

The King's Camp

Number 1:1-4:49

Introduction

Numbers: We are starting a new series in everyone's favorite book—*Numbers* (😄). Am I at church or a math class (apologies to my mathletes and accountants who want to be in math class)?

- The name “Numbers” comes from two major censuses in Numbers 1 and 26. There's a lot of counting and a lot of numbers (e.g., 46,500 in this tribe or 57,400 in that one). And it has some “banger” passages such as: ⁵ And these are the names of the men who shall assist you. From Reuben, Elizur the son of Shedeur; ⁶ from Simeon, Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai; ⁷ from Judah, Nahshon the son of Amminadab; ⁸ from Issachar, Nethanel the son of Zuar; ⁹ from Zebulun, Eliab the son of Helon; ¹⁰ from the sons of Joseph, from Ephraim, Elishama the son of Ammihud, and from Manasseh, Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur; ¹¹ from Benjamin, Abidan the son of Gideoni; ¹² from Dan, Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai; ¹³ from Asher, Pagiel the son of Ochran; ¹⁴ from Gad, Eliasaph the son of Deuel; ¹⁵ from Naphtali, Ahira the son of Enan.” ¹⁶ These were the ones chosen from the congregation, the chiefs of their ancestral tribes, the heads of the clans of Israel (Num 1:5-16). You get the point!
- Can I make two quick promises about the book of Numbers?
 - (1) The book gets better. There are stories of spies, a talking donkey, miraculous provision, prophetic blessing, and more.
 - (2) Even the seemingly dull parts matter. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable” (2 Tim 3:16). Every part of the Bible is given to us on purpose, for a purpose. If we skip the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or less exciting parts, we miss the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). We end up with a faith that is shallow and shaped by personal preference and cultural trends rather than God's intention. I've found that God often meets me in the places I least expect.

In the Wilderness: While these census lists take up some early real estate (and sabotage more than one read through the Bible in a year attempt), the name of this book in the Hebrew Bible is actually “In the Wilderness.” **And that's exactly where we see God speaking to his people.**

- “The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai” (1:1a).¹
 - So Numbers picks up at Sinai where Exodus and Leviticus left off.
 - The people have been freed from slavery and have received the commandments of God. He has shown them how to worship him and given them a way to enter his presence via sacrifice and priests at the Tabernacle (kind of a mobile temple).
 - ² God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the LORD. ³ I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. ⁴ I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. ⁵

¹ *Bemidbar* בְּמִדְבָּר. See also 1:19; 3:4, 14; 9:1, 5; 10:12, 31; 12:16; 13:3, 21, 26; 14:2, 16, 22, 25, 29, 32, 33, 35; 15:32; 16:13; 20:1, 4; 21:5, 11, 13, 18, 23; 24:1; 26:64, 65; 27:3, 14; 32:13, 15; 33:6, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 36; 34:3.

Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. ⁶ Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. ⁸ I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD'" (Exodus 2:2-8).

- All of this takes place **between the promise and the promised land**, in the middle, in the wilderness. The wilderness is not only a challenging physical location but a way of relating to life between Egypt and Israel.
 - In many ways, the Christian life is learning to live as God's people in the wilderness.²
 - The wilderness can be a challenging place to live. How do we, as God's redeemed people, follow him through the wilderness on the way to his promised inheritance?
- Paul tells us that the Israelites serve as a warning to us of how to faithfully follow God in the wilderness.³ "If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not fear the people of the land, for . . . the Lord is with us" (Num. 14:8–9).
 - Will we trust and obey or doubt and rebel?
 - Will we worship with gratitude or whine and complain?
 - Will we follow in faith or fear and turn back?
- How do we live faithfully in the wilderness with Egypt in the rearview and Canaan on the horizon?

Starting Point: The starting point is always God. If we are going to walk in God's ways, toward his promised destination, then we have to do it the way he wants us to. The first thing we see God do in Numbers is organize his people.

