

## **Pastoral Note to Reader**

Welcome to the book of Numbers! This book follows the Israelites through their journey in the wilderness to the land that was promised to them in Genesis 12. It is a journey of struggle, complaining, and constant judgement. However, it is also a journey that showcases unrelenting mercy as God consistently provides and remains faithful to His people. As you journey through Numbers, ask the Lord to reveal any rebellious tendencies in your heart—and watch Him pour out His grace, just as He did for Israel.

## **Important Facts**

Author: Moses

Location: Numbers traces Israel's journey from Mount Sinai, through the Wilderness of Paran, and finally to the Plains of Moab.

Date: 1440 to 1400 B.C.

## **Primary Message and Purpose**

The primary message throughout the book of Numbers is one of warning and grace. The people of God constantly complain of their circumstances despite the miraculous exodus God provided just a few chapters prior. (How often do we pray for relief from a situation, only to complain when God's answer doesn't match our preferences?) Though the people reject God's provision of food,<sup>1</sup> doubt God's ability to let them into the Promised Land,<sup>2</sup> deny God's plan and form their own,<sup>3</sup> rebel against God given leadership,<sup>4</sup> and even engage in immorality and pagan worship,<sup>5</sup> the Lord remains faithful to His promises. These stories of rebellion and grace echo

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<sup>1</sup> Num. 11:4–6 (NLT).

<sup>2</sup> Num. 13–14 (NLT).

<sup>3</sup> Num. 14:39–45 (NLT).

<sup>4</sup> Num. 14:39–45 (NLT).

<sup>5</sup> Num. 25 (NLT).

throughout biblical history, ultimately pointing us to the perfect promise and the perfect display of undeserved grace: Jesus' atonement for our sins.

### **Important Doctrines or Themes**

God's Centrality in His People: The book of Numbers begins with the people taking a census of the amount of Israelite people (this is where the title "Numbers" comes from!). After the census, the twelve tribes were positioned around one central point of their entire identity: the Tabernacle.<sup>6</sup> God's presence also determined the movement of the Israelites.<sup>7</sup> The Lord's presence began as the anchor of Israel's worship, order, and direction as each family woke up facing the dwelling place of God. Life works when God is at the center—but the Israelites soon drifted, and their rebellion showed what happens when He no longer is.

Judgement for Disobedience: God sentences His people to forty years of wandering in the wilderness after only two of the twelve spies boldly trusted God when everyone else doubted.<sup>8</sup> This was followed by Moses being forbidden by God to enter the Promised Land after striking a rock instead of speaking to it as the Lord instructed.<sup>9</sup> God also sends multiple plagues after His people persistently complain.<sup>10</sup> While these judgements and punishments for their disobedience may seem harsh, it shows that God's holiness demands accountability. God's judgment in Numbers is both corrective and instructive. It shows the seriousness of sin but also points to His mercy and ultimate plan of redemption.

Preparation for the Promise: God uses various people and challenges to prepare His people for the promise He is about to fulfil. The wilderness journey weeds out the generation that repeatedly rebelled;<sup>11</sup> laws, rituals, and camp organization teach Israel how to live as a holy

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<sup>6</sup> Num. 2:1-2 (NLT).

<sup>7</sup> Num. 9:15-23 (NLT).

<sup>8</sup> Num. 13-14 (NLT).

<sup>9</sup> Num. 20:1-13 (NLT).

<sup>10</sup> Num. 11:4-35; 16:41-50; 21:4-9; 25:1-9 (NLT).

<sup>11</sup> Num. 14:22-31 (NLT).

and God-centered people;<sup>12</sup> and Moses, Aaron, and the Levites provide a God-given structure for government and worship.<sup>13</sup> Numbers shows that God uses discipline, guidance, and provision to prepare His people, teaching them obedience, reliance, and holiness so that they are ready to enter and thrive in the Promised Land.

### **Memory Verses**

#### **Numbers 6:24–26 (NLT):**

*"The Lord bless you and protect you.*

*The Lord smile on you and be gracious to you.*

*The Lord show you his favor and give you his peace."*

#### **Numbers 9:23 (NLT):**

*"Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, the Israelites set out. Wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped."*

#### **Numbers 14:18 (NLT):**

*"The Lord is slow to anger and filled with unfailing love, a God who continues to forgive. He does not punish people for their ancestors' sins; he punishes them only for their own sins."*

### **Criticism & Apologetic Defenses**

Violence and God's Judgement: Modern readers sometimes question passages where God imparts judgment that results in mass amounts of death (the plague after Korah's rebellion in Num. 16, or the fiery serpents in Num. 21). Is it morally justifiable for God to punish entire communities for collective sin or rebellion? Ancient Israel was a covenant community, not just a collection of individuals. Individual and communal sin affected the entire nation.<sup>14</sup> God's

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<sup>12</sup> Num. 1–10 (NLT).

<sup>13</sup> Num. 3–4 (NLT).

<sup>14</sup> Exod. 32:28–29 (NLT).

discipline often worked to correct the community and taught them the seriousness of rebellion and encouraged repentance.

Slavery and Social Hierarchy: Laws regarding slavery, inheritance, and tribal hierarchy can seem morally outdated (Numbers 3–4 regarding Levites' roles and duties). Is it just for God to treat members of His own people differently by giving them distinct roles or privileges? God assigning different roles or privileges to His people is not about value or favoritism, but rather, it is about function, purpose, and obedience within His covenant community. Although roles differ, all Israelites share the promises of the covenant.<sup>15</sup> God's assignment of roles is a matter of stewardship and calling, not of worth.

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<sup>15</sup> Exod. 19:5–6; Num. 18:19 (NLT).