

The Number is Two – The Book of Numbers

Dr. Michael Helms

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There's a lot we don't know about the human body. But when we fail to educate ourselves about the knowable things, we set ourselves up to get sick or to die a lot sooner than we should because we didn't take care of our bodies.

There's a lot we don't know about climate change and its effect on our world. But when we fail to educate ourselves about the knowable things and take care of the earth while we can, we set ourselves and future generations up for a bleaker future.

There is a lot we don't know about God. God is too big for us to know everything about Him. But when we fail to educate ourselves about the knowable things, we make life harder on ourselves because we could have avoided a lot of needless failures.

The Book of Numbers is a story about failure on a massive scale.

The book starts where the Book of Exodus leaves off. If you look at the last verse in Exodus and the first verse in Numbers, you will see that there is only one month separating the two books. Leviticus is sandwiched between these books, and that throws the chronology off.

So, we should ask, "Where did Exodus leave off?"

Moses had led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. Through God's miracles, they were freed from the bondage of Pharaoh. They became a nation of people, and God gave them laws to follow, and he provided priests to assist them in their worship.

God was guiding them across the wilderness toward a land He promised their ancestors He would give them.

At the end of Exodus, they had constructed the tabernacle, the place where the priests offered the people's sacrifices to God. He then sent them home with their sins forgiven.

It was the place where God resided, the place where the Great High Priest entered into the Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place, once a year to offer a sacrifice on behalf of the entire nation and to seek God's forgiveness on behalf of the nation.

Exodus ends with a cloud covering the tabernacle. That is how they knew they were to stay in one place. When the cloud lifted and moved, they packed up and followed it.

Would it be that easy for us? I'd like a cloud to follow sometimes. Or perhaps just a weathervane to point me in the right direction. Wouldn't you?

But we have something better. We have the Spirit of Christ. While it's not always easy to determine God's will, it seems our greatest problem is not knowing what the Lord would have us do but doing the things we know God wants us to do.

When the story of Numbers begins, the Hebrew people are still camped in the same place they were at the end of Exodus. They are at Kadesh-Barnea in the Southeast corner of Judah in the Wilderness of Zin. The period that had elapsed was one month.

At Kadesh-Barnea, the people continued to receive instruction from Moses. These were times of great excitement and great hope for what God was doing among them and with them.

Listen to this blessing that the Lord gave Moses to share with the priests.

“The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-27 NIV)

So, did the Lord want to bless or harm these people?

The Lord wanted to bless them.

If the Lord gave them a commandment to follow, would that commandment have been for their benefit or their detriment?

It would have been for their benefit.

So, imagine the excitement nineteen days later when the cloud lifted over the tabernacle, and this massive thrall of humanity began to move with great precision toward this great new land.

Moses divided them into divisions, which was not only useful in these moves, but also valuable for battle with their enemies.

They left the Sinai Desert, led by the Ark of the Covenant, which symbolized the presence of God.

However, the excitement of the trip soon wore off. Perhaps they were now a bit spoiled by God's miracles. Perhaps once they left behind their days of making bricks in the hot sun for Pharaoh, they believed there would not be any more struggle.

God never promised there would not be struggle. There's been struggle ever since sin entered the world. What did God promise?

The Lord had promised to bless them and keep them.

A blessing can come out of struggle if we allow it to build spiritual muscle and if in the struggle we find God.

However, when some people struggle, they don't allow the struggle to make them better. Instead, it makes them bitter.

Instead of focusing on the hope and the blessings that were before them, the Hebrews complained about their hardships.

Even though God provided manna for them to eat, the people complained that they had fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic to eat in Egypt at no cost.

The complaints troubled Moses, and he asked the Lord, *"Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? Where can I get meat for all these people?"* (Number 11:11-13 NIV)

God answered Moses' prayer and provided quail for the people. The scripture says that those that wanted meat to eat all collected no less than ten quail each, but before they could eat them all, a plague struck, and those people that gathered and ate quail, the complainers, got sick and died.

Wow! That will teach you to complain.

I don't know what to make of that passage theologically.

Now I'm just going to say it because it's too good of an opportunity to pass up.

When God is leading us toward a worthy goal, all some want to do is complain. Doing God's will is not always comfortable. God is not happy with a complaining spirit.

Just as God can bless us and wants to bless us, God can also withhold blessings. Our complaints and our negative spirit can be enough to cause God to withhold His blessings or worse.

Sure, there is room for lament before God. But when our complaints place a hold or derail the work of the Lord, the story in Numbers shows us that God is not pleased.

The scripture shows that the complaining became contagious as Moses' sister and brother began to oppose him before God set them straight.

The greatest tragedy occurred as they neared the Land of Promise. God instructed Moses to send twelve men over into the land to explore it. They chose one person from each tribe of Israel.

