The Promise Moves Forward
Numbers 26:1-27:23

Introduction

The Next Generation: Things have changed. My kids have never known a world without an iPhone (I bought my first iPhone in anticipation of my oldest's birth). Have you ever noticed the differences between how older and younger generations think about phones? E.g., charades of hanging up a phone. What are you even hanging up? They will never experience the joy of dial-up internet. You had to listen to the computer scream at you for thirty seconds before you could log in and change your AOL Instant Messenger away message. But if your mom picked up the landline telephone, it would disconnect you!

- At some point, you realize you're no longer the next generation; you're the current generation. Then you start to suspect you might actually be the previous generation.
- Every generation inherits a world built by the generation before it. And every generation eventually hands that world to somebody else.
- **The people who started something aren't always the people who finish it**.

The Passing Generation: Have you ever realized how much of your life depends on people you've never met, most of whom are already dead? I live in a house built by someone who is no longer alive, I assume (it was built in 1925 fwiw). I live in a city designed by someone else (shoutout Billy Penn). I benefit from discoveries made by people, some of whom never lived to see their impact.

- For example, have you heard of the Augustinian Friar, Gregor Mendel?[1] He did experiments with pea plants in a monastery garden, discovering principles of heredity that eventually helped establish the scientific understanding of genetics. People didn't recognize his work until sixteen years after his death (ca. 1900). Sometimes the people who begin something never get to see what it becomes.

Israel is standing at the edge of the Promised Land. But something remarkable has happened. Almost everyone who left Egypt is dead. The people who began the journey won't be the ones who finish it. God promised to bring his people into the land. But now an entire generation has died in the wilderness. *Even Moses*, the man God used to lead them out of Egypt, won't be going in. What happens to the promise when the people who received it are gone? What happens to the inheritance? Who will lead the next generation?

- God's promises endure even when generations do not.[2]

1. God Preserves His People (26:1-65)

A New Generation Is Counted (vv. 1–51):

[1] St. Thomas' Abbey, Brno (modern Czech Republic), then part of the Austrian Empire. Mendel died in 1884.
[2] Generations pass, but God faithfully carries his promise forward.

1 After the plague, the LORD said to Moses and to Eleazar the son of Aaron, the priest, **2** “Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers’ houses, all in Israel who are able to go to war.” **3** And Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, **4** “Take a census of the people, from twenty years old and upward,” as the LORD commanded Moses (Num 26:1-4a).[3]

- The book of Numbers, began with a giant census of the people of Israel at Mount Sinai (hence the name “Numbers”).
    - I tried to show that the **first census** served more than demographic purposes. It was tangible proof of God’s **blessings** of his people and it served as a way to **organize** them to accomplish their journey through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. It showed the **provision** of God and the **path** of the people.
    - That doesn’t mean it’s *easy* to read, with names like Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai and Nahshon the son of Amminadab (Num 1:6-7) it can very easily feel like you’re playing some demented form of Mad Libs.
- It can be a little daunting to come to a **second census** in Numbers 26, another fifty verses with strange names, families, and clans (which I didn’t take the time to read aloud today).
    - But these lists are not accidents of history, **they are intentional components of the story God is telling about himself and his people**.
- If you take the time to read this, you’ll notice a few things:
    - (1) **A New Context:** The *first* census took place at Sinai with the **first generation**. This census takes place on the plains of Moab with the **second generation**.
        - The architecture of the book of Numbers is built around these censuses marking the transition from the failed wilderness generation to the generation preparing to enter the land.
    - (2) **Same Provision:** Despite 40 years in the wilderness, God has preserved his people. When you compare the numbers of census 1 to the numbers of census 2, you find out that they have virtually the same number of people (601,730 compared to 603,550; a drop of only 1,820).[4]
        - God promised Abraham that his descendants would be numerous (Gen 15:5). Despite generations of slavery, wanding, and rebllion, God is keeping his promise.
        - I would also point out that Judah remains the largest tribe, fulfilling a promise that a royal king would come from Judah (Gen 49:10), a promise that will go through the royal lineage of David to King Jesus.
        - Generations have come and gone, but God’s promises are right on track.
        - Despite slavery, wilderness and rebellion, God has kept his promise and kept his people. He has multiplied and preserved them.

[3] Not reading vv. 4b-50 aloud (though some observations will be made about them.

[4] 7 tribes increase, 5 decrease. Some have argued the diminishment is due to disobedience (e.g., Reuben was part of the Korahite rebellion and shrinks by 2,000; Zimri, a Simeonite was involved in the previous chapters rebellion, which might explain Simeon as the smallest tribe).

