

Read the Bible in a Year

Week 11 – August 15th, 2021

Read on Your Own this Week:

Psalm 31-33

Mark 13-16

Readings in Class:

Numbers 1-14

A Brief Overview of Numbers

Numbers picks up the story of the Torah a little over one year following the Exodus from Egypt. The people of Israel camped at Sinai for nearly a year as God worked out the covenant between him and his people. This book picks up as the people are now getting ready to set up to claim the promised land as God has promised.

Our English naming for the book comes from the fact that two censuses are taken during the course of the narrative. One at the beginning and one toward the end. These two censuses relate to us God's promise to bless Abraham's offspring and to also sustain the people. The first census takes place at the beginning. Here we see the total number of men of fighting age who will be sent in to help take the promise land.

The second census is taken following the 40 year wandering in the wilderness. Following the death of all those counted in the census at the beginning this census is God recommitting to his promises and also showing the people that he is able to keep his Word to sustain his chosen people.

However, the Hebrew name for the book highlights the main theme and tension within the narrative. The Hebrew name for this book is titled, "In the Wilderness." The story takes place in three stages. From Sinai to Kadesh. From Kadesh to the Transjordan. And finally from Kadesh to Moab, just at the border to the promised Land by the River Jordan.

Each stage is marked by struggle that leads to a surprising climax. As the people travel they grumble and complain. Eventually the people rebel and refuse to go into the Promised Land, which God obliges and allows them to wander for 40 years until the older generation who was counted in the first census dies. Moses and Aaron themselves are guilty of sin and are also barred from the promised land.

As this is going on, as the people complain and rebel, the scene shifts to a pagan prophet, Balaam, who is called upon by Balak to curse the Israelites. In a moment of divine mercy and love, Balaam is only allowed by God to bless the people of Israel. The contrast is striking. Though the people complain and rebel against God, God still responds to them in mercy and love.

Here is a brief outline of the book:

1. From Mt. Sinai to Kadesh (1-12)
 - a. The first Census 1-4
 - b. Final Preparations for Journey 5:1-10:10
 - c. Journey to Kadesh 10:11-12:16
2. From Kadesh to Transjordan (13-21)
 - a. Refusal to claim Promised Land 13-14
 - b. Further Laws and Struggles 15-19
 - c. Journey to Transjordan 20-21
3. Israel at Moab 22-36
 - a. Balaam blesses Israel as they Disobey 22-25
 - b. Second Census and New laws 26-30
 - c. Settlement of Transjordan 31-32
 - d. Final Preparation 33-36

Key Themes of 1-14

God's Faithfulness: Perhaps one of the most astonishing themes throughout the Bible is found here in Numbers. The mercy of God. Even when he sends disaster and discipline to his people, God is always there to provide and care for his wayward people. This book continues the revelation of God's character following the Golden Calf. That God made a promise and he will keep it and even use these sinful humans to achieve his purposes of salvation through Christ.

40 Years: The 40 years of wandering becomes quite an illustration later in the Bible. Whether it is from the Prophets who understand these years to be a time of God courting and loving his people to Elijah traveling 40 days and nights to Mt. Sinai when he is persecuted. Or when Jesus himself fasts in the wilderness for 40 days and nights to be tempted by the devil. The 40 years of wandering is the time set aside by God to refine and test his people to prepare them to be and do all that he wants of them. Hebrews and Revelation picks up the theme of wilderness wandering to describe us now, as we are wandering and tested by God as we await the final unveiling of Jesus Christ.

God's Order: Much time is spent on how God wants the people to march through the wilderness. They are not some aimless group, but an organized regiment that God is using to bring about his reign upon the earth. The priests are emphasized on their point in God's plan in all this and during this whole time the Passover gets its first celebration.