

Paradise Regained **Numbers 26--36**

Three talks ago we began with the greatness of Israel on display as they prepared to leave Mt Sinai. 603,550 fighting men ruled by God, ready to cross the desert and ready to enter the Promised Land.

But forty years and 36 chapters later, Israel still have not entered the Promised Land. Even when presented with one opportunity they refused. For forty years God had been cleaning the slate. The rebellious generation died in the wilderness and a new one had grown up. And at the end of Numbers we see the new generation standing on the plains of Moab looking across the Jordan into the Promised Land.

How should this new generation who *will* live in the land, how should their living be done? That is the question that the last 10 chapters of the Book of Numbers seek to answer.

What is the meaning of the land? How should Israel live in the land that God is about to give them?

The Book of Deuteronomy will have a lot to say in this regard—but in answer to questions like these, Numbers 26 to 36 makes four points (and you'll see them there on your sermon outline).

Point 1 – the land will be Israel's—soon and certainly. (slide)

The closing chapters of Numbers are amazingly optimistic. Despite Israel's track record of rebellion, Numbers takes for granted that Israel will certainly possess the land and they will possess it soon.

You may notice that the census in Chapter 26 is a repeat of the beginning of the book where a census is also found. And that's the point!

Chapter 26 is meant to read as a fresh start—the beginning of the book all over again.

After 40 years, after 25 chapters of wandering around, in chapter 26 we are back to where we started with a census simply because of Israel's continued unfaithfulness toward God.

The second census, like the first, is a reminder of God's faithfulness to his people.

God promised to Abraham long ago that he would have descendants more numerous than the stars, and although the first census generation has passed away, the second census shows us that Israel is as numerous as before.

God is committed to his promises.

Human sin may delay and cloud the reality of the promise, but sin cannot defeat God. His plan for Israel is enshrined in his promises.

There's a subtle difference between the first census and the second one. The first difference is about the fighting men:

In the first census, we are told no less than 14 times that it is all about counting the number of men over 20 years of age who are able to serve in the army.

But the second census, only in verse 2 are the fighting men mentioned. The emphasis on Israel fighting is gone.

And the reason is clear:

In the first census the emphasis was on the conquest of the land, on Israel winning the battles that lay ahead. But in the second census such is the certainty that Israel will possess the land that counting the fighting men seems so unnecessary.

The battle is the Lord's and victory is assured.

There is another difference between the first and second census. The second census is a count of those who will take the land.

Come with me to 26:53–54, “The land is to be allotted to them as an inheritance based on the number of names. To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one; each is to receive its inheritance according to the number of those listed”.

The issue is no longer whether Israel is strong enough to take the land. The issue is now who gets how much land. Conquest is assured. Israel is counted in the second census so Moses knows how many pieces the cake must be cut into. The issue is inheritance, not conquest, it's very optimistic—Israel *will* inherit the land.

Like Israel, you and I stand poised on the edge of our promised home.

We don't need to fight our way in for the Lord has gone ahead and victory is assured. Our task is to listen to the Word of God, trust in his promises and be committed to being his people.

Remember Thomas in John 14:5, “Lord we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way”? And Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me”.

Our heavenly home is with our Father and the Lord Jesus has blazed the way forward and we are called to listen and follow him. Jesus knows the way home. He knows the way through the wilderness of the world and he has given us his Spirit to equip us to carry on.

We must trust in the promises of God. We must resist the temptation to return to slavery—to return to Egypt—to return to being held captive by sin. The issue is no longer whether we are strong and wise enough to muscle our way into heaven. Instead the land is to be received as a gift promised to us from a gracious God who laid down his life for his people so that many sons and daughters may come to glory.

First point, then, the land will be Israel's soon and it will be Israel’s certainly for the Lord assures them victory and it is He who will take them home.

Point 2 – "the land will be Israel's forever". (slide)

The land is to be divided proportionally amongst the tribes and is to remain with them forever. But there was a practical problem with the law as it stood. What happens when a tribe has no sons? Then there is no-one to inherit the land and a tribe would lose the land allocated to them. A tribe could lose their land and the symbol of God’s love for them.

So in chapters 27 and 36 the issue is raised of the Zelophehad's daughters. Zelophehad was one of the generation who died in the wilderness. He had five daughters but no sons and they stood to lose their portion of the land through marriage.

So at the request of the daughters in 27:1-11 the Lord provides some new laws which allow women to inherit land and then laws that enable woman owning land to marry within their own tribe. Both laws ensure that each tribe retains its share of the inherited land.

Do you see how important the land is?

The land is the token of God's love for his people—forever. If a tribe ends up with no land because it’s all been married off somewhere else, then where is the token of God's love?

The land is a perpetual reminder of God's commitment to his people—an everlasting commitment—the land is Israel's forever. So the land will be Israel's soon and it certainly will happen. And the land will be Israel's forever.

But the real assurance of these closing chapters is the presence of God with his people in the land. So point 3...

Point 3 – in the land the Lord will dwell with his people. (slide)

There are two kinds of laws that are given in chapters 28 to 36 that point to the Lord's dwelling with his people in the land. These laws look to the future and life in the land. The first group of laws relates to sacrifices and the second group to laws about the land itself.

Chapters 28 and 29 repeat the earlier instructions concerning sacrifices and feast days and the religious life of the nation. In the land where God will dwell with his people, the nation will be ill-prepared if it is not prepared for worshipping their God.

