

Numbers (March 4)

Reading Numbers

He felt excited on the first day of travel, anticipating a new and better land. On the second day, his burden grew heavy as exhaustion rose from heel to shoulder. When they broke for camp at the end of the third day, he complained like everyone else about the hard march, the lack of decent food, and the constant drudgery. The march of millions of people and animals by ranks kicked up an endless cloud of dust. Grime caked his sweaty brow and caused him to cough up a steady stream of curses and complaints.

Numbers is a story of endurance and promise of a better life. Nothing could better describe the hopes, disappointments, and struggles of God's people today, who look forward to the fulfillment of all God's promises. Numbers teaches duties, discipline, and the daily need for repentance, forgiveness, and faith.

Contents

Numbers relates the story of Israel's journey from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab on the border of Canaan. Much of its legislation for people and priests is similar to that in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. The book tells of the murmuring and rebellion of God's people and of their subsequent judgment. Those whom God had redeemed from slavery in Egypt and with whom he had made a covenant at Mount Sinai responded not with faith, gratitude, and obedience but with unbelief, ingratitude, and repeated acts of rebellion, which came to extreme expression in their refusal to undertake the conquest of Canaan. The community of the redeemed forfeited their part in the Promised Land. They were condemned to live out their lives in the desert; only their children would enjoy the fulfillment of the promise that had originally been theirs.

Theological Teaching

In telling the story of Israel's desert wanderings, Numbers offers much that is theologically significant. During the first year after Israel's deliverance from Egypt, she entered into covenant with the Lord at Sinai to be the people of his kingdom, among whom he pitched his royal tent (the tabernacle) – this is the story of Exodus. As the account of Numbers begins, the Lord organizes Israel into a military camp. Leaving Sinai, she marches forth as his conquering army, with the Lord at her head, to establish his kingdom in the Promised Land in the midst of the nations. The book graphically portrays Israel's identity as the Lord's redeemed covenant people and her vocation as the servant people of God, charged with establishing his kingdom on earth. God's purpose in history is implicitly disclosed: to invade the arena of fallen humanity and effect the redemption of his creation – the mission in which his people are also to be totally engaged.

The teaching of the book has lasting significant for the church. God does display his wrath against his errant people, but his grace is renewed as surely as is the dawn and his redemptive purpose will not be thwarted. Despite judgment on his rebellious people, God is still determined to bring Israel into the land of promise. His blessing to her rests in his sovereign will and is sure because of the character of God.

Blessings for Readers

As you read Numbers, reflect on how God repeatedly speaks his word of law and promise to the people while sustaining them in the wilderness. Each event illustrates his fatherly discipline and gracious care for a wayward, rebellious people. Numbers leaves the reader hanging, anticipating something greater because the book ends on Jordan's east bank, just shy of the Promised Land.

While reading Numbers, pray for the Lord to discipline and sustain you in the service of his kingdom. Also, anticipate how he prepares something greater for you, an eternal homeland in heaven to be revealed when Christ returns.