

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**DHW BIBLE CLASS**

**LESSON 1**

**THE BOOK OF NUMBERS**

**CHAPTER 1-4**

**INTRODUCTION**

The book of Numbers begins where the book of Exodus left off. The final chapter of Exodus related the completion and erection of the Tabernacle. It was in “the first month in the second year, and on the first day of the month” the tabernacle was set up (Exodus 40:17). The opening verse of the book of Numbers begins with the Word of God to Moses in the desert of Sinai “on the first day of the second month, in the second year”. There was a break of just one month or thirty days between Exodus 40 and Numbers 1. The book covers the history of Israel from the second month of the second year after the Exodus to the tenth month of the fortieth year (Deuteronomy 1:3). That is a period of about thirty-eight years. We will notice that the book of Numbers does not cover a full and strictly continuous narration of the events that happened during the so-called wanderings of the children of God in the wilderness. But certain happenings were recorded, some carefully written with more details than others. And these written records of Israel’s history and God’s dealings with them offer much valuable spiritual

lessons for Christian pilgrim of every “age and clime.”<sup>1</sup>

Numbers begins with the census taken of the children of Israel to ascertain her military strength. The LORD God Himself strategically arranged the camp so that the march forward to the Promised Land could be orderly and mobile. The Levites were specially appointed to serve the Lord in connection with the Tabernacle. God led the people using the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. They reached Kadesh-barnea. The Promised Land was near, but they lacked faith in God and rebelled against Him. Judgement fell upon them. For the next thirty years, they wandered in the wilderness. They left a trail of their dead and when the thirty years came to a close, a new generation emerged. God took up with this new generation who reassembled at Kadesh-barnea. They marched on to the plains of Moab, on the very threshold of the Promised Land. Israel was ready then to enter and claim the land God had promised to their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

These first four chapters relate the organization of the Israelite community comprising two million people, the arrangement of the camp when they

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:6 Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. 7 Neither be ye idolaters, as *were* some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. 8 Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. 9 Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. 10 Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. 11 Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

settled in a place, and when they had to march forward. The tribe of Levi was specially chosen from among the twelve tribes of Israel and appointed to serve the LORD God in connection with the Tabernacle. This is a great privilege and honour.

## OUTLINE

### A. The Numbering of the Twelve Tribes (1:1-54).

1. God commanded Moses to take a census of the children of Israel of men only from twenty years and above (1:3).
2. God commanded Moses to choose a leader from each tribe to assist him (1:4-16).
3. The census was taken of each tribe of men above the age of twenty (1:17-46).
4. The Levites were singled out and not numbered (1: 47-53).
5. The children of Israel did as God commanded (1:54).

### B. The Organization of the Encampment and the March Forward (2:1-34).

1. God gave specific instructions to Moses and Aaron concerning the order of the encampment and the march forward (2:1-2).
2. On the east side of the Tabernacle (2:3-9).
  - a. The camp of Judah (vv. 3,4).
  - b. The camps of Issachar and Zebulun next to it (vv.5-8).
  - c. Led by Judah, they set forth first in the march forward (v.9).
3. On the south side of the Tabernacle (2:10-16).

- a. The camp of Reuben (vv.10, 11).
  - b. The camps of Simeon and Gad next to it (vv.12-15).
  - c. Led by Reuben, they followed behind Judah forming the second rank in the march forward (v.16).
4. The Tabernacle would be in the middle following behind Judah and Reuben (2:17).
  5. On the west side of the Tabernacle (2:18-24).
    - a. The camp of Ephraim (vv.18-19).
    - b. The camps of Manasseh and Benjamin next to it (vv.20-23)).
    - c. Led by Ephraim, they formed the third rank following behind the Tabernacle (v.24).
  6. On the north side of the Tabernacle (2:25-31).
    - a. The camp of Dan (vv.25-26).
    - b. The camps of Asher and Naphtali next to it (vv. 27-30).
    - c. Led by Dan, they formed the last rank in the march forward (v.31).
  7. Summary of the order of the encampment and the march forward (2:32-24).
    - The Levites were omitted as the LORD commanded (v.33).