- How quickly do we interpret a change in our circumstances as a change in God's faithfulness? We lose a job, experience disappointment, face an unexpected setback, and begin wondering whether God is still at work. But God hasn't changed. And neither have his promises.

An Inheritance is Promised (vv. 52-62):

51 This was the list of the people of Israel, 601,730. 52 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 53 "Among these the land shall be divided for inheritance according to the number of names. 54 To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance; every tribe shall be given its inheritance in proportion to its list. 55 But the land shall be divided by lot. According to the names of the tribes of their fathers they shall inherit. 56 Their inheritance shall be divided according to lot between the larger and the smaller" (Num 26:51-56).[5]

- There is another obvious reason that God has commanded this **new census**, they're preparing to enter the land.
  - Even in modern times, censuses are taken to determine political representation, allocate public resources, and plan services.
  - Here the census determines the size of the land allotment for each tribe (larger tribes get more land, etc.; it makes sense).
- Listen to the language of **inheritance**. It is spoken of as a fact, even though they haven't conquered the land yet.
  - They're on the wrong side of the Jordan River. There are cities to conquer, enemies to defeat, and battles to fight.
    - For Israel, God had already redeemed them from Egypt and made them his covenant people, but they had not yet entered their promised inheritance. They stood between redemption accomplished and inheritance fully received. We live in that greater 'already, not yet': Christ has won the decisive victory, and we belong to him, but we still await the fullness of what he has promised.
  - These aren't hypothetical instructions. He's giving them instructions for something he has promised to accomplish.
    - God's promises are certain—all find their "Yes" in Christ (2 Cor 1:20). We have not yet received their fullness, but we can trust the One who made them
- The land is spoken of as a certain inheritance.
  - The land already belongs to God. Everything belongs to God.
- God **owns** and distributes the inheritance.
  - It's his land to give to whomever he wants. His promises don't depend on their good or bad behavior, but on his grace.
  - The land isn't actually theirs, it's his. He's just letting them use it (e.g., my son's cell phone).

[5] Foregoing the reading of the Levites census (as I did with the other 12 tribes) in vv. 57-62.

- The inheritance is his to give, and the promise is his to keep. So live faithfully with what he has entrusted to you, and trust him with what you have yet to receive.

An Old Generation is Gone (vv. 63-65):

63 These were those listed by Moses and Eleazar the priest, who listed the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. 64 But among these there was not one of those listed by Moses and Aaron the priest, who had listed the people of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. 65 For the LORD had said of them, "They shall die in the wilderness." Not one of them was left, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun (Num 26:63-65).

- If the promises of God are the same, the people who walk into the land are not. **Not a single person** listed in the first census is listed in the second (except Joshua and Caleb, our faithful spies).[6]
    - More than 600,000 men were counted at Sinai. Nearly forty years later, virtually the same number of men are standing on the plains of Moab. But they're not the same men.
- In Numbers 14, that first generation stood on the edge of the Promised Land, but when the spies returned, the people refused to trust God. **They believed the obstacles were greater than the God who had promised to give them the land**.
    - What did God do? God declared that the rebellious generation would die in the wilderness. When God speaks it happens.
    - Michael Scott shouting, "I declare bankruptcy!" Oscar has to explain that you can't just say the word and expect anything to happen. Michael replies, "I didn't say it. I declared it." Michael's declaration changes nothing.
    - But when God speaks, he acts. He spoke creation into existence. When he pronounces judgment, his sentence will be carried out. When he promises an inheritance, he will keep his word.
    - This census proves it: his word of judgment stood. His word of promise will stand too.
    - What God said would happen, has now happened. **God kept his word**.
- We need to understand something important about the faithfulness of God. We love talking about God's faithfulness when it means blessing, provision, and salvation (and we should). **But God's faithfulness also means he is faithful to his holiness and his justice**.
    - He doesn't abandon his promises. And he doesn't ignore sin.
    - Israel's rebellion had real consequences. An entire generation died without receiving the inheritance.
        - God judged the rebellious generation and God preserved his people.

There are always threats to God's promise, but nothing can stop it from happening.

2. God Protects Their Inheritance (27:1-11)

[6] See Num 13-14

[1] Then drew near the daughters of Zelophehad the son of Hepher, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh, from the clans of Manasseh the son of Joseph. The names of his daughters were: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. [2] And they stood before Moses and before Eleazar the priest and before the chiefs and all the congregation, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, saying, [3] "Our father died in the wilderness. He was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the LORD in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin. And he had no sons. [4] Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." [5] Moses brought their case before the LORD. [6] And the LORD said to Moses, [7] "The daughters of Zelophehad are right. You shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers and transfer the inheritance of their father to them. [8] And you shall speak to the people of Israel, saying, 'If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter. [9] And if he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. [10] And if he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. [11] And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to the nearest kinsman of his clan, and he shall possess it. And it shall be for the people of Israel a statute and rule, as the LORD commanded Moses.'"