- God orders his people around his presence for his purpose.
 - (1) Counted by the King (1:1-54)
 - (2) Centered on the King (2:1-34)
 - (3) Assigned by the King (3:1-4:49)

¹ The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, ² "Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head. ³ From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company. ⁴ And there shall be with you a man from each tribe, each man being the head of the house of his fathers (Num 1:1-4)

² Inaugurated Eschatology

³ 1 Cor 10:6-13

⁴⁴ These are those who were listed, whom Moses and Aaron listed with the help of the chiefs of Israel, twelve men, each representing his fathers' house. ⁴⁵ So all those listed of the people of Israel, by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel— ⁴⁶ all those listed were 603,550. ⁴⁷ But the Levites were not listed along with them by their ancestral tribe. ⁴⁸ For the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁴⁹ "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not list, and you shall not take a census of them among the people of Israel. ⁵⁰ But appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it. They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of it and shall camp around the tabernacle. ⁵¹ When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. And if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. ⁵² The people of Israel shall pitch their tents by their companies, each man in his own camp and each man by his own standard. ⁵³ But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel. And the Levites shall keep guard over the tabernacle of the testimony." ⁵⁴ Thus did the people of Israel; they did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses (Num 1:44-54)

What Kind of Census: Why is God counting everybody? It's a particular type of census. It's a *military* headcount. ³ From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company. Israel is going to war!

- Before going to war, the King has to count his army.

1. Counted by the King (1:1-54)

Multiplied in Captivity: If we're gonna study Numbers, then let's talk about numbers. When God's people entered Egypt 400 years earlier, they were counted at 70 people (Ex 1:5). Now they are more than 600,000 fighting men!⁴

- God has *already* kept his promise to multiply Abraham's offspring (cf. Gen 22:17). We have tangible, mathematical proof of God's blessings. This census is literal evidence of the faithfulness of God.
- And I think the circumstances of their proliferation only make the miracle of God's provision more remarkable.
 - They grew into this great nation in the midst of slavery! And they get to see the provision of God in the wilderness.
 - God often does his greatest work in our hardest places.
- This is the definition of "count your blessings."⁵ When you're in the wilderness, stop and look at God's provision (e.g., children, family, job, house, church, etc.).
 - Every so often, Death Valley—one of the hottest, driest places on earth—experiences what they call a "superbloom." After just the right amount of

⁴ The enormity of the number has baffled even conservative commentators, feeling it is too large and the numbers of the army later in the Hebrew Bible are smaller (e.g., 20,000, etc.). Even Morales suggests that this number is of the entire population.

⁵ God counts his people "because of their dearness to him" (Rashi).

rain, this barren desert suddenly explodes with wildflowers. Seeds that have been lying dormant in the dry ground, sometimes for years, suddenly spring to life. The wilderness becomes a garden. That's a pretty good picture of Israel. God multiplied them right in the place that was supposed to crush them.

Assess and Organize: The census also allows Israel to be organized for what comes next. God doesn't just count 600,000 fighting men and say, "Good luck!" They're organized by tribes, clans, households, companies, and leaders. Before there can be assignment, there has to be assessment. God is taking a massive group of former slaves and ordering them into a nation with a purpose. They aren't wandering aimlessly through the wilderness; they're an army marching toward the Promised Land

Given a New Identity: Part of this census is to *organize* Israel into an *army* (every man able to go to war in Israel, v. 45). This is a huge identity shift. A little over a year before this, they were **slaves** in Egypt. Pharaoh counted them as labor; God counted them as fighters. Pharaoh saw brickmakers, and God saw an army. God takes a disorganized collection of former slaves and numbers them as his army.

- Part of this *reorganization* is helping them understand their new identity. A huge part of the journey in the wilderness is helping them understand their new identity.
 - It only took a moment to get you out of slavery, it takes a lifetime to get slavery out of you.
 - Redemption gives you a new identity and a new allegiance. You no longer belong to Pharaoh; he isn't your king; YHWH is.
 - **Shawshank Redemption:** There's an old prisoner named Brooks who's spent most of his life behind bars. When he's finally released, freedom doesn't feel like freedom. He's been "institutionalized." Prison has shaped him so deeply that he doesn't know how to live outside of it. That's Israel. God gets them out of Egypt in a night. But it's going to take a generation to get Egypt out of them.
 - We're tempted to define ourselves by what we *were* in the world rather than what we *are* in Christ.

