of this book? In this book, the people of Israel tested God's patience, and he, in turn, tested their endurance and faithfulness. Though the people failed many times, God showed

his own faithfulness by his constant presence leading along the way, through a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Moses, more than just a history lesson, the Book of Numbers reveals how God reminded Israel and he does not tolerate rebellion, complaining, and disbelief without invoking some sort of consequence on us. He taught his people how to walk with him, not just with their feet through the wilderness but with their mouths in worship, hands in service, and lives as witnesses to surrounding nations. He was their God. They were his people and he expected them to act like it.

That strikes a personal tone as a father because as a father, I have four children, three boys and a girl, and I frequently remind them, "That's not the way a Buckley acts. That's not the way a Buckley talks. You're representing our family when you go and do that." I take great pride in what our family is all about and that we want to focus on God and we want to represent him properly. And when my children don't act that way, there's consequences for negative behavior and there's encouragement for positive behavior. And we think of that in our own family. How are we representing our own family? But more importantly, how are we representing, as his children, God's family and ultimately God himself?

The Book of Numbers is largely narrative history as far as its genre is concerned. As mentioned earlier, it was written by Moses. The time was about 1450 to 1410 BC. Now, some of the key personalities would be Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Joshua, Caleb, Eleazar, Korah, and Balaam. And we'll talk more about a number of those later on. There seems to be three major breakdowns in breaking up this section of this book. The first section focuses on arrangements. The people were preparing to enter Canaan. The geographical location takes place, remember we talked, from Sinai to Kadesh, and this section covers chapter 1 through chapter 12. You'll see the major themes in these chapters being on the complaining of the Jews and also some of that old generation as they're dying off on this first part of the journey and not able to enter the Promised Land. This section also seems to only take place in these chapters, but they're just a few weeks' period of time. From chapters 1 to 9, to break it down even more minusculely, the Israelites are preparing for their journey and their entry into the Promised Land. They were fully expecting that within a short time, they were going to be in the Promised Land. Moses begins by taking a census of all the tribes primarily to see how many men are available and in what shape they are for the military service. Next, Moses dedicates the Levites and instructs the Nazirite vows and laws. And during this time, the Israelites celebrate the second Passover one year after their exit from bondage. In chapters 10 through 12, the Israelites travel from the wilderness in Sinai to approach the Promised Land. The people complain about their food and God gives them quail. And because of their greed, he also sends them a plague. Miriam and Aaron learn a lesson about whom God places in leadership.

Now, there's a second section of the three, and this section deals with the rebellion that took place at Kadesh and God's punishment that was given for their unbelief. It takes place beginning with Israel in the wilderness and seeing them travel back to Kadesh. The major themes seem to be wandering and transition. And this section takes place over a 38-year period of time, 37, 38 years that was there. In chapters 13 through 19, we see severe punishment for disobedience and unfaithfulness to God. Moses sends out 12 spies, as we mentioned, to perform reconnaissance on the Promised Land. The 12 return and only two of them, as I mentioned, Joshua and Caleb, bring back good news. The people are fearful of the occupants and they rebel against God's plan for taking over the land. Because of this, God punishes them and sends them into the wilderness for that 40-year period of time.

Now, the last section is about the new preparations to enter Canaan. They had wandered. They were back again where they left off, so to speak. And it begins at Kadesh and goes to the plains of Moab. The major themes of this section seem to be overcoming and a lot of the new generation, or the next generation, depending on your perspective. The last chapters of Numbers, which is chapters 20 to 26, talk about the new generation of Israelites who were attempting to enter the land again that God had promised to them. This time, they easily destroyed two nations that confront them as they're entering. Balak uses his prophet Balaam to learn to seduce the Israelites into worshipping Baal. Because of his disobedience, about 24,000 people died, including Balaam. Before the Book of Numbers ends, Moses again conducts a census and Joshua assumes the leadership of Israel in place of Moses who is banned, unfortunately, from entering the Promised Land due to his taking credit for what God had done and then in striking the rock is kind of where that all took place at.