Personal Application: It seems of little consequence if the *people* of God (macro) are preserved but the *person* is excluded (micro). There may be land for the nation, but what about every family?

- Most of the census is just names and numbers, but there are few extended scenarios described, and each concerns how some family can maintain their inheritance in the face of some obstacle.[7]
- Among the thousands of names and numbers in the census, we briefly meet five sisters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Their father, Zelophehad, had died without a son.
    - "The Daughters of Zelophehad" sounds like a band that goes hard in some basement punk show.
- In Israel, land was the family inheritance—the place where a household could live, work, and provide for the generations to come.

Where My Ladies At?: In a society where inheritance ordinarily passed through sons, these women could easily have been overlooked. **God doesn't overlook them**.

- God doesn't dismiss their concern. He doesn't tell them to know their place. He says, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right."
- And he doesn't simply make an exception for these five women. He establishes a rule that protects other families in the same situation.

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[7] Three biographical interruptions in the census highlight the continuation of families despite death and judgment: Dathan and Abiram's rebellion is recalled, yet Korah's sons survived (26:9–11); Er and Onan died in Canaan, yet Judah's line continued through Shelah, Perez, and Zerah (26:19–22; cf. Gen. 38); and Zelophehad's five daughters are named despite his having no sons, preparing for the preservation of his inheritance in chapter 27 (26:33). Together, these notices reinforce the theme that death does not bring God's purposes for his people to an end.

Faith: These women face a challenging circumstance, but they have deep, unshakeable confidence in God's promises.

- We should be careful about what we take from this. It isn't a promise that every request we make will receive the answer we want. Their confidence rests on what God has already promised.
- But it does invite us to bring our questions to him. We can acknowledge the difficulty before us while trusting the character of the God who has spoken.
- In a census of more than 600,000 men, God hasn't overlooked five women.
    - God sees you.[8]

See the Unseen: The God who preserves his people also cares about the people who might otherwise be overlooked. And shouldn't that shape the way we treat people?

- It's easy to care about people in the abstract. We care about our community. We care about the poor. We care about the vulnerable. But do we actually see them? Do we know their names? Are we willing to do something when we see someone being overlooked or treated unjustly?
- If God takes notice of people the world might overlook, how can his people afford to overlook them?
- We ought to be the kind of people who notice those who are forgotten, speak up for those whose voices aren't being heard, and protect those who cannot protect themselves.
    - Not because we're trying to be more compassionate than God, but because we're called to reflect the character of the God who has shown compassion to us.
- Five women stood before Moses asking for a place in the inheritance. And God made sure they had one.

A father has died, but his daughters will have a place in the land. God has protected their inheritance. Now another death comes into view: Moses himself. The land is promised—but who will lead God's people into it?

3. God Provides a Shepherd (27:12-23)

12 The LORD said to Moses, "Go up into this mountain of Abarim and see the land that I have
given to the people of Israel. 13 When you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your
people, as your brother Aaron was, 14 because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness
of Zin when the congregation quarreled, failing to uphold me as holy at the waters before their
eyes." (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.) 15 Moses spoke to
the LORD, saying, 16 "Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the
congregation 17 who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out
and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no
shepherd." 18 So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the
Spirit, and lay your hand on him. 19 Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and all the

[8] Cf. Rahab

congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. [20] You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. [21] And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation." [22] And Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and made him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation, [23] and he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the LORD directed through Moses.

Even Moses Must Die (vv. 12–14): We've seen an entire generation die in the wilderness. We've seen a father die, leaving his daughters concerned about their inheritance. But now we come to perhaps the most consequential death of all. **Moses himself**.