Obedient People: Don't skip over the brief ending of chapter 1: ⁵⁴ Thus did the people of Israel; they did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses. God commands. They obey. They do what they're supposed to do.

- This hasn't always been the case and won't always be (e.g., grumbling, complaining, turning back, etc.).
- The wilderness isn't a waste of space between Egypt and the Promised Land; it's often the place of growth and preparation.
- The wilderness can be the place where God's people learn to listen to and obey their King.

The King counts his army. They know who they are and who they belong to. But now, where does the King put himself? Right in the middle.

2. Centered on the King (2:1-34)

¹ The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ² “The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers’ houses. They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side (Num 2:1-2).

¹⁷ “Then the tent of meeting shall set out, with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps; as they camp, so shall they set out, each in position, standard by standard (Num 2:17).

Arrangement: God gives instructions for each person where to set up camp (e.g., assigned seats vs. former Southwest free for all).

- **East:** Judah, Issachar, Zebulun.
- **South:** Reuben, Simeon, Gad.
- **West:** Joseph (Ephraim, Manasseh) Benjamin
- **North:** Dan, Asher, Naphtali
- **Center:** Levi (surrounding The Tabernacle).
 - *See Graphic: There are a lot of important things about this picture.
 - Judah is leading the charge to the east. Reuben was Jacob’s firstborn, and he’s appropriately counted first in chapter 1. But when it’s time to march, Reuben doesn’t lead. Judah does. Why Judah? Because Jacob had promised, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah” (Gen 49:10). The King would come from Judah. First David, and ultimately Jesus—the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev 5:5). So even here, as God’s people prepare to march toward the Promised Land, Judah leads the way.
 - But what’s most important about this arrangement? **God is in the middle.**
 - Whether camping or marching, the King is always in their midst.

Dwelling: The Tabernacle isn’t an accessory to Israel’s life. Israel’s life is organized around the Tabernacle because it is the visible manifestation of God’s presence. It’s the **dwelling place of God**.⁶

- Throughout the Pentateuch, they are given instructions on how to build his dwelling place (Exodus), how sinful people can enter his presence (Leviticus), and now how to arrange their lives around him (Numbers).
 - God isn’t somewhere off on the edge of town. The Tabernacle isn’t the religious district that you visit when you feel spiritual. God is literally at the center of the community. Everything is oriented around him.
- This is the promise and picture of Scripture that we need and desire: God to dwell with us.
 - ⁴⁵ I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. ⁴⁶ And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God (Exod 29:45-46).

⁶ “The Camp of Israel, so I have endeavored to demonstrate, portrays an ideal city of God, a living symbol of the covenant where YHWH dwells in the midst of his people, blessing them with the light of his uplifted face” (Morales).

- ²⁷ My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore (Ezek 37:27-28).
- And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God (Rev 21:3).

On Earth As It Is In Heaven: The camp of Israel becomes a paradigm for the ideal of covenant community.⁷

- As the Biblical story unfolds we see that the earthly realities of the Hebrew camp are “copies and shadows of the heavenly things” (Heb 8:5).⁸
- In heaven, God is escorted by heavenly hosts in a divine chariot, and a lot of later Jewish interpreters saw this setup as an earthly analogue.⁹
- This camp carried the presence of God wherever it went.
- As God’s people (his body), we are meant to carry his presence wherever he sends us.

Central: Think about even the geography of our cities. Old American cities were started with the church and the courthouse in the middle of town. Often the highest point in a city was the steeple. The visible prominence of the church was meant to mirror the spiritual center of a community. Now, when a new development is planned, the first considerations are business developments, shopping centers, or maybe schools. Churches are forced to buy cheaper land on the periphery. I don’t want to make too big a deal about economic development, but I think the shift is illustrative. In our culture, God is an add-on. He’s a hobby to be enjoyed on the weekends, as long as other hobbies don’t intrude. We build our lives around work, school, sports, relationships, and entertainment, and then try to squeeze God into whatever space is left. He is not meant to be one priority among many shifting priorities, but the page on which our priorities are written.

