

Numbers 27

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[0 : 00] Okay, so Numbers 26 and 27. And the theme of this passage is hope for the future.! That's why I'm preaching it's the start of the year. Hope for the future. So we look ahead to 2019, and we ask ourselves, what are the prospects for this year?

What are your prospects? Are they ripe, or are they gloomy? Can we be encouraged as we look forward? Or should we be somewhat pessimistic? And I suppose there's a whole range of possible answers out there.

You can look politically, economically, or personally. You might come up with the same answers. You can look ahead in the spiritual sphere. From one perspective, the prospects of the church look pretty gloomy, don't they?

There's a lot in the church of Christ in the UK that is discouraging. In many parts of the church, there's gross biblical ignorance or worse. In many places, there's unbelief. Lots of churches we see departing quite deliberately from the truth of the Bible, the clear truth of the Bible. Parts of the physical church, there's rank disobedience.

[1 : 07] With leaders, even. Teaching and setting themselves against God's clear commandments. And so we can say, well what hope is there for the Christian church in the 21st century? That it will be able to obey and prosper and extend God's kingdom.

Can such a weak and imperfect church really do God's work in the world? When we look at ourselves, we can be really discouraged, can't we? And we are aware, every single one of us tonight, of our weaknesses, of areas of sin in our lives, of a lack of ability.

What hope is there that we'll keep going? That we'll persevere in the faith? That we'll keep on with God and eventually we'll reach heaven? And we need to take those questions seriously because sin is serious, isn't it?

That sin in the church and in the individual is serious. We can't gloss over sin. We can't say, well it just doesn't matter.

It does matter because it matters to God. And that is seen really clearly in this passage, isn't it? This is the second census, the second counting of the people of Israel and it's taken 38 years after the first census.

[2 : 22] That's recorded in Numbers chapter 1, if you remember that. And in Numbers chapter 1, verse 46, we're told that they counted up the warriors and the warriors were 603,555 fighting men.

That's the man over 20. Plus their women and their kids. In other words, there's between one and a half million and two million people at the start of Numbers. Two million people.

And of all those two million people, only two leave the wilderness alive. Caleb and Joshua. And all the rest of the two million will perish.

They'll die in the wilderness. They will not enter the promised land. As the writer to the Hebrews, in chapter 3, verse 1, says their bodies, they fell in the wilderness.

They were buried there. And two verses later in Hebrews 3, it says that that 1.99, whatever it is, million, they were unable to enter the promised land because of unbelief.

[3 : 27] Hundreds of thousands of corpses left in the desert because of unbelief. Sin matters and sin is serious. And you get that point made again and again and again in this account of the census.

From time to time, we didn't read it throughout the whole of chapter 6, but from time to time through the chapter, there are these notes of warning and judgment. So in verses 9 of chapter 26 and following, we read about Dathan, Abiram and Korah.

And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up. Would you remember that? That's part of the census. People are dying. They're going to be saved. Or again, in verse 19, we're talking about Er and Onan in the land of Canaan.

And we remember that Er and Onan were wicked men. They were disobedient and we read that God struck them down. Or again, look at verse 61. But Nainab and Abihu died when they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord.

You see, those little incenses are put into this chapter to tell us that these people were struck down because of sin. And even Moses, the great man, Moses, the great leader, is told, isn't he, that Moses will die in the wilderness.

[4 : 48] Moses, he too will be prevented from entering the promised land. As God says in 27, verse 14, you rebel against my word in the wilderness. And it's still true, isn't it?

The sin is serious and sin matters. Our sins are serious as the sins of the church are immensely serious. So how can a holy God bless you and bring you to heaven when you sin so often against him?

How can the Holy Spirit indwell a church which is so imperfect? How can the Holy Spirit work through imperfect people?

But he does. And God will bring us to heaven. He has promised if we are in Christ's name. And it's all due to grace. But we can see in these chapters three practical ways that God does make it happen.

Three ways in which God does give you hope for the future. in which God leads us to the promised land. So the first is a new generation. A new generation.

[5 : 52] That's the first thing that gives us hope. This is the second census. And the mere fact that there is a second census I think is wonderfully encouraging. Because it means that there are people that can't.

