

STUDYING NUMBERS

Why study Numbers? The book of Numbers could be called “Walking with the LORD.” It describes a forty-year journey from Mount Sinai where the Israelites received and agreed to the covenant God decreed to the plains of Moab where they were to receive their final instructions before entering the promised land. These final instructions comprise the book of Deuteronomy. But the book of Numbers contains many lessons for living everyday in obedience with God.

Along the way in this journey, the Israelites proved that they were sinful and unfaithful to God. They often complained about the harshness of the wilderness, lack of meat and water. They also complained about the leadership of Moses and sought another leader to take them back to Egypt. After spying out the land of Canaan at the request of the LORD, most of those who had entered the land complained that the people of Canaan were too strong to overcome. They refused to obey the LORD to proceed into Canaan and desired to return to Egypt with a leader other than Moses. Only two of the spies who went into Canaan, Caleb and Joshua, remained faithful to the LORD. They knew the LORD would lead them to victory in Canaan. In response, God declared that all those aged twenty and over, the first generation that had left Egypt, except for Caleb and Joshua, would not enter into the promised land but would die in the wilderness. Even Moses who had disobeyed God at the waters of Meribah was not allowed to enter into the land of Canaan, Numbers 20:12-13. Through all of these events, God remained faithful to His covenant and demonstrated His holiness.

God’s abiding faithfulness was shown in the account of Balak, king of Moab and Balaam, a prophet, chapters 22-24. The Israelites had reached the eastern side of the Jordan river and camped there opposite Jericho. Balak and the Moabites had seen that the Israelites were victorious over the Amorites, 21:21-35 and were terrified of the Israelites. Balak summoned a pagan prophet Balaam to put on curse on the Israelites, saying “*for I know that those you bless are blessed and those you curse are cursed.*” 22:6. Balaam sought God’s direction and was told by God to go with the messengers from Balak and do only what God told him, 22:20. On the journey to Moab, Balaam’s well known encounter with an angel occurred including the account of his donkey speaking to him, 22:21-35. Balaam spoke the words that God had given him, 23:1-24-24, uttering oracles of blessings on the Israelites.

During their encampment on the plains of Moab, many of the Israelite men indulged in sexual immorality with the women of Moab resulting in God’s judgment upon them by sending a plague that killed 24,000 Israelites, 25:1-9. Phinehas, a grandson of Aaron was very zealous for the LORD and put to death an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who had no regard for the LORD. The LORD made a covenant of peace with Phinehas and his descendants declaring they would have a lasting priesthood before the LORD, for his actions were said by the LORD to have made atonement for the Israelites, 25:6-13. See also Psalm 106:30-31. This covenant of peace is often called the “Priestly Covenant. Balaam was also later killed when the Israelites fought against the Midianites for his involvement in the corruption of Israel, 31:1-16.

Some of the significant developments within numbers, following the incident with Balaam, include the taking of census to number the second generation, that would proceed into the promised land, Numbers 26. Chapter 27 of Numbers relates the account of the choosing of Joshua to succeed Moses as leader of the Israelites. In Numbers 28-29, the LORD told Moses to give the second-generation instructions regarding offerings and feasts. Numbers 30 records the LORD’s instructions regarding vows. In Numbers 31 the story of the Israelites battle with the Midianites is recounted and the division of the spoils of war. Numbers 32 records the allotment for the tribes that were to possess lands on the eastern side of the Jordan river. Numbers chapter 33 provides an account of the stages of the journey the Israelites made when they left Egypt to their arrival on the plains of Moab. Chapter 34 outlines the boundaries of the land of Canaan that the LORD was giving to the Israelites for their inheritance. Chapter 35 records the command of the LORD regarding the towns the Levites were to have including six of these towns that were to be designated as “cities of refuge.” The final chapter in Numbers deals with inheritance rights for the daughters of Zelophehad.

Simple Outline of Numbers

The Iniquities of the First Generation 1-25

The Instructions to the Second Generation 26-36

Verses to Memorize from Numbers

6:24-26

24 The Lord bless you

and keep you;
25 the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
26 the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.

14:18 The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

14:21 Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth.

23:19 God is not human, that he should lie,
not a human being, that he should change his mind.
Does he speak and then not act?
Does he promise and not fulfill?

24:17a I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.

Resources for studying Numbers

See the article on how to study the Bible for suggestions on the method of Bible study and recommended resources to obtain. Suggested commentaries and studies are listed below for a more extensive study. Some are available on-line in a pdf format.

One Hour – One Book Youtube Channel
Scroll to numbers video.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSrCJNW5eUWQMyVw_2VqW_w

Commentaries

Allen, Ronald B. *Numbers*, in The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 2, Zondervan Publishing House, 1990.

Ashley, Timothy R. *The Book of Numbers*, 2nd Edition, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022.

Coakley, James, *Numbers*, in The Moody Bible Commentary, Moody Publishers, 2014.

Cole, R. Dennis. *Numbers*, in The New American Commentary, Broadman & Holman, 2000.

Constable, Thomas. *Notes on Numbers*, latest edition. Online at Plano Bible Chapel.

Harrison, R. K. *Numbers*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, Moody Press, 1990.

Merrill, Eugene H. *Numbers*, in The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament, Victor Books, 1985.

Wenham, Gordon J. *Numbers*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, InterVarsity Press, 1981.

Studies

Articles from the Master's Seminary Journal are available at no charge from the Master's Seminary Journal Website. They are in the pdf format.

Allen, R. B. *The Theology of the Balaam Oracles*. (pdf version of this Doctrinal Dissertation available online).

Barrick, William D. *The Kingdom of God in The Old Testament*, Master's Seminary Journal, MSJ 23/2 (Fall 2012) 173–192.

Busenitz, Irvin A. *Introduction to The Biblical Covenants; The Noahic Covenant and The Priestly Covenant*, Master's Seminary Journal, TMSJ 10/2 (Fall 1999) 173-189.

Merrill, Eugene, H. *A Theology of the Pentateuch*, in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, Moody Publishers, 1991, Pages 7-87.

Merrill, Eugene H. *Kingdom of Priests*. Baker Book House, 1987.

Rydelnik, Michael, Edwin Blum, General Editors, *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament*, Moody Publishers, 2019.

-Postell, Seth D. Numbers 24:5-9, 15-19: *The Distant Star*, Pages 285-308.

Sailhamer, John H. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, Zondervan Academic, 1995.