

# Numbers 2

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[ 0 : 00 ] Number 2. Someone has described the Christian life as learning to drive in heavy traffic on the wrong side of the road.

You know that's like, don't you, I was in Spain recently at Fernando's wedding and they'd hire a car for me and I spent most of the time going on the roundabouts the wrong way and it's decambobulating, isn't it?

When you find yourself on the wrong side of the road. And I think when somebody becomes a Christian and they find themselves amongst God's people, it is a little bit like learning to drive in heavy traffic on the wrong side of the road.

And if there's one book in the Bible that will really help us get our bearings, it's strangely enough the book of Numbers. Paul tells us 1 Corinthians 10, the book of Numbers is about Christ.

It was written for Christians. And he gives us an outline of the book in just a few verses and he says, these things that happened to the people of Israel, they happened for your sake. And he says, it's all about getting there.

[ 1 : 07 ] You're in the car with children, are we there yet? The kids say, are we there yet? And in the Christian life, we're not there yet, are we? But we're not where we used to be. We've been redeemed, we've been set free.

We're on our way to the destination, Revelation 21. It's a heavenly Jerusalem, but we're not there yet. We're in the wilderness. We're on the way, we're on the journey.

And this book, the book of Numbers, is all about getting there. It's about getting from Egypt to Cain in the Promised Land. It's about learning to drive in heavy traffic on the wrong side of the road. It's about learning to walk with God in a strange and difficult place, the wilderness.

The first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, they are really foundational. What are they about? Genesis is about a ruined people. Exodus is about a redeemed people.

Leviticus is about a holy people. Numbers is about a pilgrim people. A people who are on the moon. A people who are travelling with God to Jerusalem.

[ 2 : 09 ] Let me remind you that the book really means, doesn't it, the wilderness book. That's what it is, quite literally. And in our book, the Bible is called Numbers because of the two censuses.

One in chapter 1 and one in chapter 40. And the whole book is around, is based around those two censuses. Or sensei. I don't know what the plural is. And the key to understanding the book is that between those two censuses, there are 40 years.

And there's a lost generation. That's why Moses is writing the book. He's writing this book so that the second generation will not make the same mistake as the first.

And that is what Paul picks up on in 1 Corinthians 10. It should have taken 11 days to get from Sinai to the Promised Land. Instead, it took them 40 years. And that is incredible when you think about it, isn't it?

A whole generation was lost. The only people that made it in were Caleb and Joshua. The rest died in the wilderness. They perished in the wilderness. It's very challenging.

[ 3 : 11 ] And in these chapters in the book of Numbers, God is getting his people to move on. He's brought them out of Egypt. He's redeemed them. He's entered into covenant with them about Sinai. And he's preparing them to move on through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

So the first thing he does in chapter 1 is he numbers them. But in chapter 2, I don't know whether you've noticed it, he orders them. So three words tonight. Ordered, centred, separated. Ordered by God, centred on God, separated for God, separated by God.

They've been numbered, but now they're ordered. And they're being organised and they're being arranged. And that is not something to skip over. When you read in the New Testament, the Apostle

Paul writes to Colossians, a church he'd never visited.

It's a church plagued by false teaching and false philosophy. He writes them in chapter 2 and he says, Though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit. And this is what he says, it's very interesting.

He says, and I delight to see how orderly you are. And how firm your faith in Christ is. It's a military metaphor. Here's the church under attack from false teachers.

[ 4 : 21 ] And yet Paul says, I'm delighted to see and hear that you are standing firm in your faith in Christ. You stand shoulder to shoulder without breaking rank. I'm delighted to see how orderly you are.

You're standing four square on Christ alone. And God is the God of order. He's not a God of chaos. And he orders his people.

And that is what you have particularly here in Numbers chapter 2. He's a God ordering his people. He is telling Moses exactly how they should be arranged. Where they should be, how they should move forward. And I don't think we should skip over that.