That the people are not going to be exterminated. That they're not going to be extinguished. And when we read in verse 51 of chapter 26 that there are the list of the people of Israel these are the fighting people of Israel 601,730 warriors.

We should be immensely encouraged by this. That is almost as many as there were in the first census in chapter 1. Lesson 2,000. It's a mighty army an enormous army of young strong fighting men.

Even though there are two million corpses in the wilderness God has created a new people. A mighty host of soldiers. And God has brought a new generation to replace the old sinful unbelieving generation.

And that is encouraging isn't it? That gives us hope for the future. The new generation. And not only the fact of the census but the twofold purpose of the census. Why was there this census?

[7 : 03] Well first of all it was to assess the army of conquest. This census is telling you and I the battle is about to begin. They're about to cross the door.

They're about to leave the wilderness and they're about to go into the promised land and take it. And because that is about to happen God counsels the army. And the second purpose of the census is even more encouraging.

It's to provide if you want a database in how the land can be divided among the tribes. After they capture the promised lands this census will be used to decide who gets what.

How big is each tribe? How much land that they're going to need? So look in verse 53 of chapter 26. And among these the land shall be divided for inheritance according to the number of names.

To a large tribe will give a large inheritance and to a small tribe will give a small inheritance. And every tribe shall be given its inheritance in proportion to its lips. In other words everything about this census is hopeful.

[8 : 04] Why are we having it? We're having this census because we're a new generation.

Because we're about to cross the river. And we're about to fight the enemies of God's people.

And we're going to cast them out and we're going to take the land that God has promised. And when we've taken the land it's going to be divided up. And it's going to be inherited amongst the 12 tribes so that it will be divided up fairly. And we need to know how many are in each tribe so the whole census, the whole second census is full of hope and it's saying you're about to take possession of the land.

It's an interesting point here I think in spite of the judgment, in spite of the sin, these are still God's people. And they're still the same people. Now just look at how they're described.

It's really really fascinating. Look at verse 4 of chapter 26. Take a census of the people from 20 years old and upwards. As the Lord commanded Moses, the people of Israel who came out of the

land of Egypt were.

And then it counts the young people who weren't there. And these new people, they'd never seen Egypt. They didn't know Egypt.

[9 : 24] They'd been born since many of them and yet they are the same people. They are the same covenant people. They're not a completely different church. They're the same church.

All the promises of God are still theirs. They are a new generation and yet they are still the covenant people of God. And that gives them great hope for the future. A new generation.

As I want to say, we should look at every child, every young person in our church. Where are you? Listen. And we should give thanks to you.

And we should be filled with hope because of you. Because there's hope for the future because of the next generation. Now, unlike some churches, we don't idolise children. Alright?

We don't put them at the centre of everything. We don't build a church around them. We don't say church is just for the young people. And yet, I do want to say to you that there is no community on earth which values you more than this church, children.

[10 : 28] When I'm dead, and when these older folk are dead, and we've fallen off our perch, it is the young people who will be the church.

And every baptism, whether it's the baptism of a child, or the baptism of an adult, God is adding to our ranks, and God is giving more people, and he's saying to you the church will not die.

And the witness of the gospel will land. Faith in God will endure in this world. And as seed will rise, serve his will, one generation passes.

Well, we miss them, don't we? But they're always replaced. They're always replaced. And God has been very kind to our congregation over the last few years. He's given us a new generation.

And so we should be thankful and hopeful. The second reason is a new spirit. A new spirit. You might say, what's so great about a new generation? Because the new generation is just going to be the same as the old, unbelieving generation.

[11 : 38] Are they too going to die in the wilderness? What's so good about younger people? Are their fathers and their grandfathers, well, they disbelieved and they disobeyed and they were judged? Have we got any reason to think, well, this new generation is going to be any different?

And that is the point of the incident at the start of chapter 27. Did you pick it up? The daughters of, what do you say?

Zelophehad. Zelophehad. I hope you remember these five young women. They said, didn't they, our father died in the wilderness and he had no sons. I'm calling him his real-life law.

When a young woman was married, she was given a dowry and that was the end of her claim on the estate. She had no future claim on her father's property. His inheritance, his land, his estate, and the land passed to the nearest male relative.

But these feisty five young women, they're unwilling to accept it, aren't they? And it struck them as fair and just. And they said, why should the name of our father be taken from our clan because he had no sons.