### C. The Organization of the Priests and Levites (3:1-51).

1. The generations of Moses and Aaron (3:1-4).
  - a. Aaron's sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar anointed to serve in the priestly ministry (vv.2-3).
  - b. Nadab and Abihu died because of their disobedience (4a).

- c. Eleazar and Ithamar ministered in the priest's office (v.4b).
  2. The Levites served under the priests (3:5-10).
    - a. God told Moses to instruct the Levites to serve under Aaron the priest (vv.5-6).
    - b. The Levites were to take charge of the service of the Tabernacle under Aaron and his sons (vv.7-9).
    - c. Aaron and his sons were to perform the duties of the priest (v.10).
  3. The Levites were the Lord's possession (3:11-13).
  4. The numbering of the Levites was taken (3:14-22).
    - a. God commanded Moses to take a census of the male of the Levites from a month old and above (vv.14-16).
    - b. The sons of the Levi were Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (v.17).
  5. The census and organization of the encampment of the sons of the Levites (3:18-39).
    - a. The Gershonites (vv.18-26).
      - The census taken (vv.18-22)
      - Pitched on the west side of the Tabernacle (vv.23-24).
      - Took charge of the coverings of the tent and the courtyard (vv.25-26).
    - b. The Kohathites (vv.27-32).
      - The census taken (vv.27-28)
      - Pitched on the south side of the Tabernacle (v.29).
      - Took charge of the furniture of the Tabernacle (vv.30-32).
    - c. The Merarites (vv.33-37).
      - The census taken (vv.33-34).
      - Pitched on the north side of the Tabernacle (v.35).
      - Took charge of panels and the pillars of the courtyard (vv.36-37).
    - d. Moses and Aaron and his sons pitched their tents on the east side of the Tabernacle (vv.38-39).
  6. The Levites substituted for the firstborn of the children of Israel (3:40-51).
    - a. Every male child that was one month old and above of the children of Israel were substituted by a Levite (vv.40-41a).
    - b. Even the firstborn of the cattle of the children of Israel was substituted by the cattle of the Levites (v.41b).
    - c. Moses performed the Lord's commandment (vv.42-43).
    - d. For every firstborn male who was not substituted by a Levite because of the greatness of the number over the Levites, redemption of five shekels was imposed (vv.44-50).
    - e. The redemption money was given to Aaron and his sons (v.51).
- D. The Ministry of the Levites (4:1-49).**
1. The LORD commanded Moses and Aaron to instruct the three sons of Levi concerning their ministry (4:1).
  2. The ministry of the Kohathites (4:2-20).

- a. Only those between the age of thirty and fifty were qualified to serve (v.3).
  - b. The Kohathites took charge of the most holy things of the Tabernacle (v.4).
  - c. Aaron and his sons would prepare all the holy things to be carried (vv.5-14).
  - d. The Kohathites would carry the most things as they march forward (v.15).
  - e. The special ministry of Eleazar, the son of Aaron (v.16).
  - f. Warning to the Kohathites for any breach of the instructions (vv.17-20).
2. The ministry of the Gershonites (4:21-28).
    - a. Only those between the ages of thirty and fifty were qualified to serve (vv. 21-23).
    - b. The Gershonites took charge of the curtains, coverings, and hangings of the Tabernacle and courtyard (vv.24-26).
    - c. They would serve under Aaron and his sons (vv.27-28).
  3. The ministry of the Merarites (4:29-33).
    - a. Only those between the ages of thirty and fifty were qualified to serve (vv.29-30).
    - b. The Merarites took charge of panels, pillars, and sockets (vv.31-32).
    - c. They would serve under Aaron and his sons (v.33).
  4. Summary and results of the census (vv. 34-49).

