

A Holy God, A Blessed People

Numbers 1-10

Packing for a long trip is a painfully frustrating exercise. Especially one of my trips. My bag handle broke at the train station. The bag fell between the platform and the train. Travelling can be a painful exercise.

This morning we're beginning a series on the Book of Numbers which is a travelogue of Israel in the wilderness. In Chapters 1 to 10, Israel are packing their bags—and doing this very carefully. For Israel didn't have the luxury of air-conditioned coaches or Millard Caravans. They had to walk and it was an awfully long walk from Mt Sinai to Canaan across some very harsh terrain.

This morning we're considering chapters 1-10. It's a few chapters (10 actually) but if I were to sum them up with one phrase it would be this one (slide 1):

“PREPARING FOR GOD'S PRESENCE”

As Israel prepared to leave Mt Sinai and head into the desert, they were preparing themselves to travel in the presence of God. And so they needed to make preparations to deal with the power of God's presence amongst them.

Now the “POWER OF PRESENCE” is a very powerful idea.

STAR WARS we hear these words – “Luke...Luke...the force is with you”. The power of presence.

My THREE BOYS used to play in the park. Chris, Andrew and Matthew were happy to run away and do their thing. But every 10 minutes or so, they wanted to re-assure themselves. They wanted to know I was still there—they didn't want anything other than to know I was there.

The power of presence.

The Book of Numbers is a book about the power of the presence of God amongst his people as they wander through the wilderness. Israel travelling through the wilderness—God with them. The power of God's presence amongst his people.

You'll notice on the screen that the Book of Numbers takes the Israelites from Mt Sinai, through the desert to the edge of the Promised Land (slide .

Remember that the Israelites were captives in Egypt,

Passover and Exodus; crossing of the Red Sea; on to Mt Sinai where they received the 10 commandments and learnt what it meant to live as God's special people.

Numbers records the departure of Israel from Mt Sinai and their travels through the wilderness up until they reach the edge of the Promised Land.

At first glance the Book of Numbers seems very remote from our experience. It was written by Moses some 4,000 years ago and set on the other side of the world. But differences give way to similarities.

The Israelites in the wilderness were asking many of the same questions that we are—right now. Some things are similar:

Israel were a saved people, so are we.

The Israelites struggled with sin, so do we.

What kind of relationship can a sinful people have with a holy God who is ever present? How do a sinful people relate to a holy God?

Just as Israel needed to know the answers, so do we.

Israel were on a journey to the Promised Land.

And we are on a journey. We too are heading home—heading toward our heavenly home.

Israel were in transit through a hostile land, and we are passing through this world as strangers and aliens.

What does it mean for us to have God present with us on our journey?

What difference does travelling with God make?

As Israel travel through the wilderness—as they experience the power of God's presence—Israel must learn how to relate to a holy God. They must learn what it's like to have God as their travelling companion. They must learn to rely upon God and trust him.

Israel's lessons are our lessons and so we need to listen hard.

So let's now venture into the desert with the people of God and the God who is present.

The Book of Numbers opens with the people camped at Mt. Sinai. About a year after they left Egypt. About a year since God brought them out of captivity and drowned the Egyptians in the Red Sea.

The first 10 chapters record the preparations Israel must make before they can break camp and finally leave Mt. Sinai (slide 3). Take a walk in your Bibles

In Chapter 1 there is a census.

Chapter 2 describes how their tents are to be organised.

Chapters 3, 4 and 8 religious officials are put in place.

Chapters 5 and 6 are laws about purity and religious service.

Chapter 7 is the dedication of the Tabernacle.

Chapter 9 is how and when the Passover is to be celebrated.

Finally in Chapter 10 they are ready to leave.

Why so much detail? One-third of the Book of Numbers is dedicated solely to travel preparations. How must Israel must pack their bags if they are to travel with God? And why?

In 1994 Don and Margie McIntyre spend twelve months living in the Antarctica region. They lived in a room described by a reporter as “a tiny wooden box often no warmer than the household freezer”. They left written instructions that they were not to be rescued if they got into trouble.

When you're packing for a trip like this, you need to pack very carefully, knowing what to take and knowing what to leave behind. They took with them 4.5 tonnes of equipment. They left behind their appendix simply because explorers who had gone before them inevitably came down with appendicitis.

Israel must also pack carefully for they are preparing for a long trip. They are preparing to travel in the presence of God so they must take extra care what they pack, for God's presence is not to be taken lightly.

Travelling with God is a serious business and we wonder if Israel is up to the task. We know from Exodus 32 they have a history of rebellion.

After the Golden Calf episode this is what God said to his people:

“Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way”. But Moses intervenes, so God relents in verse 14 and says, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex 33.3).

Travelling with God is serious business. God's presence is not to be taken lightly. Moses knew this, but he also realised the necessity of having God with them. So Moses said to God in verse 15 of Exodus 33,

“If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

What distinguishes Israel from the nations around her is this: Israel lives in the presence of God. And there is power in that presence. So Israel must prepare themselves carefully if they are to travel with a holy God.

Numbers 1-10 is designed to teach Israel things about the God who is going with them.

Numbers 1-10 teaches Israel how life should be lived in the presence of God.

What lessons, then, can be learned from the first 10 chapters of Numbers? What can we learn from Israel's experiences that might help us in our Christian walk? I can think of three lessons.

LESSON 1 – *the God who is present with Israel keeps his promises* (slide 4)

Back in Genesis God promised Abraham an immeasurable number of descendants. “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

God is bound to his promises. God has promised that Israel will be extremely large in number.

Chapter 1 of Numbers begins with a census, and the count is 603,000.

Living proof that God is keeping his promises to Israel.