Because particularly in our culture, and especially today, I think in the kind of wider church scene, really the culture is, it'll be alright.

Near enough is good enough. That's where many people live. It's quite casual. It's understandable. But when people like to do their own thing. And that has come into the church, hasn't it?

[ 5 : 23 ] And so people hang loose, as far as the things of God are concerned. And we need to remind ourselves, that is not how God does church. It's not a free for all.

The church is not a place where we can make up the rules ourselves, and we can decide how we're going to do church. God is a God of order.

And he orders his people through his word. And the people are arranged. They are arranged like an army about to march. That is the arranged one. There's something unique about that. Something that was very well understood in the culture of the day in numbers.

So a contemporary, Ramesses II, organises people in exactly the same way. He arranged his army in the way that they would be camped. In a square with the royal tent right in the middle.

That's what you've got here. And if you take the trouble to read all those lists of names in chapter 2, that is what you have. It's a square with a tent in the middle. And the people are arranged in a gigantic square, north, south, east and west.

[ 6 : 32 ] My brother was telling me that when he preached on numbers, chapter 2, in this massive barn of a building with a huge great balcony, he got bits of the congregation to go into different parts of the balcony to show them. And then the tent was in the middle.

It's absolutely ridiculous. What a waste of time. But the tent is in the middle. Who's in the tent? That's the question, isn't it?

A British Navy officer by the name of Robert Stockford, who commanded one of the ships with which Nelson chased the French, as far as the West Indies. Nelson and his Navy chased the French, a fleet twice the size of the British fleet, right the way to the West Indies.

And the guy in charge wrote this. He said, We are half-starved and otherwise inconvenienced by being so long out of port, but our reward is that we are with Nelson. We are with Nelson.

Who's in the boat? Nelson. Do you sing the children's song with Christ in the vessel? He smiled at the storm. Who's in the boat with us? It's not Pharaoh. Who's in the camp?

[ 7 : 31 ] It's not Ramesses II, but God, the Word made flesh. And tabernacle amongst us. John 1.14. He dwelt, he tented amongst us. And we have Jesus, a virgin will conceive and give birth and bear a child and she shall call him Emmanuel.

Which means God with us. That's who Jesus is. And we gather round him. Let me give you that great quote from Tertullian again. We are a society, talking about the church, we are a society with common feelings, unity of discipline, a common bond of hope, and we meet in gatherings and congregations to surround God in prayer.

Massing our forces to surround him. This violence that we do pleases him. That is the picture you have here. That's what we do when we come together as a congregation of God's people.

We're surrounding, we're massing our forces around him. We're approaching him. He is in the camp. He is in our midst. And it's not a free-for-all, the church.

It's not mass hysteria. Remember, you're talking about two to three million people in the desert. 6,500 fighting men over the age of 20. And the calculation, the figures when you try and work them

out are almost too big to believe.

[ 8 : 45 ] But there must have been about two to three million people in that camp. And so imagine mobilizing a crowd like that to go through the desert. It was ordered, and it was dissonant.

Look at verse 17 of chapter 2. Then the tent of meeting shall set out with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camp, as they camp. So they shall set out, each in position, standard by standard. Imagine the chaos. It could have been with such a vast crowd. But they are gathered and they are ordered, each in his own place, and under his standard. It is not a free-for-all.

There's a place for everyone in this camp, and everyone is in its place. And again, I think that's something that we need to stop and think about with the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It has edges. And it has boundaries. And it has divisions. I'm in a bit of a debate for the moment with a friend of mine about church membership in the Bible.

[ 9 : 45 ] And I want to argue it is there. It is there in the Acts of the Apostles. 3,000 were added to the church that day. Added to what? How did they know there were 3,000 people added?

Someone must have known. Someone must have been counting. Someone was keeping records. 5,000 were added. Acts 5. And then you come into the epistles and the Apostle Paul says about the man who is guilty of gross immorality.