## COMMENTARY

### The Census

The LORD commanded the census. The official count was restricted to Israelite men who were twenty years and above, and who were able to go to war. The method of counting was by the families of the men. Each leader of the twelve tribes would help Moses and Aaron count. Twelve tribes were mentioned. The Levi tribe was omitted from the list (1:5-15). The tribe of Joseph had two tribes, namely, Ephraim and Benjamin. These two tribes were included in the twelve tribes. The total count was six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty (1:46). Based on this, the total population of the children of Israel at that time was estimated between two to three million (taking into account the parents and their siblings).

It is clear from the text that the primary purpose of the census was to determine the military strength of the children of Israel. The children of Israel would have to go to war against their enemies in order to claim the Promised Land. It was God who initiated the census. The purpose is clear. This is to help us understand the correct theology of war. War is not all bad. Sometimes a war must be fought to bring about peace, however temporary, to stop further killings and sufferings. Through it, man learns to live in peace with one another.

Another point of interest is that men that were called up were checked for "their pedigrees after their families" (1:18). Only those who were born of Israelite families were chosen. The mixed multitude that came with them did not qualify. There is a spiritual lesson to be learned. The Christian faith is both a

pilgrimage and a warfare. And only those, who are truly born again, born into the kingdom of God, may be enlisted to battle the enemy.

The Levites were not numbered in the general census (1:47). God had called them to a special service relating to the Tabernacle (1:50).

### **Organization of the Camp**

The LORD then told Moses and Aaron to instruct the children of Israel how they should camp each time they settle at a place. They would have to camp quite a distance away from the Tabernacle (about 900 metres away, Joshua 3.4). The tribe of Judah was to pitch its tents on the east side of the Tabernacle, together with the tribes of Issachar and Zebulun. On the south side were the tribes of Reuben, Simeon and Gad. On the west side were the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin. On the north side were the tribes of Dan, Asher and Naphtali. The twelve tribes were divided into four groups and they pitched their tents round about the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was in the centre of the camp.

In the arrangement of the march forward, Judah was followed by Reuben, and then the Tabernacle, which was borne by the Levites. Following the Tabernacle on the rear were Ephraim and then lastly Dan. It is clear from the arrangement of the camp and the marching formation that the Tabernacle was the centre of focus. God laid down a principle of great importance. God must be the centre of the Israelites' lives. The same was true in the formation of the marching column. The lesson is simple: if the Israelites want success in their endeavours and their exploits, God must take pre-eminence in the national life of Israel.

Otherwise, it would be doomed to failure. Moreover, God reveals that He is a God of order and not of confusion.

### **The Priests**

Aaron and his sons were from the tribe of Levi but they were different from the other Levite clans, namely, the Gershonites, the Kohathites and the Merarites. Aaron and his sons were chosen, anointed and consecrated to minister in the priest's office. They were responsible for the ceremonial, sacrificial and spiritual services of the Tabernacle. Four of Aaron's sons were mentioned, Nadab, the firstborn, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu died as a result of their rebellion and sin against the LORD (Leviticus 10.1-2). This goes to show that even the sons of Aaron the priest were not exempt from judgement and punishment when they sinned against God. God's work cannot be taken for granted and done irreverently.

### **The Levites**

God instructed Moses that the Levites be presented to Aaron, the priest, so that they could assist him in the LORD'S ministry. There is a difference between Aaron and his sons, who served as priests in the Tabernacle, and the Levites, who were assigned to help Aaron and his sons in serving the LORD in the behalf of the people. There must not be any confusion regarding this ministry of the Tabernacle between the priests and the Levites. God gave the reason for the exemption of Levites from the general census. They belonged to God - for every firstborn Israelite, God took a Levite in his stead.