The main divisions of Numbers, as we kind of laid out again that bigger picture, is we talked about that preparation of their departure. And again, the first 10 chapters there. The events took place here. I said it was only a few weeks. It was really about 19 days, they feel. In this time, when the census was taken, it's interesting to note that this was for anybody that was 21 and over and who could serve in the military. So you had to be able to carry a sword. So if you had some sort of muscle disease, you wouldn't be characterized as fit for military service. The total obtained at this time was 603,550. You can read about that in 1:46. Now, this would indicate that the total population of the group that was there right now was about three million people. The census was followed by the cleansing and blessing of the congregation in chapters 5 and 6. The offering of gifts was taking place from various tribes (chapter 7), the consecration of the Levites (chapter 8), and the observation of the Passover at Sinai (9:1-14). As we mentioned then, the journey goes from there over to Kadesh Barnea (10:11 through 14:55). And this

section here includes the account of the coming of the quail (chapter 11), the rebellion against Moses by Miriam and Aaron, which we'll talk a little bit more about later, in chapter 12, and the faithful mission of the spies in chapters 13 and 14. The wanderings of the desert wilderness, which is chapters 15 to 19, as noted, it covered that period of 37 years, from the end of the second to the beginning of the 40th year of the wilderness. So you kind of get that phrase in there. Why wasn't it 40 years? Because it starts a little into the wanderings and then it ends when, of course, the time of wandering ends.

Now, chapter 15 includes the various laws and records actually capital punishment for Sabbath breaking as a part of that. The rebellion of Korah, which again, we'll talk about in a few minutes (chapter 16). And the budding of Aaron's rod in chapter 17 is also mentioned here. Now, the last year of history, which we kind of talked about in the big chunk there, which is from the second year of the arrival of the Israelites at Kadesh until they reach the plains of Moab by Jordan near Jericho is chapters 20 through 36:13. Now, it's notable here that this is the area specifically where, as we had mentioned, Balaam, but also the zeal of Phineas is in chapter 25, the second census which we mentioned in chapter 26, but also this is where the instructions for the dividing of the land take place in 26:52 through 27:11. And this is where Joshua, as we already kind of referred to a little bit, was officially named as the leader of the Israelite nation. The laws that are listed there, we're not going to spend a lot of time on, but again, they talk about offerings and there's a big warning about vows that are taken and the seriousness of the results of that. And that's chapters 28 to 30. The war with Midian which they conquered pretty easy (chapter 31), and then the settlement of the tribes that were on the opposite side of Jordan than what God had promised them (chapter 32), and a little bit of a review of the locations at which Israel had camped during their wanderings is mentioned in 33:1-49. And then more instructions given as they got into Canaan, how they were going to divide the land and conquer the land (33:50-34:29). They also appointed cities of refuge (chapter 35) and instructions concerning marriage of land-owning Israelite women in chapter 36. A lot is in the Book of Numbers. A lot of facts, a lot of figures, but a lot of story.

Now we're going to talk a little bit more about that story part as we kind of break down some of the main events that took place during this time that I think are incredibly relevant to the tie-in even to us today in our modern day world and the way that we obey God. The one thing that I want to spend a little time on as we go back to kind of the beginning of Numbers, we mentioned the Nazirite vow a little bit. Now, the Nazirite vow had three key elements to it that were important. And these were set aside people. Most people know the Nazirite only through Samson and what took place there. It was a special vow that was given, and in so taking, they couldn't drink wine, they couldn't touch dead things, and they

couldn't have their hair cut. Those were kind of the main things. But it wasn't as if God was just trying to create a hippie generation, so to speak. He was trying to say that these people are going to be relatively easy to notice, that they've taken a vow of consecration that's different from the other Israelites that they were around.

The Levites is also mentioned in this section here, and their responsibility which is about dealing with removing of the defilement of the Israelites, how their responsibilities would be with the Passover, with the clouds, and with the trumpets, which we'll talk more about that in just a few minutes. So as they're traveling, they established these beginnings, thanks to these first 10 chapters. And as they start traveling, it's interesting to note that, again, the cloud is what they followed by day. God made it very clear what he wanted them to do. And the fire pillar was what they followed by night. Quickly, we find that the Israelites do what we do too often. Even though they see God's blessing, the cloud, the salvation from the Egyptian armies not too far behind them, they're going towards what God has promised to them and has for their future, and what do they do? They start to complain about manna. What's manna? Manna was a picture of the bread of life who comes down from heaven. That's the spiritual picture. Manna was actually a wafer that we can speculate what it was like. I always kind of picture it as looking like a small cracker. I don't know exactly if that's what it looked like. I don't know. When I was a kid, we'd put these oyster crackers, these circle crackers in our chili, and I used to pretend those were manna when we messed around sometimes as kids. But it was something small, but it had incredible nourishment in it. It was designed by God. You're not going to get better label than that. He gave it to the Israelites for them to be able to be nourished by. They were able to get a certain amount. And then on the day before the Sabbath, they could get double amounts so that they didn't have to do any work on the Sabbath day and they had that. More than that, they woke up in the morning with more than they were supposed to, it would be spoiled or rotten in the morning. It was very distinctive purpose. It was God food, so to speak. And what do they do? They started complaining.