You put this man out. Of the church. And then in 2 Corinthians it says you must bring him back in if he's repented. So in the New Testament church they knew who was in and they knew who was out. And somebody kept a record of that. And John tells us in his letter. He tells us about the Antichrist who have come in he says and they've gone out from among us. And that is how we know they don't belong.

Because in the church whether you call it membership or partnership or whatever you want to call it there are boundaries and there are edges and you must know whether you are in or whether you are out.

[ 10 : 50 ] And so much people shepherd you. And so if you want to go anywhere in the Christian life you've got to get in amongst God's people. Drifting along on the edges or do you any good?

Do you know that you are amongst God's people you are gathered to the standard? Or just drifting along? Have you found your place amongst God's people?

Paul says to the Corinthians to the New Christians coming from a pagan background of 1 Corinthians 7.20 Let everyone remain in the same calling as which he was called. It's a good place to start. You're wondering where you fit in how do I live the Christian life amongst God's people? Well just carry on as you start it for a bit. God is sovereign God shaped you in your mother's womb. God has supervised all the experiences of your life and he's going to use that.

Now that you're a Christian don't quit your job and become a full time minister. No. Paul says let everyone remain in the same calling to which he was called. And then he goes on a little bit later in 1 Corinthians 12 he goes on to talk about the body of Christ.

[ 11 : 55 ] He says in verse 4 he says there are different gifts but the same spirit. Different kinds of service but the same Lord. Different kinds of working but the same God. He says in verse 18 in fact God has arranged the parts of the body every single one of them.

Just as he wants them to be. And so what I'm asking you to like is do you know where you fit into the body of Christ? With your particular and peculiar temperament and your personality with all its quirks the way that God has put you together the life experiences you've had the life situation you are in do you know how that fits?

Do you know what spiritual gifts God has given you so that you can contribute on the onward march of the people of God through the wilderness? Richard Beavis do you remember he preached a couple of times he used this illustration?

he talked about me the times before the internet do you remember that? Some of you do. And the times before the internet there was a typewriter wasn't there?

If you don't know what that is someone will explain it to you afterwards. And there was a little key on the internet with an A and then a kind of circle around it. And no one knew what it was about does it?

[ 13 : 12 ] Richard Beavis talks about he would he didn't know what it was about so he would use it to draw light at the bottom you press that button the A with a little circle around it.

And nobody knew what that sign was about. But now that sign has come into its own isn't it? The at sign. It's one of the most used symbols on the keyboard. Nobody knew what it was for and then

suddenly now it's used greatly isn't it?

Every day you can't send emails without it. And you might think you are just a little obscure an insignificant letter on the keyboard what can I do? But as the story of God's people and as the story of God's churches gets typed out on the keyboard of eternity you might think that you're no better than the letter Z or a percentage mark on a keyboard whatever that's for.

How often does that get used? You might think how can God use me? When will God ever use me? Well let me tell you that if your name is in the Lamb's Book of Life and if you are numbered amongst God's people by grace then your time will come.

With all our gifts the variety of gifts we work together to build God's church. If you want to go on in the Christian life then you've got to get in amongst God's people.

[ 14 : 31 ] You've got to work out where you fit amongst God's people. What your contribution is. So think of Alan and Paul on the sounds.

You have different people doing the coffee and tea. You have Debbie doing the flyers. You have Sergey pulling up the banners. You have people doing the cleaning. People making cakes for birthdays.

All this is for the sake of Christ and his gospel and his church. It's all to do with the onward march of the people of God. It's not just the guy in the front with the loud voice and the big mouth.

All sorts of gifts in the body. Everyone in its place and a place for everybody. And that's what you see here in numbers. Here are God's people ordered by God.

Presbyterians should do things decently and in order. We kind of pride ourselves on that. But that is actually biblical. God is the God of order and he orders his people.

[ 15 : 41 ] The second thing is they're ordered by God but they're also centred on God. Look at verses 1 and 2. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron saying to them that the people of Israel can't be twice on standard with the banners of their father's house.