⁷ Exodus 28:15–21 describes the high priest’s breastpiece with twelve precious stones arranged in four rows of three, each stone engraved with the name of one of Israel’s twelve tribes (vv. 21, 29). This creates an interesting visual correspondence with Numbers 2, where the twelve tribes are arranged in four camps of three tribes around YHWH’s dwelling. Later Jewish tradition develops the connection further. *Numbers Rabbah* 2.7 associates each tribe’s standard with the color of its corresponding stone on the high priest’s breastpiece and assigns each an emblem. Other Jewish interpreters understood the priestly garments and sanctuary cosmologically. Philo, *Life of Moses* 2.124–126, associates the twelve stones with the twelve signs of the zodiac, treating the high priest’s garments as symbolic of the ordered cosmos; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.186 similarly associates the twelve stones with the twelve months. This does not mean that Exodus or Numbers teaches astrology or explicitly identifies the stones with the zodiac. Rather, it demonstrates an ancient Jewish tradition of reading the Tabernacle, priesthood, and ordered camp as reflecting the order of creation/heaven. The canonical imagery is itself suggestive: the high priest bears the twelve jeweled tribes before YHWH (Exod. 28:21, 29); the twelve tribes surround YHWH’s dwelling in four groups of three (Num. 2); and the New Jerusalem is again characterized by twelve tribes, precious stones, and God dwelling in the midst of his people (Rev. 21:3, 12, 18–21). The 4×3 correspondence between Exodus 28 and Numbers 2 is noteworthy, though Scripture does not explicitly state that the camp arrangement was patterned after the breastpiece.

⁸ Col 2:16-17; Heb 8:5, 10:1; illustration “Stranger Things.”

⁹ Num Rab 2:7 says colored banners corresponded to gemstone on Aaron’s breastplate with historic images included. E.g., Reuben (red mandrakes), Simeon (green Shechem), Levi (white, black, and red Urim and Thummim), Judah (sky blue lion), Issachar (black sun and moon), Zebulun (white ship), Dan (sapphire blue serpent), Gad (gray military camp), Naphtali (pale red or wine-colored doe), Asher (pearl olive tree), Joseph (jet black ox of Ephraim and wild ox of Manasseh), Benjamin (multi-colored wolf).

- For the Israelites, God wasn't just at the geographical center but the center of everything.
 - If you remember back to Exodus and Leviticus, their **calendar** was built around God's saving acts (the new year started at Passover, etc.).
 - Every **week** they deliberately stopped working to worship God (e.g., Sabbath).
 - He was at the center of their **economy**—they gave him the firstfruits and the best of their flocks.
 - He was at the center of their **family life**, teaching and training their children in the ways of God.
- Their **camp** was arranged around God. Their **calendar** was arranged around God. Their **week** was arranged around God. Their **homes** were arranged around God. **Their whole life was supposed to revolve around the presence and purposes of their King.**
 - They didn't just make room for God; he was the organizing center of the room.
 - "Children don't inherit your convictions, but your priorities."
 - If you say church is important, but you skip it for youth sports, you've communicated your priorities despite your stated convictions.
 - The question isn't: Is God a part of my life? It's: Is my life arranged around God?
 - Is God at the center of your life? Or have you relegated him to the periphery?
 - Is God at the center of your life? Or do you keep him on the margins? Of your budget? Your schedule? Your relationships?

Presence for the Journey: God is with us in the wilderness, not just at the final destination. God doesn't merely give them a destination, he puts his dwelling in their midst

- "God does not simply wait for his people at the end of their journey. He meets them in the wilderness to be with them, to guide them, and to bless them on their journey to his Promised Land" (TGC).
- While walking in the wilderness, trusting the promise on our way to the promised land, we can experience the presence of God.
 - You can have the joy of heaven now, because **Christ is with us.**
 - Jesus is "with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).
 - "[He] will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb 13:5).