God commanded Moses to take a census of the Levites. The sons of Levi were Gershon, Kohath and Merari. The

census included those who were one month old and above. The total number comes to 22,000 (3.39). The number of the firstborn of the children of Israel who were one month old and above was 22,273. There were not enough Levite children to substitute for the children of Israel. The difference was 273. These 273 must pay redemption of five shekels to the priests. This is another principle – whatever that belongs to God must be given to Him. Otherwise one would be robbing God. There should be no frivolity in the service and the work of God.

The three groups of Levites pitched their tents around the Tabernacle. Gershonites pitched their tents on the west side between the Tabernacle and the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin. Kohathites pitched their tents on the south side between the Tabernacle and the tribes of Reuben, Simeon and Gad. Merarites pitched their tents on north side between the Tabernacle and the tribes of Dan, Asher and Naphtali. The purpose of placing them between the Tabernacle and the rest of the children of Israel was to prevent the children of Israel from breaking the laws of God pertaining to the service of the Tabernacle and be killed. Moses and Aaron and his sons pitched their tents on the east side between the Tabernacle and Judah.

The details of the work of the Levites were given. It will be observed that their work involved the external and material parts of the Tabernacle, whereas the priests' work involved the internal and spiritual. The Kohathites had the privilege of the coverings of the Tabernacle, and the safe keeping of all the utensils used in the Tabernacle. And when the camp march forward, the Kohathites were to carry and transport

the things after Aaron and his sons had packed them neatly and in order. The Gershonites had the privilege of the Tabernacle, the pillars and hangings of the courtyard, and the hangings of the door of the courtyard. They would have to carry these things and then put them back in order. The last group, the Merarites, had the privilege of the boards, bars, pillars and the sockets of the Tabernacle.

What is most glaring and instructive is the sharing of the work of the Tabernacle. The things were clearly demarcated and assigned -- no quarrel about who should attend to the supposedly more important or more holy things of the Tabernacle. The lesson for the modern Church is simple. God too gave the church some apostles, some preachers and teachers, some evangelists, and pastors. Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians spoke of diversities in gifts and services, and all serving the Lord together. Another interesting condition for service in the Tabernacle was that the Levites must have attained the age of thirty. They would serve for the next twenty years until the age of fifty when they must pass on their work to a younger person. The service of the work of the Lord must be given to a more mature person and not to a man less than thirty years old. Maturity is essential in serving the Lord. A novice is dissuaded from serving lest he be puffed up.

### **SUMMARY**

We learn many interesting and valuable lessons in these first four chapters of Numbers. God is a God of order and not of confusion. God prepares His people for the work ahead.

To be well prepared is half the battle won as God instructed the children of Israel to do. The Christian's life is both a warfare and a pilgrimage. We must be prepared. AMEN

2. How long was it after the tabernacle was erected (Numbers 1; Exodus 40:17)?

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**DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Daily Readings**

**MONDAY:** Numbers 1:1-54; 2 Corinthians 10:4; Ephesians 6:11-12

**TUESDAY:** Numbers 2:1-34; Romans 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 14:40

**WEDNESDAY:** Numbers 3:1-40; 1 Peter 2:5-10.

**THURSDAY:** Numbers 3:41-51; 1 Peter 1:18-21.

**FRIDAY:** Numbers 4:1-49; 1 Timothy 3:6; 1 Corinthians 12:18-25.

3. Why were the Levites not counted (Numbers 1)?

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**Discussion Questions**

1. How long had passed since the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt (Numbers 1)?

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4. What were the responsibilities and duties of the Levites (Numbers 1)?

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5. Why do you think God gave the Israelites specific instructions on how they should arrange their camp (Numbers 2)?

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6. What significance, if any, do you see in the particular way God told His people to arrange their camp?

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7. What reasons does God give in Leviticus 3 for setting apart the Levites?

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8. Does God have the same ownership over you as He had over the Levites?

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9. What is the difference between the ministry of the priests and the Levites (Numbers 3, 4)?

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10. Why do you think God started the service of the Levites at the age of thirty and retired them at fifty?

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11. What were the precautions that must be taken in moving the temple furniture (Numbers 4)?