Worshipping God is not just an added extra tacked onto a busy life. It's just not another angle of life which complements the financial, social and emotional side of our being. From the first page of the Bible we learn that life comes from the God and rest is found in Him.

From the last page of the Bible we learn life with God is our goal and our crown. So the way in which we approach God while we live now is a matter of first importance.

The perspective of the Bible is that a life that ignores God is not only a foolish life—not only a dangerous life—but a sub-human life. To know God and to live in the light of that—that is worship. It's a privilege to worship God. And so on the border of the Promised Land Israel must prepare to worship God in the land. So laws such as those relating to sacrifices remind Israel that every aspect of life is all about knowing God.

The second group of laws relates to the land itself—and this is the concern of chapters 34 to 36. As Israel dwell in the land they must understand what it means to possess this land. Chapter 34

describes the borders of the land and who will be responsible for carving the land up amongst the tribes.

The southern, western, northern and eastern boundaries are defined in verses 3 to 12.

Then in the first few verses of chapter 35 there are provision for the Levites who have no land of their own. Instead, the Levites are apportioned forty-eight towns in verse 7 which are scattered throughout the land.

Then in the second half of chapter 35 provision is made for safe cities. Six cities of refuge. Have a look at verses 33 and 34, “Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites”.

The Lord will dwell with his people in the Promised Land.

The spilling of blood by murder or by manslaughter pollutes that land for blood represents the life of the people and only God has the right to take life.

So intentional or accidental killing must be atoned for by the shedding of blood.

The murderer must die.

But the one who kills accidentally may flee to a city of refuge. And as long as he lives within that city he is allowed to live. He cannot leave that city until the High Priest dies—for the death of the High Priest is atonement for the death of the person that he accidentally killed.

This is all about living in the presence of a holy God. God is good, but he is not safe and his holiness is to be respected. For Israel, it's about living God's way in the land. The land must be holy for God dwells there with his people.

As we approach the end of the Book of Numbers, we see that it ends on a strong note of hope.

These final chapters remind Israel that the land comes from the hand of a God who keeps his promises. A God who is sovereign and cannot be defeated. A God who is holy and dwells with them.

They have been brought to the edge of the Promised Land, preserved by God through all sorts of ordeals, and now they have been made ready to enter the land of promise. God has not been stingy. Israel are to be blessed in every possible way.

Point 4 – "lessons from the past". (slide)

Now the New Testament says that we also have been blessed in every possible way. Like Israel we have been chosen, redeemed, forgiven, sanctified, adopted, empowered. Everything is ours through Jesus.

So let us hunger and thirst for every good thing God that gives us.

Israel's sin, which might be so easily ours, is to become bored with the goodness of God.

Our temptation is to take for granted our riches, to become weary of our wealth. Our temptation is to become bored with the atonement of the cross and to become complacent with the resurrection.

Jesus tells a story about a rich man who invites his wealthy friends to a banquet and they didn't come because they had no hunger for good things. So the man invites the hungry who come in droves, and when the rich eventually turn up they are locked out because their hearts were not yearning for good things.

Israel will soon possess the land. The Lord will give it to them and he will dwell with them. But anything less than whole-heartedly receiving these gifts and they risk losing their inheritance and expulsion from the land.

As the story of the Bible unfolds into Deuteronomy and beyond we sadly see that Israel despises the land that God has given them. They follow other gods, they reject God's kingship, they make allies of God's enemies, and in time they are driven from the land by pagan nations.

But there were always some in Israel who remained faithful.

The writer to the Hebrews describes these faithful people this way. Hebrews 11:13, "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth". Then verse 16 says that these faithful Old Testament people "were longing for a

better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be their God, for he has prepared a city for them”.

The great people of Old Testament faith did not receive all the gifts that God had promised. And like them, we wait for the heavenly city to come. We are not there yet, the heavenly city is still to come.

And while we wait, we should continually offer to God our sacrifice of praise. All of our speech and life should testify to the character of God. His love, his generosity, his justice. All our life and speech should testify to his mighty deeds of rescue and salvation.

And the writer to Hebrews says that while we wait we should do good and share with others. And while we wait we should obey our leaders in the Lord.

1 Cor. 10 says that the account of Israel in Numbers was written down so that we might have a warning, a warning not to fall into Israel's errors.

We must avoid idolatry that caused Israel to fall in the wilderness (verse 7).

We are to avoid sexual immorality which caused Israel to fall in the wilderness (verse 8).

We are to avoid grumbling about God which caused Israel to fall in the wilderness (verse 9).

We are to avoid treating things as God, treating people as things, and treating God as nothing.

We should do all these things while we wait for the city that God has prepared.

How does the Book of Numbers prepare us to enter God's better country? Well, remember that it is God who has brought you this far. Remember that he is sovereign, you can depend on him. Remember that he faithful, trust him. Remember that he is holy, obey him.

Remember that there is a Promised Land for us, a land to which we are nearer now than when we first believed. Remember that we cannot enter that land without the death of the one who leads us. By the mercy of God we are not sheep without a shepherd, but we are sheep who has a shepherd who laid down his life for us.

Remember that we are not without a leader. Remember that God has made his dwelling amongst us by his Spirit. Remember we are his holy people and his possession forever.

As you praise God with your lips and your life, remember the heavenly city—the better country—for it will be ours, soon, certainly and forever. It's a city of refuge, and our great High Priest laid down his life so that we could enter it.

It's boundaries are perfect, its dimensions are huge. It is the Most Holy Place and we may all enter it by the blood of Jesus. It's our city. It's our Promised Land, it's our home. Amen.