Moses instructed them to come back with a report about the land, towns, and people.

They were gone for forty days. When they came back, there was no disagreement about what they had found.

This is the account they gave to Moses: *“We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey. Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are well fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev, the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.”* (Numbers 13:21-29)

Caleb, one of the spies that went into the land, silenced the people so Moses could speak. Moses said, “We should go and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” (verse 30)

How did Moses think that his group of men with no fighting experience could do this?

They had no resources. They had no weapons.

Moses had the assurance from God that the land was theirs. Moses had seen the Red Sea part. Moses had seen God send ten plagues that had freed them from Pharaoh.

Moses had been on the backside of the desert and met God in a burning bush and heard his call. Moses had come to understand that God was with him and that if he was with God, that was the best place he could possibly be.

Sometimes churches and people ask themselves the wrong questions. Sometimes the only question that needs to be asked is whether the Lord has directed us to do something. When you know the answer to that question, then all that matters is whether you have the faith to follow God and obey Him.

What Moses knew about God; the Israelites had not yet learned. God wanted to bless them and not curse them. God wanted to make his face to shine upon them. God wanted to be gracious to them. God wanted to give them peace.

The Israelites had not yet learned that God’s commandments were designed to benefit them and not harm them.

Numbers gets its name because Moses had the Israelites camp around the tabernacle by tribes. The number of those in each tribe were counted. The number came to 603,550.

Every time they camped, the tabernacle was pitched in the middle of the people. It symbolized that God was in their midst—that God was at the center of all their decisions, their hopes, dreams, aspirations, and plans. At least, God was supposed to be.

Is God at the center of all your hopes, dreams, and plans? Do you decide to do things that are best for us as a church or for you? Best for your family or best for you? Best for your customer or best for you? Best for others or best of you? Best for the employee or best for you? Best for the team or best for you?

It only took ten men to persuade over 600,000 people that if they went into the land that God said was theirs, they would be devoured. Ten men lost faith in God and believed that the land God promised them was bigger than God. Ten men then caused over 600,000 to doubt and to rebel.

Sometimes a small group has devastating consequences on the spiritual direction of a larger body. One person can lead a group astray.

Joshua and Caleb were the only two spies that believed God would still give them the land as he promised. They tried to convince the people to stay the course and trust God, but the people threatened to stone them.

Wow! That's rather sobering. "Keep talking about going over there, and we will kill you." That was the message.

So the book of Numbers ends where it started, in Kadash-Barnea, forty years later.

They could have taken Promised land in a short period, but instead, a generation died in the wilderness.

Think of the numbers that could have enjoyed the land flowing with milk and honey. Instead, they lived out their days complaining and suffering far more in this life than they ever should.

Jeremiah the prophet once said, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV)

God has plans for you. Regardless of your age or stage in life, God has a plan for you.

God has a plan for your business. God has a plan for your career for your family. God has a plan for this church.

God never said that we would not encounter struggle, but the Lord Jesus does not want struggle to win the day. Jesus said that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. But that requires that we have faith to follow Jesus.

Each day choices are before us.

Every day, the majority of the people are telling us not to follow Jesus. The majority are telling us that Jesus is not the way.

Jesus made it very simple for us. The number you need to remember this morning is two. Jesus said there are only two roads people can choose.

Jesus says, "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few take it.*" (Matthew 7:13-14)

The number that took the narrow road in the Book of Numbers were three: Joshua and Caleb, and Moses. Of those three, only Joshua and Caleb stepped into the Land of Promise.

Moses died on the mountain looking over into the Zion, but never going there because he disobeyed God.

Which road are you taking? Are you among the complainers? Do you have enough faith to follow God and take the path he's asked you to take in your life?

Are you among the few that have figured out that the commandments God gives to us, while not easy, are given because He loves us and because He wishes to bless us? Too many people fail to understand that about God.

Let's be honest. One reason we don't follow God in our personal lives or as a church is that we don't like to struggle. What we fail to see is that by avoiding struggle initially, we can end up wandering in a wilderness for a lifetime.

If we are willing to enter the struggle, like a mother giving birth to a child, we will discover that our struggle has been worth the effort.

Today, Jesus invites you to enter into the struggle, to walk the narrow road, the road that leads to life.

Are you on the road to life? Or are you walking the broad road to destruction?

The Lord leaves the decision up to us.

The road to life begins by acknowledging that without God, you cannot find the road to peace in this life and you sure cannot find your way to heaven in the next.

You need to tell God that you need Him. Tell God that you believe in his son Jesus. Confess your sins. Unless you do that, you are on a broad road of destruction.

Today, God wants the number to be one, just one more person to humbly step over from the broad road to the narrow one.

Will you do that today?

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