Now, again, I have to be honest. I like different things to eat. There are certain things that I like. Cheeseburgers and other things. I don't want to eat them every night of the week. I don't want to eat them for every meal. And even if it was God food, I could certainly see it, humanly speaking. But rather than seeing what God had provided, what do they look at? That it was all they had. And, boy, it's so easy for us to get this "woe is me" kind of a perspective on things. They murmured to him in chapter 11. So what did God do? God, in his graciousness, which he does to us, sent them quail. Now, I love God having a sense of humor, I feel like. He sent them tons of quail. So easy to catch. I mean, it was coming out of

their ears. They had so many fowls around that they could eat and enjoy the meat of. And God provided in a huge way, but it's kind of humorous how much he gives to them as a break from the manna.

So along this time, Moses is the guy that's looked at. Well, Aaron and Miriam are both related to Moses, brother and sister, and they get a tad bit on the jealous side. What you see in chapter 12, that they actually take a stand against Moses, specifically Miriam, and she really goes after Moses like "Who are you?" kind of a situation. You see a couple of those instances in Numbers where authority and leadership is questioned. And just a side note. God establishes authorities in our life for a purpose. And we don't always like the authorities and what they tell us to do, but those laws and rules are there for a reason. And when we don't agree with them, there's ways that we can protest them, especially in a church setting as I serve as a pastor. I am certainly not without error, but God had put me as an elder in our church to be able to shepherd, to lead, to cast vision for our flock, to protect them, to teach them. And we need to be very mindful as we're in churches. If we take a stand against an elder, the Bible even says I need to have another there for when they accuse them. So just be mindful and prayerful if you have questions or you want to kind of wave your fist or aren't happier or discontent with the leadership that you have. Keep that in mind that there's a couple of instances of that. And God comes down hard. Miriam actually gets leprosy. Now, to see the graciousness of Moses, he prays and asks God to remove the leprosy for Miriam, and God does, which again shows the tender heart that Moses had for those that were placed around him.

We see in chapter 13 the report of the spies. We've talked a lot about that. I'm not going to explain anymore there. But then we see, as we move on, that there's a failure at Kadesh Barnea and the wilderness wanderings in Chapters 14 to 19. Chapter 14, there's unbelief that comes up, and Moses intercedes, and Moses just tells the people, "You know what? God put us here. There's a plan. There's a purpose, so you need to follow us." He gives them directions (chapter 15) in their wandering, what they should do. But once again, rebellion comes up. In this case, it was a gentleman that led the outbreak was named Korah. Now, Korah, went to Moses basically with a group of people, 250. Everyone said, "Hey, Moses, why do you kind of have all the authority? Why aren't there others that are involved in it? Why can't I do what I want to do or we can't do them? Why shouldn't we be in leadership?" And again, I encourage you to read chapter 16 because you don't see Moses having this anger and this "How dare you?" I think I would be like, in that situation, "God established me here. I have to put up with all your complaining and your fighting. And now you're going to come against me?" I would have almost been like "Here, you take the mantle. You deal with them. I'm not going to deal with it." But that wasn't

Moses' response. He prayed for them. And yet God saw that rebellion and wanted to take care of it. And the very next day that that rebellion occurred, God swallowed up, the earth opened and swallowed up Korah and his followers to show all the rest of the Israelites, "I'm the one that establishes leadership and authority. And don't you question what I establish." Again, as I mentioned, to this day, mankind still questions on an ongoing basis what God establishes in his word.

