

# **In the Wilderness**

## **Bible Studies on the Book of Numbers**

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# Introduction

The book of Numbers is the story of a great journey undertaken by the Israelites who had been rescued by God from slavery in Egypt. In terms of the Bible's overall story, this book is part of the partial kingdom (see diagram on page 31 of these studies). The journey in Numbers starts in the wilderness of Sinai and it finishes in the wilderness on the plains of Moab, on the boarder of the promised land. The Hebrew title for this biblical book is 'In The Wilderness'.

The most direct path for this journey was 600km and could have taken only days to travel, but for the Israelites this journey would take 40 years. That is because this book is about two generations of Israelites, the first generation that was rescued out of slavery in Egypt that never made it into the promised land, and the second generation that entered into the promised land. One of the unnerving realities of this book for God's people is that it is possible to set out with God and never arrive at the promised destination.

This story is written about a people who live between their redemption from slavery in Egypt and the consummation of that redemption in the promised land. In some respect it is no different to the experience of the Christian today: we live between the redemption Christ won for us on the cross and the consummation of that redemption when Jesus returns. Like the Israelites, we also live between the times. That means that this biblical book has lessons for us as we journey towards our hope of a place prepared by Christ for his people. In 1 Corinthians 10 the apostle Paul reflects on the first generation of this book, he recounts the blessings they received from God, and says in verses 5-6

*Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.*

As we make our way through this book, we will be confronted to live faithfully as pilgrims in this present wilderness of the world and look to Christ as the one who has gone through the wilderness ahead of us.

# **1. Stand up and be counted**

## **Numbers 1:1-2:2**

### **Getting Started**

1. What do you regard as the privileges and responsibilities of belonging to God's people today?

### **Investigate**

2. How long has it been since Israel left Egypt? (v. 1)

3. What clue does verse 3 give us regarding how Israel will take possession of the promised land?

4. What does verse 19 tell us about the Israelites' relationship to the LORD and Moses?

5. What does the total number of those able to serve in Israel's army tell us about God's promises to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3?

6. Why were the Levites not counted? (v. 50)

7. How does the presence of the Levites in the camp serve the Israelites? (v. 53)

### **Thinking it through**

8. How do you feel about Israel taking possession of the promised land by conquest? Why?

9. Read Ephesians 6:10-17. What do these verses tell us about the battle we fight and the weapons we use?

10. In many western nations the idea of total commitment is not a popular one. People check for the opt out clauses for any commitment they make. How does this attitude impact church life? How can our churches be different from the culture around us?

# Prayer Points

## **2. “Ready, set ...”**

### **Numbers 9:1-23**

#### **Getting Started**

1. Starting something new, like starting a new job or school or moving to a new place, can produce anxiety and stress. What factors can bring comfort in these moments?

#### **Investigate**

2. What are the Israelites commanded to do in verse 2-3? (see also Exodus 12:14)

3. What does verse 4-5 tell us about the Israelites relationship to the LORD and Moses?

4. What happens if someone doesn't celebrate the passover at the appointed time? (vv. 9-13)

5. What is the surprise of verse 14?

6. How was God's presence experienced by the Israelites (v. 15-16)?

7. What was required of Israel for God to guide them into the promised land? (vv. 17-18, see also v. 23)

### **Thinking it through**

8. Why might the celebration of the passover be important for the future of the Israelites?

9. What do we learn about God's character when he outlines the accommodations for observing the passover?

10. How does 1 Corinthians 5:7 help us understand the place of the passover in the life of the Christian?

11. God continues to guide His people today. What do the following verses teach us about our journey to God's promised destination?

- John 14:6

- Mark 8:34-38

- Hebrews 4:11-13

## **Prayer Points**



# **3. Surprised by grumbling**

## **Numbers 11:1-35**

### **Getting Started**

1. Why might we think that grumbling is not a serious matter in our lives?

### **Investigate**

2. What did Israel do to arouse God's anger and why did it cease? (vv. 1-2)

3. Why did Israel think that Egypt was better than their journey to the promised land? (vv. 4-6)

4. How does Moses respond to the Israelites' grumbling? (vv. 11, 14-15)

5. How does God ease the burden on Moses? (vv. 16-17)

6. How does God view their grumbling? Why? (v. 20)

7. What does God mean when he says, “Is the LORD’s arm too short?” (vv. 21-23)

8. What was the evidence that the 70 elders had received some of the power of the Spirit that was on Moses? (vv. 24-27)

### **Thinking it through**

9. Read Exodus 16:2-7. Why is Israel so deserving of God’s judgement?

10. What is Israel forgetting when they long for what they had in Egypt? Do you sometimes envy the life that non-Christians seem to enjoy? In these moments what are you forgetting?

11. Read Hebrews 4:1-3. What can we be doing to make sure that we don’t fall short of entering the rest that God has promised us?

## Prayer Points

# 4. “Stop!”

## Numbers 13:26-14:45

### Getting Started

1. What areas of our life are we prone to not trust God? Why?

### Investigate

2. When the spies gave their report on the promised land, what was their pressing concern? (vv. 27-29)

3. How do the spies deliberately undermine God’s promise regarding the promised land? (v. 32)

4. What did the Israelites think was the solution to their fears? (vv. 2-4)

5. How do Joshua and Caleb seek to encourage the Israelites? (vv. 7-9)

6. How does God plan to judge the Israelites and still remain faithful to his promises to Abraham? (vv. 10-12)

7. What sort of appeal does Moses make on behalf of the Israelites? (vv. 13-19)

8. Who will not enter the promised land? Why? (vv. 20-35)

9. Who will enter the promised land? Why? (vv. 20-35)

### **Thinking it through**

10. What do you think was the real issue for the spies' false report?

11. Read Hebrews 3:7-19. How does the writer of Hebrews apply this incident in Numbers to Christians today?

12. What situations do you find yourself in that cause to to feel overwhelmed and find it difficult to trust God. How do you think you can change?