God doesn't just put them around him to stand as decorative statues, he gives each of them a part to play.

3. Assigned by the King (3:1-4:49)

⁵ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁶ "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. ⁷ They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. ⁸ They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle. ⁹ And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. ¹⁰ And you shall appoint Aaron and his

sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death” (Num 3:5-10).

³⁸ Those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tent of meeting toward the sunrise, were Moses and Aaron and his sons, guarding the sanctuary itself, to protect the people of Israel. And any outsider who came near was to be put to death (Num 3:38)

⁴⁹ According to the commandment of the LORD through Moses they were listed, each one with his task of serving or carrying. Thus they were listed by him, as the LORD commanded Moses (Num 4:49).

Diverse Gifts, One Purpose: Chapters 3–4 zoom in from the whole camp to the tribe of Levi (remember, the Levites weren’t included in the military census of chapter 1). **They’re counted separately because they have a different assignment.** Even among the Levites, there are different roles.

- **(*) Aaron and his sons.** All priests are Levites, but not all Levites are priests. The priests are specifically the descendants of Aaron (a subset of Levites).
- Levi had three descendants, so there are three branches to the Levite tree. And each has a part to play in the care of the tabernacle.
 - Gershon, Kohath, Merari.
 - The Levites have two basic responsibilities: guarding God’s dwelling in chapter 3 and transporting God’s dwelling in chapter 4. Protect the holiness of God’s dwelling and accomplish the work of moving it wherever the King leads.
- **(1) Gershonites.** The Gershonites were responsible for “the tent with its covering, the screen for the entrance of the tent of meeting, the hangings of the court, the screen for the door of the court... and its cords” (Num 3:25-26).
- **(2) Kohathites.** The Kohathites “guard duty involved the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, the vessels of the sanctuary... and the screen” (Num 3:31).
- **(3) Merarites.** The Merarites were “appointed [over] the frames of the tabernacles, the bars, the pillars, the bases, and all their accessories” (Num 3:36).
 - Every person in the camp has a role to play.
 - It’s the same in the body of Christ. We all are here to glorify him, but we do it with our particular assignments.
 - We don’t get to opt out of what calls us to do, or get jealous of the callings of others.

Worship and Serve:

- All the way back when God put Adam in the garden, he put him there “to work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15).¹⁰ The same words as to “serve” and “guard.” Adam lives in God’s garden temple to worship and serve him. The Levites do the same in God’s camp. And we are called to do the same.
 - **We were made to live in God’s presence and serve his purposes.**

¹⁰ עָבַד (‘ābad) — work, serve; שָׁמַר (šāmar) — keep, guard

Kingdom of Priests: But Israel is not a nation simply *led* by priests. It is itself a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6).

- The Levites had their unique part to play, but the whole nation belongs to God for his purpose.
- And that gets picked up and applied directly to the church. We are a “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Rev. 5:10). Christianity is not a spectator sport where a few professionals do ministry while everybody else watches. There are no bleachers in the kingdom of God.
- For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:10).
 - You have been saved by grace, but you have also been saved for something. God has put people around you, gifts within you, opportunities in front of you, and a church around you.
- The question isn’t, “Did I get the assignment I wanted?” The question is, “Am I faithfully doing what the King has given me to do?”

Conclusion

How do we live faithfully in the wilderness of this life? How do we stay faithful with Egypt in the rearview and Canaan on the horizon?

- (1) Remember who you belong to.
 - You have been numbered by the King of Kings. He has counted you as his. Your identity is defined by him, not by your past. Chosen by Jesus and bought by his blood.
- (2) Keep the King at the center.
 - Is he the center of your life or have you pushed him to the periphery? If someone looked at the camp of your heart (or schedule, or pocketbook), what would they find in the middle? Only Christ should be preeminent.
- (3) Faithfully do what he has given you to do.
 - You were made to worship and serve King Jesus. Are you using your gifts to fulfill his calling in your life?
- That’s what I think these four chapters are really about. That’s really the question Numbers is going to keep asking us: Will we trust and obey the King in the wilderness?

THE KING'S CAMP