As Israel head toward the Promised Land, they need to learn that God will not break the promises that he has made to them. As Israel wander through the wilderness they need to have confidence in the promises of God.

They need to know that God will not let them down, they can rely on him, he will see them through.

The census in chapter 1 is a reminder that God can be trusted. For even right now he is faithfully keeping the promise of descendants that he made to Abraham.

Have you ever experienced broken promises?

Sometimes promises are broken accidentally, like “I simply forget”. Other times there are excuses, “but my car broke down”.

But sometimes we may never intend to keep the promises we make. Some even call these “non-core” promises!

When God makes promises he keeps them.

Notice in the census of chapter 1 that Israel can still be counted. In this sense, God's promise to Abraham of an uncountable number in Gen 15 is a work in progress. At Sinai this uncountable number hasn't happened yet. There are 603,550 people, but there are far more stars than that!

The last census in the Bible is found in Revelation 7. When a count of Israel is again taken, this time there is 144,000 people, 12 tribes of 12,000 people. Now in the setting of Revelation this 144,000 is not a literal number, it is symbolic, it represents completeness and fulfilment.

The number of people around the throne praising God in the last census is countless. The promise of uncountable descendants to Abraham is fulfilled.

First lesson for Israel and for us: the God who is present is a promise keeper.

We must know the promises of God and we must learn to rely upon them. We must trust in the promises of God. This world is wild and woolly. Our lives are often thrown to and throw like corks in a storm. We need a firm anchor. We need the promises of God. We need somewhere to look.

We need something that transcends this world so we can make sense and walk with confidence through the good times and the bad. We need the promises of God.

The God who is present with us keeps his promises.

LESSON 2 – *the God who is present demands to be at the centre* (slide 5).

In chapter 2 Israel are instructed on how they should arrange their tents when they stop for rests in the wilderness. When each tribe sets up camp, they are to do so in relation to the Tabernacle which was the visible sign of God's presence amongst them.

When Israel set up camp—chapter 2 tells us—it is to look something like this (slide 6). (Talk about slide and God is at the centre).

God demands the centre of his people's life.

He will not be peripheral in the life of his people.

It is inconceivable that God wants to stand on the sideline.

As Israel move toward the Promised Land they must understand that God wants and demands to be at the centre of their existence. And his presence means light and life.

The laws relating to purity in chapters 5 and 6 are designed to remind Israel that God must stand central in every sphere of life: personal health, personal relationships, religious devotion.

All these things find their place according to the centrality of God. Everything is organised around the God who is present. He is king and he demands to be in the centre.

Lukewarm Christianity wants the best of both worlds: its wants God as a travelling partner and it also wants him on the sideline. It wants God in the boot when he deserves the driver's seat.

God demands and deserves the centrepiece of our lives.

A fellow named Rowland Hill once visited a home and saw a child riding a rocking horse. After watching the boy for some time he wittily remarked, "He reminds me of some Christians. There is plenty of motion but no progress".

With God at the centre of our lives, we will progress through this world and God will protect us from the adversity of this world. But stick God to one side and there may be lots of motion, but there will be no progress. Don't deceive yourself. Think about this carefully! Commit yourselves fully to the kingship of Christ. He summons you to holiness.

And that brings us to our next point....

LESSON 3 – *the God who is present is holy* (slide 7).

God is good but not safe. He is to be treated carefully.

Israel were to take precautions when travelling in the company of the God who is holy. And so it was the job of the Levites to act as a sought of fire-break between God and the people. Only the Levites could dismantle the Tabernacle—only the Levites could get that close to God.

Have a look at Num 1:51, “Whenever the tabernacle is to move, the Levites are to take it down, and whenever the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall do it. Anyone else who goes near it shall be put to death”.

God is good, but not safe. He is no-one's possession. And again in verse 53, “The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the Testimony so that wrath will not fall on the Israelite community. The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the tabernacle of the Testimony”.

God is good, but not safe. He's the Lord, the Creator, the Judge. He is good but not safe. You can't approach God except on his terms, and God demands to be at the centre of your life.

Now the God who was present in the Tabernacle amongst Israel is now present amongst us.

In John 1 we are reminded that Jesus became flesh and lived among us—literally, Jesus *tabernacled* amongst us. Jesus fully knew the goodness of God, but he also knew that God was not safe.

He experienced God's anger on the cross. Jesus died an excruciating death.

On the cross, he was the firebreak between us and an angry God.

Jesus is our mediator. He represents us to God and he represents God's presence amongst us.

Through Jesus we can have a relationship with a holy God.

And that relationship must be an exclusive relationship. God will keep his promises, but we must have him at the centre of our lives.

God is holy, he is not to be treated lightly, we must walk with him carefully. God is faithful, there is power in his presence, but he demands to be at the centre. Anything else is simply idolatry. The writer to the Hebrews describes God as a “consuming fire”. He will punish those who do not listen to his voice.

There is nothing more important than being in right relationship with the God whom we travel with.
There is nothing more important in our lives than to secure the blessing of the God who is present.
There is nothing more important than securing the favour of the God who has a powerful presence amongst us.

And the receipt of God's blessing is costly.

Israel learnt that if they are to travel in God's presence then blood must be spilt as payment for sin—the blood of animals anticipating the blood of the Lord Jesus.

The highest goal in human existence is to glorify God and enjoy him forever—and this is possible through the Lord Jesus. It's his blood that achieves the forgiveness and the peace that we so desperately need. Knowing God, that's what life's all about, and we can know God through trusting in Jesus.

If you're a Christian, then you're headed home—but you're not there yet. Trust Jesus. Keep him at the centre of your life. Worship him. Stay close to him and he has promised that he will see you home. Amen.