## Prayer Points

# 5. “Not again!”

## Numbers 20:1-29

### Getting Started

1. “The only thing that we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.” (Hegel) In what areas of our personal life or our life together can we fail to learn from our mistakes?

### Investigate

2. What was the presenting issue facing this next generation about to go into the promised land? (v. 2)

3. What do the Israelites complain about? (vv. 3-5)

4. Read verses 6-11.

What was Moses commanded to do?

What did Moses do?

5. What is God’s judgement on Moses and Aaron? (v. 12)

6. Why do Moses and the Israelites not fight the king of Edom? (v. 14, see also Genesis 36:1-9)

7. How does God describe Aaron's death? (v. 24, 26)

### **Thinking it through**

8. At the waters of Meribah incident, what do we learn about;

- Israel:
- God:
- Moses:

9. Read John 7:37-39. How does Jesus bring us the sort of water we need to survive as his people?

10. Why do you think Edom stopped Israel from making their way into the promised land? (reflect on the early chapters of Numbers and how Israel was to go into the promised land)

11. Why is the exchange of garment from Aaron to Eleazar so important for the life of Israel?



# Prayer Points

# 6. A Fresh Start

## Numbers 21:1-8

### Getting Started

1. What are the similarities and differences you see within your own family? Why do you think that happens?

### Investigate

2. Who instigated this attack and who was the victim of the attack?  
(v. 1)

3. Read Num 14:39-45. Why is the victory at Hormah significant for the Israelites? (v. 3)

4. Why did the Israelites grow impatient? (vv. 4-5)

5. What important lessons did this generation learn about:

- Themselves
- The LORD
- Moses

6. What did the Israelites have to do to survive the snake bite? (vv. 8-9)

### **Thinking it through**

7. How would you describe this second generation of Israelites' relationship with God?

8. What did the Israelites have to do even before they looked to the bronze snake to be healed?

9. Read John 3:13-14. How is the snake on the pole similar to Jesus being lifted up on a cross?

10. What does the snake incident remind us as the Israelites take possession of the promised land?

11. Read 1 Corinthians 10:9. What are we to learn from this incident with the Israelites?

# Prayer Points

# **7. God will bless his people**

## **Numbers 22:1-23:12**

### **Getting Started**

1. How might Christians be regarded as a threat to secular Australia?

### **Investigate**

2. How did Balak the King of Moab view the Israelites? (vv. 2-4, see also Numbers 21:21-24)

3. What sort of advantage did Balak hope for over the Israelites? (vv. 4-6)

4. Given that Balaam is not an Israelite, what is unusual about this prophet in verses 7-9? (see also v. 18)

5. Why can't Balaam curse the Israelites? (v. 12)

6. How does 2 Peter 2:15 help us understand why God is angry with Balaam, after God had told Balaam to go with Balak's men? (vv. 20-23)

7. What does Balaam learn from his donkey? (vv. 28-33)

8. How is the competing demands on the donkey similar to the competing demands placed on Balaam?

9. Why can't Balaam curse Israel? (vv. 7-8)

### **Thinking it through**

10. In our passage God spoke his message through a donkey and a pagan prophet. How do we expect God to speak to people today? (Hebrews 1:1-2 and 2 Timothy 3:14-17)

11. How does Genesis 12:1-3 shape our expectations for the events described in our passage?

12. What sort of blessings from God do Christians enjoy now and what blessings from God do we look forward to?

13. How might we regard the threats to God's people today?

# Prayer Points

# 8. The seduction of God's people

## Numbers 25:1-26:4

### Getting Started

1. What might seduce a Christian from their commitment to Christ?

### Investigate

2. What did Israel do to cause the LORD's anger to burn against them?

3. What does God command Moses to do and what does Moses do instead? (vv. 4-5)

4. How would you describe the actions of the Israelite man in verse 6?

5. How did Phinehas turn God's anger away from the Israelites? (vv. 7-13)

6. Why is God pleased with Phinehas? (vv. 11)



7. Why are the Midianites to be treated as the enemy of the Israelites?  
(vv. 16-18)

8. Read Numbers 26:1-4. What do these verses tell us about God's plan for this sinful second generation?

### **Thinking it through**

9. What word describes the Israelite's relationship to God and why?

10. Read Romans 12:11. How is Phinehas a model of a life lived in zealous service of God?

11. 'Tolerance of other religions is wrong.' Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? What do people mean when they promote tolerance today?

# Prayer Points

# 9. Looking to the future

## Numbers 27:1-23

### Getting Started

1. In what ways does our anticipated future shape our present decisions?

### Investigate

2. According to Numbers 26:52-56, what is the central concern of this second census of the Israelites?

3. Read Numbers 26:63-65. How do these verses speak of God's faithfulness to his promises to Israel?

4. What is the pressing concern for Zelophehad's daughters? (vv. 3-4)

5. According to God's answer to this situation in verses 8-11, who will miss out on their inheritance in the promised land?

6. Why is Moses prohibited from entering the promised land? (see also Numbers 20:2-13)

7. Why is Moses greatly concerned for the generation who are about to enter the promised land? (vv. 15-17)

8. How will Joshua's role be similar and yet different from Moses' role? (vv. 18-21)

### **Thinking it through**

9. Read Galatians 3:26-29. On what basis will people be "heirs according to the promise"?

10. As we have worked our way through Numbers, what evidence have we seen that Israel were sheep who needed a shepherd?

11. What do the following verses teach us about our need of a shepherd?

- John 10:11-16

- Matthew 9:35-36

- Hebrews 13:20-21

- 1 Peter 5:1-4

# Prayer Points