They shall come facing the tent of meeting on every side. So they get out of the tent. What's the first thing they see in the morning? As they come out of the tent. They see the tent of meeting. They see a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

They see the Shekinah cloud cloud which is the symbol of the presence of God in the middle of the tent camp. How encouraging is that? The people of God have edges and boundaries but they also have a centre.

And there in the middle, slap bang in the middle of the camp is the tent of meeting. Any soldier who served in combat will tell you that their life is a mixture of boredom and terror.

Being in the army, long moments of boredom. Punctuated by short bursts of terror. And nothing is more important to say if you are a soldier in Afghanistan or wherever it is, to acknowledge that those who are in charge of you know what they are doing.

[ 16 : 58 ] They know how to win a war. A soldier will face a great danger and he will risk life and live. But as long as he knows that his life isn't going to be wasted, as long as he knows that the generals are not incompetent and that they know how to fight a war, why do you take confidence?

Soldiers take confidence in the competence of their generals. That they know their soldiers and that they know how to lead their soldiers to victory. And God himself is in the midst of our camp.

God himself is our commanding officer. We mass our forces to surround him. God is in control and God is in our midst. Christ. And we've got to get up in the morning and look in his direction.

We've got to seek his face. We've got to open the tent doors and see the pillar of cloud and the fire. And we've got to recognise the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And if we're going to march forward, if we will live the Christian life, that's what we must do.

So here are these people. It's an army in formation. They're about to march on the promised land. They are capped facing the tent of meeting. And it is so easy, isn't it, to get caught up with the ordering of the people.

[ 18 : 15 ] Ordering of the people is a good thing. But it's easy to get caught up with the mechanics of church life, with committees and minutes and programmes and appointments and all the things that need to be done, and they do need to be done to keep the church running.

And it's easy to forget that the whole point of the gathering of God of the church is Jesus Christ. The whole purpose of gathering together is for God amongst us, to have his presence in our lives.

God was present, wasn't he, in the garden with Adam and Eve. We're told he walked with them and he talked with them. That is church.

God present through his word in our midst. What happened is man sinned and lost God's presence and now God in Christ has restored his presence to all who believe.

in him. And we should never take that for granted. It is the supreme blessing of the church. Yes, it is right that we come and we encourage one another.

[ 19 : 20 ] We sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs to encourage one another. It's part of why we come to build one another up. But the supreme blessing of coming to the gathering of God's people is not simply just to meet with one another.

it is to hear his word directing us. Unbelievers think of granted, don't they? They think of God like the kind of 999 emergency.

You call out. You hope you don't have to. And for most people the knowledge of God is something in the back of their minds. they hope they never have to call out to him. Most unbelievers want to keep God at arm's length.

They want any relationship with him to be handled by the professionals. I got sent an email not long ago by some people that wanted to come from another country for me to baptise their children.

And in the thing they said we want to get our children done before we move. I was dying to reply rare or medium rare. Is that how you want them done? Can you say a prayer for me Padre?

[ 20 : 29 ] They want to keep God at arm's length. And yet for the believer, the Christian to know God, to have God in our lives and to have God with us in the wilderness of this life is what it's all about.

Chief end of man is to glorify and enjoy God. God and if tonight you're a Christian and you're not enjoying God then can I please ask you to talk to someone because that is not normal and that is not natural.

And if you're coming to church week by week and you're not enjoying God's presence, if God is not speaking to you through his word and God is not directing you and leading you on, then please do speak to someone. There's a blockage somewhere or something is happening that shouldn't be happening.

we gather to meet with God and have him speak to us through his word. That's what our prayer every Sunday is.

What? Guide me all thou great Jehovah pilgrim through this barren land. I am weak but thou art mighty hold me with thy powerful hand. Now how do we do that? Here it goes to feet loaded by God centred on God separated to God.

[ 21 : 48 ] Look at the verse 52 of chapter 1.

