

In the Wilderness — The Journey Begins

Numbers 1–4

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Introduction: A Book for the Wilderness

Our study of the Gospel of John is now complete, which means today we move on to something new. Before we return to Revelation — which I do plan to take up later this year — I am convicted to spend time in the Old Testament. All of last year and all of this year thus far we have been in the New Testament, and as a pastor I feel the weight of preaching the whole Bible. So for a season I want to direct our attention to one of the great books of the Old Testament.

The book I have chosen is called, in the Hebrew Bible, *bah-meed-BAHR* — “In the Wilderness.” In the Hebrew Bible, each book takes its name from its opening words. Genesis begins with *ba-reh-SHEET*, “In the Beginning.” Exodus begins with *sha-MOHT*, “Names.” Leviticus begins with *vah-yeek-RAH*, “And He Called.” Numbers begins with *bah-meed-BAHR*, “In the Wilderness.” And Deuteronomy begins with *da-vah-REEM*, “Words.”

The reason we call these books by different names in English — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy — goes back to an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint. Around 250 BC, a massive translation project was undertaken to render the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, a task that took nearly a hundred years to complete. In that translation, the Hebrew names were replaced with descriptive titles, and our English Bibles have followed that Greek tradition ever since.

I find this an unfortunate change, at least in the case of the fourth book. “Numbers” tells you very little about what you are about to read. “In the Wilderness” tells you everything. This book is about the people of God living in a particular kind of moment: saved by the mighty hand of the Lord, but not yet in the promised land.

Think about what God has already done for Israel by the time this book opens. He delivered them out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt through mighty acts of judgment. He brought them safely through the waters of the Red Sea. He met with them at Mount Sinai and entered into a relational covenant with them, giving them his law — instructions for how they are to live in relationship with him and with one another. He caused his glory, the *shekinah*, to descend and dwell in the tabernacle in their very midst. And he promised to bring them into a land of their own, where they would be blessed.

“In the Wilderness” picks up after all of that — after the saving acts of God — but before they cross the Jordan into what has been promised. It is a book about people who have been redeemed but have not yet received the fullness of what redemption is leading toward. They are living in the wilderness, sustained by God’s presence and holding onto his promises, waiting for a day yet to come.

And here is why this book is for us: that description fits us exactly. We too have been saved by God. In Jesus Christ, the Lord has delivered us from the bondage of sin and death through the mighty act of judgment that took place on the cross. Just as Israel followed Moses through the waters of the Red Sea, we have followed Jesus through the waters of baptism. We have been brought into a relational covenant with God — what the New Testament calls the New Covenant — and because of that covenant, the Lord himself now dwells with us through the Holy Spirit. We have been promised eternal life in his presence, and we look forward to a promised land — heaven, and the new creation yet to come.

We, who are in Christ, are living in the wilderness. We stand on this side of salvation, but we have not yet entered the fullness of what God has promised. We are people of future hope.

This is exactly what the New Testament tells us. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul gives a quick account of the events recorded in Exodus and Numbers, and then says in verse 11: “*Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.*” The book of Numbers was written for us, for this age we are living in. So let us open it for wisdom and instruction on how to live on this side of salvation, while we wait for the fullness of what is promised. That is my goal for our journey into the wilderness.

The Setting: One Year at Sinai

The text for today covers the first four chapters of Numbers. By this point, the people of Israel have been living at and around Mount Sinai for a full year. Sinai is where they came after leaving Egypt — the place where, as Moses tells them when they arrive, they are to come and meet their Lord (Exodus 19). At Sinai, they entered into covenant with the Lord, received the law, and watched as the glory of God moved from being distant and unapproachable to dwelling within their very camp. The tabernacle was constructed, the *shekinah* glory descended into it, and a new reality began. The Lord God on high was now dwelling with his people. They were no longer slaves but a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a treasured possession.

How, then, shall they live in this new reality?

In these first four chapters of Numbers, the Lord gives them three foundational instructions. My goal this morning is to walk through each one and draw out what it means for us.

Instruction One: Order Your Life to Protect the Work of Salvation

The first instruction comes at the very opening of the book. Numbers 1:1–3:

“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, ‘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. 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.’”

Notice the details here. This is not a census of the entire population. It is a census of those who are able to go to war. The purpose of this count is to protect the people as they move through the wilderness. Life in the wilderness is not safe. Egypt is still a powerful nation, and there would have been real fear of pursuit or retaliation. There were other kingdoms in the region who, I have no doubt, would have happily made use of a few hundred thousand slaves — not to mention the gold and wealth Israel carried out of Egypt. The people had been saved and brought into covenant, and now they needed to protect that salvation. The census counted every male twenty years old and older, and the total came to 603,550. Their task was to guard what God had accomplished on their behalf.

This principle applies directly to us. Our world is not safe either. There are enemies of the faith — and I do not think I am being paranoid in saying so.

Outside of the United States, in places like India, China, Turkey, the Middle East, and parts of Africa, reports of persecution come in every day. The Armenian genocide — the first genocide of the twentieth century — was carried out against a Christian population. And that pattern of violence against Christians has not ended. According to the organization Open Doors, thirteen Christians die every day for their faith, and nearly four million more live under constant threat to their lives.

Within our own country, the threat takes a different form. Christians are a constant target of ridicule and misrepresentation. Nearly every film or television program portrays believers as judgmental hypocrites harboring dark secrets — anti-science, anti-reason, anti-joy. Christians are regularly caricatured as hate-filled and bigoted. The ethical and moral convictions we hold, particularly around human sexuality and the sanctity of human life, have been systematically demonized by the surrounding culture. And I haven’t even begun to address the deconstruction of Scripture that has taken place in academia.