Then we see in chapter 17 something very interesting, and God wants to make sure that everybody knows that Aaron is the man that he chose in light of, I guess, maybe all this rebellion that was taking place, that he was the high priest. He was the man who can lead the religious leaders in the Israelite nation. So he has all of the leaders of the 12 tribes take a staff, a long piece of wood, and he asked them all to put their name on it, etch their name on it. Of course, they didn't have markers back then. They probably etched it into it, into the wood with a sharp object. And they put them inside of the tabernacle there. In the morning, when they got up, God said, "The one that has buds on it will be the one, the person that I want to lead the religious elements of the Israelite nation." And sure enough, as Moses went in the morning, the one that budded, the one that actually had almonds budding off of it was Aaron's. And it's powerful again to see how God wanted to make it very clear who he wanted in place as the leader. Chapters 18 and 19 kind of finish up this section as they start to then get the Levitical structure now that Aaron has been confirmed in a different level as leading the Israelite nation.

So they're kind of sweeping back around through all this and heading back and they're not too far away from Canaan. And then Moses does something that a lot of times, I think, we misunderstand it. And we see that he strikes the rock with his rod. And we have a tendency to feel like "Well, he struck the rock. He was disobedient. That's why he didn't go into the Promised Land." But that passage actually says what he did is when he got before the Israelites, he said, "Look at what God *and I* did." It wasn't the striking the rock. That was a frustration. God didn't punish him for that. God punished him because he decided that he was going to start to take some of the glory and authority and credit that only belongs to God and God alone. So Moses, after going through all of this, his punishment was "You can't go in the Promised Land. Moses, you're going to see it, but you can't do it." After 38 and a half years, he was told no, but the Israelites were now ready. The old generation had died off. The new generation is ready to enter into the land, and so they are prepared to go into Canaan.

They do come across the Edomites in chapters 20 and 21, this section. Those are Esau's descendants, Jacob and Esau. They were known as the mountain people, the rock people. God said he was going to preserve them. Jacob had misled Esau and tricked him and taken away his birthright. And God said he

was still going to watch over the Edomites or Esau's relatives. And they were the most important relative of the Israelites. They had the closest tie-in that was there. We see Aaron's death in these chapters, and then his son Eleazar is the one who steps up and becomes his replacement as the high priest. Along the way, the children of Israel were convinced that they should be worshipping someone other than God. And we see that again in this section of 20 and 21. And they are hit with a plague. In fact, 21:4-9 talk about this. And it became, as you'll see in the Book of John, that God used this as a sign even when we have probably the most familiar verse, John 3:16. It's in that section there. He reminds us that just like the brazen serpent was raised up for the Israelites, which I'll tell you the story in a moment, so will the Son of Man be raised up so that we can have redemption. And that's in John 3:14-15.

So, again, they've sinned against God. They decide they're going to worship other gods besides God, and he brings these fiery serpents. Of course, we can only kind of speculate what they look like exactly, but we know they had a bite that as they bit the Israelites, they started dying as a result of it. They had a plague that took place. There was an inflammation because of the venom that was in their body. And the only way that they could have salvation was that they looked at this bronze serpent that was held up and that it was a replica or a picture of who Christ would be, as we mentioned. But to them, it was their acknowledgment that "God is God, and God is the only one that could save me. God is the only one that could get me out of this predicament." And it's interesting. As Christ became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), so this became the object for them to look at, so that they could have physical salvation. It's an amazing tie-in to the gospel story. And then they get to the Jordan River. They're on the banks of the Jordan. Not much further and they're home free, so to speak. Yeah, there'd be battles to fight, there'd be struggles to go through, there'd be difficulties, but they finally had made it after this long, arduous journey, never being able to stay in any place very long, staying in the same place but staying in it years later as they would make this trek in circles literally as they waited for God to allow them in the Promised Land as the other generation, the older generation died off.

Chapters 22 to 25 is where we hit into an interesting character. He was a prophet by the name of Balaam, and he was from Pethor. And that's in Numbers 22:5. Now, in Deuteronomy 23:4, we see that Pethor is in Mesopotamia, and that was really the cradle, they called it, of the human race. Now, Pethor is a long way from Moab. It was along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, suggesting that this guy must have been a well-known prophet because he wasn't really in his area, so to speak. They had no television, no internet sensations, so it was word of mouth that they were aware of Balaam. So there's kind of a paradox when you look at Balaam. He's a prophet and he knows the true God and has real faith in him

and receives real messages from him. We see that in Numbers 23:5, we see that in verses 6 and 15 as well, and we see it in 24:2. But he's a false prophet in that he resorts to the use of magical arts. And in Joshua 13:32, he's actually called a soothsayer. Balaam is known as the hireling prophet in that he compromised his prophetic gift for gain.