The people of Israel shall pitch their tents by their companies, each man in his own camp, each man by his standards. 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. Thus did the people of Israel according to all that the Lord commanded Moses. Think of the tabernacle as a kind of nuclear reactor, with this exclusion zone around it.

Lucy in Narnia, she asked Mr. Beavitt, is he safe? Safe? Who said he was safe? He's not safe, but he's good. He's not a tame lion, you know.

And we as a Christian church in this country have domesticated him. God has become our talisman, our lucky charm, our rabbit's foot. He's become the logo on the printed newspaper.

[ 23 : 30 ] He's become chairman emeritus of the company. He's not anything of the sort. He's not a tame lion. God is no figurehead. You see how very very powerfully in the New Testament, don't you?

Ananias and Sapphira, they came to the church. They were part of the church, they were members of the church, they seemed to be really generous people. They brought their offering and they pretended they'd sold their house and they were giving it all away to the Lord.

People were amazed. And the Lord struck them down. He struck them down for hypocrisy. He struck them down because they were pretending to be something they weren't.

And they were carried out in a body bag. And great fear seized the whole church when God dealt with Ananias and Sapphira. They were hypocrites pretending to be what they weren't. And God dealt with them very severely.

And they were removed from this life and this world. And we're told, it is fascinating, Acts chapter 5 verses 13 and 14. When you go home, read this before bed. Great fear seized the whole church.

[ 24 : 37 ] And then this amazing verse, 13 and 14, chapter 5, no one dared join them. But nevertheless, and I love that, more and more people believed and were added to their numbers.

Isn't that fascinating? No one dared join them, but nevertheless, more and more people believed and were added to their numbers. That is the church in the world.

That is the church in the wilderness. That is how it is. There is great fear of God. God is so real.

He is so other. He is so holy. And when people realize that, as they come in amongst us, they are afraid to join.

And yet they can't help themselves, they are drawn. Now we are a very long way from that. people don't even know we exist. And people don't even know we're here. Although the banners are brilliant. We need to say that.

[ 25 : 40 ] The banners are terrific. But the way the church should be in the world is with God in our midst. There should be things happening in our lives.

There should be things happening in our network of relationships that the world can't explain except in supernatural terms. Saeed was with us yesterday.

His electric bike is broken. He was telling me that Saeed, the really man, he drives an electric bike.

He doesn't walk very well. Comes to us on Sunday morning all the way down from Finchley because we're his church and he could go to an easy church.

And he was with me yesterday. He was saying that he'd started a job in the last six months with some Arabs and he'd be working for two days and they came to and said you are a Christian aren't you?

He said yes I am. Why do you ask? And they said because you work differently. It's remarkable isn't it?

[ 26 : 45 ] That people saw in the way that he painted and decorated. That there was something different about him. Something that they couldn't explain in normal terms. God is in the midst.

Do you remember what it said about the disciples? They took note of them because they would be with Jesus. Does anyone take note about us? People say to folks this week that man that woman has been with Jesus on Sunday.

Good fear seized the city of Jerusalem because God was in the midst of his people. The sovereign God is not a figurehead. The sovereign living God was amongst his people and the whole city was afraid and people were to join these Christians and yet at the same time they couldn't keep themselves away.

And that is how it should be. That is the God of the Bible. He is near. Wonderfully he is near to us in Christ. But he's high and lifted up and he is holy and to have God present is a scary thing.

Would we do things different if there were no human being present? Should I clean the kitchen differently when Claire is not there? Just think about what it is to have God present all of the time.

[ 27 : 56 ] It's what David woke up to in Psalm 51 is that you remember he's the king of Israel. He can do what he likes. He took another man's life. He murdered her husband. It was a big cover up. It lasted months and months and months.

It was a lie. He lived a lie and suddenly Nathan the prophet comes and he wakes up to reality. Do you remember what he said? He said against you Lord, against you and you only have I sinned.