My point is simply this: like the Israelites in the wilderness, we have real enemies. And so the first instruction for life in the wilderness is this: **order your life in such a way as to protect the work of salvation that has been done in you.**

I want to be clear — I am not speaking about the possibility of losing your salvation. I believe firmly in the assurance of salvation. What I am speaking about is what Peter describes in 2 Peter 1 as salvation becoming “ineffective or unfruitful.” Listen to what he writes in verses 3–8:

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There is a great deal in that passage worthy of extended study. But the point is clear: life in the wilderness requires intentional effort to guard what God has done in us.

Instruction Two: Orientate Your Life Around the Glory of God

The second instruction comes at the opening of chapter 2. Numbers 2:1–2:

“The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘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.’”

A brief word about terminology: the “tent of meeting” by the time of Numbers refers to the same thing as the tabernacle. Earlier in Exodus, while the tabernacle was being constructed, Moses used a separate tent, pitched away from the camp, as the place where he would meet with God. Once the tabernacle was completed, these two were merged — Exodus 39:32 describes the finishing of “the tabernacle of the tent of meeting.” From that point forward, the people use both names interchangeably to describe the place where God’s glory dwells among them.

So when the Lord tells Israel to camp “facing the tent of meeting on every side,” he is instructing them to organize their entire national life around the place where he meets with them.

The rest of chapter 2 describes how this was carried out. On the east, facing the entrance of the tabernacle, camped Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. Moving around clockwise, Reuben, Simeon, and Gad were to the south. Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin were to the west. Dan, Asher, and Naphtali were to the north. At the center of it all — directly around the tabernacle itself — camped the Levites, whose role we will come to in a moment. Every tribe, every family, every individual in Israel woke up each morning with the dwelling place of God’s glory as the fixed point of their orientation.

This was profoundly countercultural. In the ancient world, temples — the places where gods were thought to dwell — were typically located at the margins of society. They were placed on high hills or *acropolises* (think of the Parthenon in Athens), or out on the outskirts of a city (think of the temple complexes at Luxor in Egypt). The gods were distant. You traveled to them when you needed something. But the entire purpose of this covenant was nearness — God dwelling in the midst of his people, not at a safe remove. The tabernacle was not on a mountaintop at the edge of the camp. It was the center of everything.

Later in Israel’s history, the people would repeatedly drift toward the “high places” — shrines built on hilltops across the land — and this is precisely what troubled the prophets so deeply about them. The high places represented a theology of distance: we will come to you when it suits us; until then, please keep your distance. The prophets thundered against this because it was a fundamental distortion of who this God is and how he intends to be known.

What does this mean for us? The second instruction for life in the wilderness is this: **orientate your life around the glory of God.**

At least three things are involved in living this way. First, it means recognizing the nearness of God. The Lord is not to be pushed to the margins of our lives, called upon only in emergencies. He is daily present, and that reality is worthy of daily praise and thanksgiving. Second, it means doing things God’s way — what John calls in 1 John walking “in the same manner that Jesus walked,” or what Jesus himself describes in Matthew 6:33 as seeking “first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” And third, it means interpreting this world through the lens of Scripture. I sometimes call this having a biblical worldview: bringing God’s perspective to bear on how we think about time, money, the use of our gifts, marriage, leadership, the poor, suffering, and the outcast. To be oriented toward the glory of God is to see life through his eyes.

Instruction Three: Keep Guard Over the Gospel

The third instruction comes in chapter 3. It is addressed specifically to the Levites. Numbers 3:5–7:

“*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle.’*”

The rest of the chapter assigns the different Levitical families specific tasks: the care, transportation, and protection of every element of the tabernacle. The place where God meets with his people — where his written testimony is kept, where his glory dwells — is to be guarded and cared for with great seriousness.

I want to draw a line from the Levites’ guarding of the tabernacle to our guarding of the gospel. The third instruction for life in the wilderness is this: **keep guard over the gospel message that the Lord has entrusted to you.**

This is distinct from the first instruction. The first was about protecting the work God has done *in* you — guarding your own salvation from becoming ineffective. This third instruction is about protecting the *message* of the gospel itself. Just as the Levites were entrusted with the care of the place where God dwells and his word is kept, so we have been entrusted with the integrity of what God has revealed.

Corporately, as a church, this means being genuinely gospel-focused — not allowing our gatherings to drift into something else. It means financial transparency, the safety and care of those in our community, the faithful stewardship of what has been entrusted to us, and a commitment to being a genuine blessing in this city. It means guarding against the slow drift by which a church can lose its center.

Individually, as members of the priesthood of believers, we guard the gospel in the examples we set, the way we speak, and the way we live. We guard it by sharing it. We guard it by growing in it — as Paul writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:14, “*guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*” And we guard it by being willing to defend it. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 10:5:

“*We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*”

Conclusion: Until That Day

We are in the wilderness. We have come through the waters and been delivered from bondage. We have been brought near to the Lord and entered into covenant with him. We have been given eternal life. As John writes in 1 John 3:2:

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

Until that day, we live in the wilderness. And for life in the wilderness, the Lord has given us three instructions. Order your life in such a way as to protect the work of salvation that has been done in you. Orientate your life around the glory of God. Keep guard over the gospel message that the Lord has entrusted to you.

Let’s pray.