[12 : 46] Give it to us. possession among our fathers. It's a really advanced request, culturally, in the culture of the time and the day.

Here are women who are wanting the same inheritance rights as men. Why should the land pass out of my father's name because he had no sons? We're his daughters, we're his children, and we've got as much rights to the land.

It's a very, very interesting thing that God grants their request. And God makes this a permanent law. So look at verse 8, chapter 27. And you shall speak to the people of Israel, saying if a man dies, he has your son.

And you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter. Now I could spend time, you could go back home, and you could look how advanced this is in the legislation of the day.

In terms of human rights, in terms of the other cultures of the world, how God cares, our fairness and proper equality. And you can apply it today, can you? You can apply it today to people who are vulnerable and marginalized and discriminated against.

[13 : 57] And you can show how God cares about these people, and so should we. But that isn't central to the passage. Have you grasped what is the truly remarkable thing about this passage?

Here are these women, and they are claiming their inheritance. We want it, they say, we want it. But where are they? Where are they? They're in the wilderness.

They haven't got it yet. They've not captured one square inch of the promised land. And yet these girls are absolutely convinced, they're convinced that the whole land is going to be possessed by Israel, and they want their names written down.

And they want their shares in advance. It is powerful faith, isn't it? Calvin says, they made their appeal as if tranquil possession of their rights were to be accorded to them that very day.

And it's so different, isn't it? It's so refreshingly different, these young women from the unbelieving older generation. Do you remember the generation that wouldn't go in? The spies came back and they said the grapes are absolutely massive.

[15:14] The fruit is incredible there. The richness of the land. But the enemy is too big. And the older generation were too frightened and they turned back 38 years earlier to Jordan.

No, no, we're scared, they said. We can never capture the city. But the new generation, they're different. And there's vision and courage.

And they say the land is ours and we want our share of it. And they are certain of the future inheritance, of the future. The future wealth that is going to be theirs.

And not only is it a new generation, but Numbers is telling us that these people have a new faith. They have a new spirit, and they have a new zeal. So again, we must be sentimental about you children, all right?

And about you young people. And we mustn't put on roses and spectacles and think you are going to be the most wonderful young people and children that have ever lived. And you will grow up to be kind of Presbyterian supermen and superwomen.

[16:30] Children and young people, you will struggle like we struggle with unbelief. And you will experience fearfulness and failure, and like us, you will fall into sin.

And yet, when we've said all of that, is it not too much to hope that our children and the children of this church will have a new spirit and a better spirit of faith? Is it too much to hope and to pray for that as we compare our children with ourselves, that our children will be more mature than we are? that they will be more knowledgeable about the truth of God than we are? Isn't that what we're trying to do? Isn't that what we are giving ourselves to?

With our children in the hope that the children of this church, the young people who grew up in this church, that they will actually surpass us. Is it too much to hope and pray that our children and our young people will be more more enterprising in the work of the kingdom than we've been?

That they will see possibilities that we've been just too blind to see? Is it too much to hope that our children and our young people will have a greater vision of the kingdom of God than you and I have?

[17:53] Is it too much to hope that they will have a firmer grasp on heavenly realities, that they will be like these feisty daughters and sort off the hands? So real to them, isn't it? So real to them, that they're scratching out their hands to grasp these things.

They are so real to us. That's what we want, isn't it? But if you don't want each other to grow in God, that's going to turn up.

Don't be committed. They'll never come to prayer meeting, if you never come to prayer meeting. We should work, shouldn't we? We should work that our children would surpass us.

And they would go far beyond us. And that's what we want. We want our children to be better Christians, more fruitful, more productive, to bring more glory to God. Of course we know, don't we? We're not naive, think we can do that, we can get them automatically do certain this, do this, do that, press certain buttons and that will happen. But we do pray, don't we? We do pray, we must pray that our children will be more fruitful, more productive, productive, they'll bring more glory to God.

[19:04] But the generation that will come in this building will be more productive than we have been. And that is our hope, isn't it?