How many do we deal with in our culture who there are aspects that they speak a message of truth and yet there's aspects of it that seem to be complete and utter blasphemy against God? Which reminds us how we have to have the discerning of the Holy Spirit as we are influenced in this digital age by so many preachers and teachers on the internet. So many preachers and teachers that are on television that we understand that the sites we go to and the resources that we tap into are ones where we can legitimately and literally be able to rely on them as a source of truth into our lives, a speaking truth to educate us at how we can better know Jesus Christ in our journey.

Now, Balaam had some amazing oracles. In Numbers 22:41 through 23:12, we see this first oracle that was presented. And what happens is Israel is unlike any other nation in that she cannot be cursed, he says. I can't do it. I don't care what you offer me. I don't care what you say. I can't do anything bad against Balaam, even though his payer, the guy that was financing him, told him he wanted to do that. So then we see in Numbers 23:13-26, there's a second oracle and this describes the unchangeable God (verse 19) and reconfirms his determination to bless Israel. God comes to Balaam and says again, "These are my people. I'm going to bless them. So make sure you have their back on this because of the influence that you've been given by God to be able to share these things." Now, we see in Numbers 23:3-14 that there's a third oracle and it focuses on Israel's ultimate king, the Messiah, who will "eat up the nations his enemies" (24:8). In Numbers 24:15-19, we see the fourth oracle and that tells that Israel's ultimate king, whose coming will be announced by a new star display in the heavens and will one day hold the scepter over all men, the children of Seth. You'll see that in verse 17 in that section.

The fifth oracle in is Numbers 24:20-24. Balaam's final three oracles predict the future end of all nations by listing historical examples of contemporary nations. You see God working through and emphasizing his plan in these different oracles of Balaam. You would think that that would be enough for him to say "I can't compromise the truth." Even though Balaam claims to know the true God, the New Testament consistently holds him up as a false prophet. The three New Testament references to Balaam that we're aware of is 2 Peter 2:15 talks about the way of Balaam, Jude 11 talks about the error of Balaam, and Revelation 2:14 talks about the doctrine of Balaam. So here's an individual who, again, by all intents and purposes, we would say, "Well, of course, he's somebody that we can follow. Of course, he's somebody

that we can go after. I mean, look at these truths that he had." Do not allow one truth to become a pattern. I often tell the people in our church, "Look at what somebody is characterized by." Look at what they're characterized by. And Balaam in the end decides to follow after the person, the king who had paid him. God even uses a donkey to talk to Balaam, to say "Don't do that." Balaam beats the donkey and it takes so many different signs for him to realize "God is trying to get your attention, Balaam. Give the message that I have given."

When I read that, it kind of hit me even from the perspective of kind of sharing my faith. What does it really take sometimes for me to realize that there's opportunities to share my faith right in front of me? That Balaam had all these opportunities to share who the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was, the God of the Israelites was. He could have pointed nations instead of fighting against the Israelites to join forces with them, to realize that their God was the God. How many opportunities do I miss in those situations?

We kind of wrap up this section in chapter 26 and we're going to go through 36. But 26 goes over the second numbering. At that time, there was 601,730 fighting men. A little smaller than what was before, but of course, remember, we have a whole new generation now. The other generation had died off. So that shows you all the things that had happened. Again, we're probably right around the three million mark of Israelites at this time, give or take 100,000 or so there. There's instruction that's given about the conquest (chapters 27 to 36), instruction for the Levites. He reviews their wanderings. I think it's always good to say "Remember the lessons that we've learned. Remember how God's been faithful." I've been on lots of missions trips and one of the things I'd always love was the last night when we'd sit down and then make sure we either videotape it or journal it. "Remember what God's done this week, these 10 days, these two weeks. Let's not forget his lessons." I try to do that with my church family. "Let's remember. Let's review. This is God's story. Let's remember what God's done. Let's reflect on what God's done. Let's remember who we serve and why we serve him."