- The man who confronted Pharaoh with God's ten plagues, led Israel out of slavery through the Red Sea, received the law of God on Mt. Sinai, and guided God's people through the wilderness for forty years. *If anyone seems indispensable to Israel's future, it's Moses*.
- But God tells Moses to go up the mountain and look at the land. He gets to see it, but he doesn't get to enter it.
    - This is specifically because of his own sin in the wilderness. I won't re-preach his sin at Meribah in Numbers 20, but his failure, his falling short, has real consequences.
    - Even Moses isn't exempt from the punishment of unbelief. No one is exempt from the consequences of sin.
    - So Moses will die in the wilderness, just like the generation he led.
- But God's promise to Israel doesn't die with Moses.
    - The man God used to bring Israel out of Egypt won't be the man who brings them into the Promised Land.
    - God's servants are temporary. God's purposes are not.
        - God loves us deeply and makes us important to His plan. **But none of us is indispensable**. Many Christian leaders have fallen into the blinding pride of self-importance. Real churches have imploded because arrogant leaders have bullied their staff and congregation out of self-importance.[9]
            - **The church belongs to Jesus, not the man behind the pulpit.**
        - This should *humble* you and prevent you from pride and arrogance. It should also make you grateful that God, who needs nothing and no one, lovingly chooses to use us and invite us into his work.
- If Moses can't lead them into the land, who will? And what will happen to God's people without the shepherd who has led them for forty years?

God's People Need a Shepherd (vv. 15-17): Interestingly, Moses doesn't protest or argue with God's punishment. Instead, he asks God to provide for his people, someone who will lead them out and bring them in, so that God's people won't be "as sheep that have no shepherd."

- Without a leader, that's what they would be, that's what *all* of us would be, "sheep without a shepherd."

[9] Cf. Mars Hill, Seattle, Mark Driscoll

- Sheep without a shepherd are vulnerable. They wander. They get lost. They're exposed to danger.
- And God's people need more than someone who can organize a military campaign or distribute property. They need someone who will lead them according to God's word, care for them, and guide them into what God has promised.
- **God's people need the leadership God provides**.

God Raises Up Joshua (vv. 18-23): God doesn't merely provide a replacement. He provides a Spirit-equipped shepherd.

- Joshua is a somewhat familiar character in the story of God's people. We've met him several times in Numbers, most notably as one of two faithful spies (along with Caleb) who trusted God enough to believe they could take the Promised Land (that's why the two of them were alone from the first generation to make it into the Promised Land).
- Why does God choose Joshua?
  - Beyond military expertise, leadership capacity, or personal charisma is the indispensable quality of "a man in whom is the Spirit."
  - The key to a godly leader is the Spirit of God (cf. Moses in Num 11).
  - God doesn't merely call people to accomplish his purposes. He equips them to do what he calls them to do.
- Joshua isn't the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise.
  - Yes, Joshua will lead Israel across the Jordan River. He will lead them into the land God promised their fathers. But even Joshua cannot give God's people their ultimate rest.
  - **8** For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. **9** So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, 10 for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his (Heb 4:8-9).
    - Joshua and Jesus are actually two forms of the same name. Joshua comes from the Hebrew יְהוֹשֻׁעַ (Yehoshua), meaning "The LORD saves," which was shortened to יֵשׁוּעַ (Yeshua). In Greek, both become Ἰησοῦς (Iēsous). In fact, Hebrews 4:8 uses the exact same Greek name for Joshua that the New Testament uses for Jesus. Joshua led God's people into the Promised Land, but the greater Joshua, Jesus Christ, leads his people into their ultimate rest.
  - When Jesus Christ came, he was the Spirit-anointed Shepherd who had come to lead God's people to him.[10]
  - Centuries later, another Spirit-anointed Shepherd would arrive, a greater Joshua.
- Jesus is the perfect, permanent Good Shepherd who not only leads his sheep, but lays his life down for them (Jn 10:11).

Conclusion

[10] Isa 11:1-2, Matt 3:13-17, Matt 9:36

Generations come and go. Leaders rise and fall. Even the greatest servants of God eventually reach the end of their lives. But God's promises endure even when generations do not. And that should change the way we live.

- **First**, it means **we can trust God with a future we cannot control**. Some of you are anxious about your future, your children, your family, your church. You don't know what comes next. You don't know how things will turn out. But you don't have to know the future to trust the God who holds it.
    - God hasn't promised that everything in your life will turn out the way you want. But in Christ, he has promised an inheritance that cannot perish, spoil, or fade (1 Pet. 1:3–5). And the Shepherd who secured that inheritance will never abandon his sheep.
- **Second**, it means we can **faithfully do our part without needing to see the final result**.
    - You may not live to see everything God will do in someone's life. You may pour yourself into someone who doesn't seem to be listening. You may spend years serving, praying, giving, and discipling without seeing the fruit you hoped for.
    - But faithfulness isn't measured by whether you get to see the finished product.
    - Moses didn't get to lead Israel into the land. But God's promise didn't depend on Moses finishing what he started.
    - We're not called to control the outcome. We're called to follow the Shepherd faithfully and lead the next generation to do the same.
    - Are we faithfully pointing the next generation to Jesus?