That those who come after us will surpass us and go far beyond us. Hope for the future. A new generation and a new spirit. And then lastly, and most importantly, a new leader.

we read Catherine Voss' story Bible. I think it's the best story, but we read it every morning, but my mother used to read it to me every morning. And I have one vivid memory of coming to this passage where Moses is told he's not going to be allowed into the promised land and just dissolving in tears. I couldn't believe it. I was heartbroken. There's a great pathos, isn't there, in this passage? But if we're ever tempted to criticize God and to think harshly of God, and that thought does come into our

minds sometimes.

Lord, shouldn't Moses have crossed over the line into the promised land? It seemed hard, didn't it? At the end of his life. But we must remember the Lord had something better for him.

[20 : 22] We cannot even begin to comprehend what Brad, Franklin and the children are going through. And the church and the friends of Meghan.

And yet we do know this, that the Lord has something better for Meghan. And the Lord's ways are perfect and he deals justly. And so we see that here with Moses.

Moses is not going to lose salvation. He's not going to lose heaven. He's actually going to appear with Elijah alongside Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

And yet he'll never enter the earthly kingdom of Canaan. The promised land he's worked for, he's traveled for it for so long. And the old man is now near death. He's been a shepherd of his people all his life.

And now into this shepherd's heart comes a yearning and a longing. He says, what's going to happen to the people when I'm taken away? What will happen to the people? And so he comes to God with what must be the true prayer of every Christian leader as he comes to the end of his life.

[21 : 30] Look at verses 16 and 17, chapter 27. Let the Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh appoint a man over this congregation, who shall go 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 a sheep that have no shepherd.

And God, he is saying, please would you give us someone who will come after me, a man, to lead these people? And what he's asking for is a warrior, a royal shepherd, something who will lead the people in war.

That's the meaning of the phrase, go out before and come in before them. That means leading them in battle. Leading them in war. To shepherd them and care for them. And the prayer is answered in Joshua.

God says in verse 18, he says, so the Lord said to Moses, take Joshua, the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, the spirit of God, and lay your hand on him.

And verse 19, make him stand before I lay his other priests and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in that sight. And you shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey.

[22 : 51] Joshua is a godly man in whom is the spirit of God, and he's going to prove to be an effective leader. And he's going to be the one that will lead them into the promised land, and they will take possession of the promised land.

God will always provide new leaders. God will always provide new leaders. And when the time comes for me to fall off my perch, and for the elders to gracefully retire, God will provide new leaders.

That's the hope of the people of God. God buries his best workers, but his work carries on. Joshua isn't going to be Moses.

Joshua isn't going to be the man that Moses was. Do you remember the Lord spoke to Moses face to face? Joshua was never given that privilege. Joshua received guidance from Eliezer.

He used the Urim and Theorem. We read in Deuteronomy that there was never a prophet like there was, like Moses. But we're being told here that Joshua is not going to be the ultimate answer.

[24 : 03] Joshua is not going to be the ultimate answer. Do you remember David? Even David, the greatest king of Israel, the shepherd, warrior, he's not going to be the ultimate answer. David's sin brought judgment on his people, and yet God was to promise such a leader to the people.

Ezekiel 34, 23 says, I will set over them one shepherd, and he will feed them, and he will be their shepherd. It's the promise of a warrior king, of a shepherd, well, who is fulfilled in the ultimate leader, isn't it?

The ultimate leader is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The one who says, I am the good shepherd. And the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

He is the leader. The warrior king, Revelation 19, verse 11. I saw heaven standing open, and there before me was a white horse whose rider was called Faithful and True.

And with justice he judges and wages war, and on his robe and on his thigh he has this name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And so here's our hope for the future, for 2019 or any other time.

[25 : 19] It's not just the new generation which is encouraging, not just the new spirit, because we can't depend on those things, but the leader. The leader.

Of ourselves we would never inherit the promised land. On our own, of ourselves we would never reach heaven. Left to ourselves, this should not truly be fruitful.

But we're not left by ourselves. Because we have a leader. Jesus, our King. He is our leader.

And he is the one that guides us through the wilderness of this world. And he overcomes our enemies, and he brings us safely to the journey's ends, to our eternal inheritance.

And so one of the prospects of the individual, and one of the prospects of the church, well they're bright. They are bright. Because of our leader. They're as bright as the power and faithfulness of the risen, reigning Lord.

[26 : 31] And we can say, the Lord is my shepherd. You are with me. And in God's house, forevermore, my dwelling place shall be.

Let's bow and pray.