

Numbers

for grumblers



Why Numbers?!?!

You may *grumble*: why should I read this book?

A book with so many numbers and names...

A book with so many human mistakes and complaints...

But wait a minute... Numbers is among the first 5 books of the Bible.

Shouldn't we expect it to contain an important message for us?

To discover the message of Numbers, let us first look at the book as a whole.



What is the reason this book was written?

Moses wrote this book because he and almost his whole generation had not been able to enter into the land that had been promised to them. They had not been able, because often they had not believed the Lord and his promises and had not obeyed his commands. Often, they had grumbled and even rebelled against Him. However, after this generation, there was a new generation, a generation of faith. God would keep his promise, by bringing this generation into the promised land. Moses wrote the book of Numbers, in order that future generations might be aware of the problem of unbelief and have faith in the Lord. Because he is faithful, he is trustworthy and his commandments should be kept.



What is this book all about?

This book describes how the people of Israel, during their journey from Mt Sinai to the promised land, fell in several forms of unbelief. They **grumbled** about God's provision, **rebelled** against God's appointed leaders, **feared** the war of which God had said He would give them victory in and finally even **connected** themselves through sexual immorality to the girls and gods of Midian. So, this is a book about disobedience and unbelief of God's people, of believers. However, from the beginning to the end the book is also a testimony of God's **faithfulness**. In the beginning of the book the people are **numbered** and **blessed**. In the end of the book, they are **blessed** and **numbered** again. God promised Abraham offspring. Now see, with how many they are! God promised Abraham a land where they would live. Now see, how they arrive!

'What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

By no means!' (Romans 3:3-4a)



What is the message of this book?

The Holy Spirit, through his servant Moses, clearly communicates this message throughout the book of Numbers:

Since unbelief is a deadly denial of God's faithfulness, this disease needs to be deeply dealt with in God's people of all generations, lest they miss their promised rest, their promised inheritance.

So, God's people must not proudly rely on their own faithfulness, to arrive in God's promised rest, but always humbly rely on their merciful God, to deal with their problem, to save them from their sins. He is able, not only to save them, but also to bring them to his promised glory.

The way God will provide a solution for human unfaithfulness is not fully clear in the book of Numbers, though in various ways it is hinted at, or prefigured. For instance:

- The repeated theme of 'a substitute' (see f.i. Num. 8:9-12, c. Hebr. 9:11-15)
- The way they are saved through intercession (see f.i. Num. 14:19), c. Rom. 8:34)
- Through a star, a sceptre, seen from afar by Balaam (see Num. 24:17)
- A city of refuge and the death of the high priest, for safety and freedom of the manslayer (35)

The book of Numbers is clearer about the necessity to look for salvation through the Saviour, than about the nature of the coming Saviour. He is only seen from afar. Still, from these hints we can learn a lot about salvation:

- How** salvation works: a substitute takes the place of God's people [See Is. 53, Rom 3:25]
- Who** brings salvation through judgement: One Who intercedes [See Rom. 8:34]
- When** salvation would come: for them still far away, but not so for us [See I Peter 1:10-12]



What is the purpose of this book?

Repeatedly later biblical authors come back to and reflect on the message and the lessons of the book of Numbers. Among whom the apostle Paul, when he points to the book of Numbers in his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes about the purpose of the book:

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Cor. 10:11-12)

Stating this positively we could say that the purpose of the book of Numbers is that all will strive to enter in into the promised rest, rather than that some of us may miss it. The author of the letter to the Hebrews also writes about this in Hebrews 3 and 4.

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How do I get started with Numbers?

Here are some suggestions for you how to get started with reading and learning from the book of Numbers:

- Before you start your journey with the book, or with sections of the book, thank God for the teaching material that He provided us with in the Bible. Be aware that those who believe in Jesus are never without a teacher: God has given us the Holy Spirit. Through the whole Bible the Spirit wants to teach us to get to know Jesus Christ and to grow in Him. So, start with acknowledging the Teacher given to us and with asking for an attitude wherein He can teach you! So: PRAY
- Consider the option to take some afternoons, to read the whole book as in one gush. This may help you to get the big, overall picture, avoiding that later on you may get lost in the difficult details that sometimes may confuse you in Numbers. So: GET THE BIG PICTURE
- Find some travel companions. Isn't traveling together often a wonderful thing? Find some others, that you can share your experiences, questions, discoveries on the way; this may encourage you and others. So: find PEOPLE to share and grow together
- Start with the first section and take a quick look at the overviews I made (and will make) for you. In the upcoming time I will try to show you how the section as far as I can see works. That may help you not to get lost and to see how you could day by day read a smaller section, meditate upon it and find spiritual food in it, without getting lost. So: start with PART ONE
- Take your time to meditate on a smaller section and to ask God what He shows you and teaches you through this smaller section. (II Timothy 3:16,17) You might keep a journal, to note what you found, learned and experienced.