Then he had the special cities that we've talked about. They were the cities of refuge. Now, these were important cities. And there were two sections in 35. I don't want to miss this one. There was also Levitical cities. Now, these were cities that were the spiritual influence. They were hubs of where people could go and Levites were given these. It's where they were housed. And they were in each of the 12 tribes' territories. And it was a place the Israelites could go to for ongoing spiritual training and a place of prayer and other things. It was a very special place and God made sure there was access to everybody that wanted it at that time.

So we have the cities of refuge I want to talk a little bit about. And these were for protection for those individuals who committed manslaughter. Now, there's a difference between murder and manslaughter. Murder was when somebody intentionally took another individual's life. A story we're all aware of, I think, is of Cain and Abel, and Cain went and purposefully took the life of his brother Abel. That was premeditated. It was intentional. There was no doubt about what he was trying to do. Manslaughter, on the other hand, was when an accident occurred and another life was taken. And that could have happened many ways. An ox got loose in the field that somebody was responsible for and ran over and killed somebody. Somebody was helping somebody on a building project and a stone fell down and he had unintentionally killed somebody. Things like that that would take place. They weren't purposefully done. As a result of that, though, it doesn't mean that emotions didn't run high and the family of the individual who's killed was angry, was hurt. And sometimes, rather than be forgiving, they would want to take out some sort of harm or punishment on the individual who had killed their loved one. So God established, in his wisdom, these cities of refuge, and they were placed all throughout the 12 tribes of Israel for individuals to go to that they could have safety and security. Now, if they made it to a city of refuge and they were found to be guilty of murder, they couldn't stay there. But as long as it was manslaughter, they were able to stay in that city. And as long as they stayed in that city, they were allowed to stay there and have peace and tranquility that took place there.

Now, those cities of refuge, just for your reference point, there were some that were east of the Jordan because, remember, the Israelite nation was separated between being in the Promised Land on the one side of Jordan and those that were on the other side of Jordan outside of the Promised Land that was there. So the cities that were east of the Jordan were Bezer, Ramoth, and Golan. And the cities that were west of the Jordan were the city of Kadesh, the city of Shechem, and the city of Kirjath-Arba. We wrap up before they enter the land of promise, in chapter 31, the war that they have against the Midianites, which again God gives them victory in their lives.

So how do I apply this Book of Numbers with all these details and all the different aspects that are there? I love that God chose to weave some of those stories in there for us. But modern readers, I think, could take away from Numbers not only a thorough history of Israel's early days, but also a renewed sense of God's delight in obedience. He is our God too and he wants us to live righteously, worshipping him through our words and through our works. And I love that God set up the Levites specifically to be able to do that and to be able to help out in that. And God allows us to have spiritual people of influence to be able to help us on our journey and does not expect us to do it alone.

The journey of the Israelites through the wilderness earned the apostle Paul notice. When he penned his first letter to the Corinthian church, he says this: "These things happened," he wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:6, "as examples to us so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved." Where's my hungers and my desires at? Now, it's easy to crave things that aren't good for us. I remember my children in particular. I'd have them on their high chair. I'd be feeding them their food. And it's amazing how much they threw off the food. We didn't have a dog at the time. We probably should have invested in one. And I would take my child down as I cleaned off the high chair and they would reach in and try to get food off the ground, something that had been there for a while because Dad missed stuff sometimes. Stuff that now had dirt on it that wasn't good for them. And I always wondered, "Why didn't they just eat the food that was up on the high chair, in the tray when it was clean?" But we as human beings do that so often. There's an attraction to the things that we're told not to do, that we are told are dangerous to us, that flesh, spirit battle that takes place within us.

Do you see any resemblance between the grumbling Israelites, rebellious in nature, and yourself? How can we avoid following their example? We need to have humility and sincerity, praying for soft heart, and open to God's guiding hand. When the Israelites chose to follow God's plan, they were fine. But when they chose to say "No, God. I got this one. I know better. I'm going to do it my way," they always got themselves into trouble. And we see that as a book is dedicated to what? The majority of it being the stories and tales of a people who were the children of God who spent 37 to 40 years wandering around in the wilderness. Hard lessons. Unfortunately, there's scars from hard lessons. A generation was wiped off. Would the new generation embrace God and follow him? Do we embrace God and follow him the way we should day by day? There's a challenge for all of us to consider as we wake up each morning and make decisions about what we're going to do with today.