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12. What principle can be drawn from these precautions concerning the handling of the temple furniture?

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## LIFE APPLICATION

### SUMMARY

#### 1. The Theology of War.

- a. Does God approve of war?
- b. Verse 3 intimates that war is inevitable.
- c. Israel would be attacked as envisaged by God, since He called Moses to take a census of all those who were twenty years and above, and who were fit to go to war.
- d. God does approve of war.
  - The theology of war needs to be separately studied in order to understand it correctly.
  - God does not approve of premeditated killing/murder.
  - A person is not guilty of murder or manslaughter if he kills in order to defend his own life.
  - However, God who is the Creator of mankind has the right to kill or destroy sinful man. It is still righteous. The penalty of sin is death, either now or later. God is the righteous Judge.

#### 2. God also told Moses to take the head of each of the tribe to assist him in the census.

- a. The work was of such a magnitude that it was impossible for Moses to perform alone.
- b. He needed the assistance of others - the heads of all the tribes.
- c. Lesson. In doing the will of the Lord, there is a need to work as a team. Each person has his own part to play for the general good.

All are done to carry out God's will and for His glory.

- d. To work together does not mean there will not be disagreements, conflict and friction. These happen because we are not perfect. If everyone knows what he should be doing, and why he is doing it, work will be smooth. The sad thing is that some of us do not, and therein lay the problems, difficulties and troubles.

#### 3. The God of Order and Discipline. The arrangements of the encampment and march forward were stipulated by God.

- a. The number of able men twenty years and above was 603,550.
  - From this figure, the estimate of 2,000,000 was deduced.
  - Counting the parents and one or two other siblings of each able-bodied man.
- b. God divided the tribes (13 in all) into four groups of three each. The tribe of Levi was left out.
- c. Each group of three was allotted the place to pitch their tents—Judah, Issachar, Zebulun (east); Reuben, Simeon, Gad (south); Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin (west); and Dan, Asher, Naphtali (north).
- d. In the line up for the march forward, Judah's group led the entourage, followed by Reuben's, then the Levites bearing the tabernacle and all its appurtenances, next Ephraim's, and taking the rear was the group of Dan.
- e. The arrangements
  - Prevented any quarrels among themselves.

- Promotes caring for one another against any intruders and attackers.
4. The significance was that God must be in the centre of their national life.
    - a. They camped around and facing the tabernacle where the presence of God was symbolized by the pillar of cloud and fire.
    - b. God was in the centre of the camp. They were reminded of the presence of God before them—they looked to God, they served God, and they obeyed God. God was first and last in every thing they did.
    - c. There was a distance of 900 metres between each of the camp and the tabernacle. This clearly indicates the holiness of God.
    - d. The Levites camped between them and the tabernacle—Gershomites (west); Kohathites (south); and Merarites (north). On the eastern side, Moses, Aaron and his sons, the priests, and their descendants, pitched their tents. Note that they pitched in front of the only entrance to the Tabernacle.
  5. The difference of duties between the priests and the Levites.
    - a. The priests performed the ceremonial functions of offering the sacrifices of the people.
    - b. The Levites assisted the priests in preparing the people's offerings and sacrifices. In addition to this, each of Levi's sons, Gershom, Kohath, and Merari, was assigned the specific duty of dismantling and bearing the tabernacle, its curtains, pillars, vessels and furniture.
- c. Lesson. In the church today, there is a difference between those who are called and gave their lives full-time to the service of the Lord and the lay leaders of the church -- namely between the Pastors, full-time staff workers who are theologically trained, and the lay leaders.
  - d. This distinction ought to be observed.
    - The full-time servants of the Lord, as they are theologically trained, know the Word more than the lay leaders.
    - They spend more time to pray and meditate upon the Word of God to discern His will.
    - The lay leaders, with some exception, assist and support the full-time servants in carrying out the work of God.
    - Both mutually help one another to do God's will.