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PART 1: GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS! [1:1 – 10:10]

THEME: THE LORD'S PEOPLE PREPARED FOR THE JOURNEY

They are prepared for a glorious journey
through a dangerous desert
to a promised paradise-land

Section 1.1 **THE LORD PREPARES HIS PEOPLE BY TAKING THE LEAD**

THE LORD TAKES THE LEAD IN:

- Overseeing his people who can go to war (Chapter 1)
- Organising his people, who should be where (Chapter 2)
- Centring his people around the tabernacle (Chapter 3, 4)
- Instructing his people, about being out/unclean/in/near (Chapter 5, 6a)
- Blessing his people for their journey (Chapter 6b)

Section 1.2. **THE LORD PREPARES HIS PEOPLE THROUGH PROVIDING**

THE LORD PROVIDES THROUGH:

- Material contributions, accepted by Him for service (Chapter 7)
- Personal contributions, accepted by Him for service (Chapter 8)
- Communion, in celebrating the Passover (Chapter 9:1-14)
- The Commanding cloud (Chapter 9:15-23)
- Communicating trumpets (Chapter 10:1-10)

OVERALL MESSAGE OF SECTION 1:

Since the LORD has so faithfully prepared his people for their desert journey, shouldn't a joyful confidence always be their response?

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PART 2: FAITHFUL GOD, FAITHFUL PEOPLE? [10:11 – 21:35]

THEME: **THE LORD'S PEOPLE RESPOND WITH MUCH GRUMBLING**
on the glorious journey
through the dangerous desert
so that the promised paradise-land
would not be inherited by most of them, but by their children.

Section 2.1	Grumbling begins, plagues and unbelief on the way to Canaan (10:11-12)
Section 2.2	Old generation rebelling near Canaan, defeated (13,14)
Section 2.3	Instruction (15)
Section 2.4	Climax of the rebellion (16)
Section 2.5	Instruction (17-19)
Section 2.6	Old generation dies; quarrelling near Canaan, overcoming (20-21:3)
Section 2.7	Grumbling once more, plague and faith, healing and first inheritance (21:4-35)

As you see above, Moses frequently structures the stories in a symmetric way, with a certain centre and with themes that are repeated before and after the centre. Such a structure we call a 'chiasm'. This second part is the centre of the book of Numbers. At the centre of this section is the rebellion of Korah. Observe how 2.1. and 2.7. cohere, 2.2. and 2.6., 2.3. and 2.5; and, as said, 2.4 in the midst.

Sometimes it seems that the sections also contain such symmetry, see for instance below:

Section 2.1.:

THE LORD IS FAITHFUL:

- in leading and overseeing his people from Sinai to Paran (10:11-28)
 - in dealing with outsiders: Hobab (10:29-36) & complainers on the fringe (11:1-3)
 - in providing good manna for the complaining people (11:4-9)
 - in dealing with even Moses complaining (11:10-30)
 - in providing bad meat for the complaining people (11:31-35)
 - in dealing with the inner circle, complaining about Moses (12:1-15)
- in bringing his people to Paran, the border of Canaan (12:16)

OVERALL MESSAGE OF SECTION 2:

If the problem of grumbling is so deeply rooted even in God's own people and their leaders, then shouldn't we repent of unbelief and humbly ask God to deal with this problem in us and save us from it, rather than continue in it and stumble and fall?

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PART 3: GREAT IS YOUR FAITHFULNESS! [22 – 36]

THEME: THE LORD'S PEOPLE PREPARED FOR LIVING IN THE LAND

God's blessing for his people is unstoppable, though sinning continues to bring plagues. However, a new generation is counted and prepared by God, in his faithfulness to inherit and live into the promised land.

- Section 3.1 No curse against God's people, unstoppable blessing, curse (22 - 25)
Balaam, the double hearted Midianite minister (22)
Blessing, not only by Aaron's sons, but even by Balaam (23-24)
Balaam's trap, new generation also unfaithful, but Phinehas faithful (25)
- Section 3.2 New generation overviewed, led and instructed (26-30)
Overviewing a new generation (26)
New generation, clinging to their inheritance (27:1-11)
New leader, shepherding and faithful (27:12-23)
New instructions, agenda filled with 'communion times' (28-29)
New generation faithful, like God, keeping promises (30)
- Section 3.3. The Lord's wrath and curse for Midian and Balaam, tempting like serpent (31)
- Section 3.4. New generation prepared for living in the land
First tribes begin to inherit (32)
As you inherit, don't forget the past journey, nor to drive out (33)
Overview of the land where they will live and its boundaries (34)
Cities to flee from wrath (35)
Cling to your inheritance, do not lose it, not even a part (36)

OVERALL MESSAGE OF SECTION 3:

If God so faithfully kept his promise to Abraham, not only to make his descendants numerous, but also to bring them to the land, shouldn't we respond with looking forward in faith to what God has promised to us and anticipate to the kingdom that comes?