What about Bathsheba? What about you Ryan?

Where was God when David sinned? Where was God when David flirted with Bathsheba and seduced her? Where was God? He wasn't somewhere else. Joel Harris was one of the leaders of the Calvinistic Methodist.

18th century revival. He had a house in Trevecca in a place in South Wales. He would still go there and Wesley and Whitfield would go there and in the living room he had painted this great eye.

An eye on the ceiling reminded the community that lived there. It was a bit of a weird bunch really.

But it reminded them that they were living in the sight of God. Because it was a scary thing to have God in your midst. So no everything is seen by him.

[ 28 : 56 ] He is high and lifted up. And he draws near to us. In Eden it was okay. It was safe in those early chapters of Genesis. They walked and they talked with God. It's a lovely picture those opening chapters.

But you remember because of their sin and rebellion they are driven out of the garden. And when they're driven out of the garden there is the cherubim. And there is a flaming sword that goes in every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.

That's the picture now. We live east of Eden. And there's a flaming sword that turns in every direction which means you can't get in. It's no good saying that you'll become a vegetarian and you'll be kind to God's creation.

It's no good saying you'll go to church and do your best. There's no way back to God. The flaming sword turns in every direction whatever route you're going to take. There's no way for you to get in. And the only way is for that sword which represents the fiery anger of God against sin to fall on your substitute. And that's what happens then. He's plunged into his breast at Calvary.

[ 29 : 57 ] We've quoted John 1 verse 14 a number of times already. The last time in them was one and tonight. John 1 in the beginning was the word and the word was face to face with God.

The word was God and the word was God. And then we're told the one who is God, the second person of the blessed trinity, the word was made flesh and literally the tabernacle tented amongst us.

And we've seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten, of the father full of grace and truth. And the Bible tells us that no one can see God. That's why the camp is arranged in this way.

That's why there's an exclusion zone around the tabernacle. The Levites standing guard not letting anyone into the tabernacle. That is why there's a whole priestly! people sins to be atoned for because no one can see God and live, the Bible teaches you.

But now we're told God has actually come in Christ. The image of the invisible God. No one has seen God and lived but Jesus is the divine accommodation to our human frailty.

[ 31 : 00 ] And Philip he is the word made flesh. And he said to Philip, if you've seen me, you've seen the father. And so tonight we can't go near. We can come close.

We can actually enter into God's presence to see them. Not just unharmed but welcomed. There's no exclusion zone around the tabernacle.

There's no exclusion zone around Jesus. No guards barring the way. Instead there are open arms and a father who runs out to meet you. And you're no longer forbidden to come. Now you are invited to come.

You are commanded to come. And we're no longer separated because God has come down into the wilderness in human form. And taken our sin and our guilt and our rebellion on himself. So God was in Christ reconciling the world.

And that's why we're back to the start of the service with Revelation 21. Because in Revelation 21 the angel come and he says I will show you the bride. The wife of the lamb, the church.

[ 32 : 03 ] And he says I looked and what did I see? Did I see a woman coming down the aisle? No I saw a city coming. Out of heaven. Here comes the bride 14,000 stadia wide.

And what did it look like? Did you notice what it looks like? It looks like Revelation 21 the camp in the wilderness. Did you pick that up? What shape is it?

It's a square north east south and west. The tribes have gathered. Isn't that what we read the angel who talked with me in a measuring rod? That a great high wall with twelve gates, twelve angels on the gates and on the gates were written the twelve tribes of Israel.

Three on the east, three on the south, three on the west, three on the north. This is the camp in the wilderness but there's one big difference. Because do you remember what it says in Revelation 21? in that chapter I looked and I couldn't see what? The temple or the tabernacle. Why? Because in the new creation it will all be temple.

[ 33 : 02 ] It's all tabernacle. And the lamb himself is the tabernacle. And the temple because the dwelling place of God is with man. And that's the end of the journey.

And that is where we're heading. That is where we're heading.