

Numbers 1

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[0:00] The book of Numbers, three times Numbers is referenced in the New Testament. One is in a speech by Stephen in Acts 7. He refers to the church in the wilderness. That's the book of Numbers. Then in the book of Hebrews where warned that lest there be in us a heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. And he refers to what happened in the wilderness.

And in 1 Corinthians 10 the Apostle Paul gives us a summary of Numbers. In fact he gives us an outlined book of Numbers. And he gives us a number of reasons why you and I should study it. So I've asked Leslie to come and read 1 Corinthians chapter 10 and verses 1 to 13.

1 Corinthians chapter 10 and verses 1 to 13. I'm going to jump around the Bible for a lot tonight. So if you haven't got one do grab one at the back if there's any left. 1 Corinthians 10 and verses 1 to 13.

1 Corinthians 10 and verses 1 to 13.

2 Corinthians 10 and verses 1 to 14.

[1:55] 2 Corinthians 10 and verses 1 to 14.

3 Corinthians 10 and verses 1 to 14.

1 Corinthians 10 and verses 1 to 15. 1 Corinthians 10 and desde 15. 1 Corinthians 10 and desde 15. 1 Samuel 10 to 15. 1 Samuel 10 and desde 15. 6 they took place as examples not just for them but for us and they were written down as warnings for us so the book of Numbers is not a dusty old history book it is a remarkably relevant book it's an exciting book that's what he says in verse 4 what does it say the book of Numbers is about they drank the same spiritual drink as we drink for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ as they wandered around the wilderness it was Christ who wandered around the wilderness with them and so let's turn to Numbers chapter 1 Numbers chapter 1 I think I told you the story about the Russian lecture during communist times in the communist era that took place in Czech Republic or Czechoslovakia as it was then and there was a lecture where this atheist man he addressed a huge audience on the subject of the resurrection of Jesus and he tried to disprove the resurrection of Jesus and at the end an orthodox priest got up and he asked if he could respond in a few words he was told he could only have 5 minutes he said I don't need 5 minutes 5 seconds is all I need he turned to the audience and he gave them that traditional

Easter greeting Christ is risen back with a deafening roar came the traditional reply he is risen indeed he is risen indeed decades and decades and decades of atheistic communism could not destroy the faith of those people one of the greatest proofs for the existence of God is the church the survival of the church why does the church continue to exist today against all the odds think of the church in China in 1951 all the Christian missionaries the foreign missionaries were booted out they left approximately 3 million Christians today at a very conservative estimate there are at least 52 million Christians in China without the help of missionaries think of Korea the Korean church is probably the most missionary minded church in the world today and the Koreans suffered greatly under communism the church had a saying they said we're like nails the harder you hit us the deeper you drive us and today the Korean church is sending out missionaries all over the world why does the church continue to survive against the odds and the book of numbers tells us why Stephen in his speech in Acts chapter 7 speaks of the church in the wilderness where do you find the church in the wilderness it's in the book of numbers the Hebrew title is wilderness the wilderness book that's what numbers is about it covers the journey of God's people from Canaan to Sinai from Sinai to Canaan it's a journey that should have taken them 11 days but it took them 40 years so something has gone wrong and that is what Stephen describes as the church in the wilderness and that is where we are we have been redeemed we have been set free as they were

set free from Egypt we are on our way our way to the promised land of the new heavens and the new earth but at the moment we live in the wilderness and often we are between a rock and a hard place because the wilderness can be a very difficult place to be sometimes life can be very difficult sometimes there is fierce opposition in the wilderness and we need to remember who we are we are the church in the wilderness and we are not on our own in the wilderness because God is with us we are not on our own because he has brought us out of Egypt we are not where we were thank God we are not yet where we one day will be but God is travelling with us the church in the wilderness founded on the promise of God faithful to the purpose of God and fired by the presence of God number one founded on the promise of God look at verses 1 and 2 the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the tent of meeting on the first day in the second month in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt saying take a census count take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel by clans by father's house according to the number of names every male head by head one by one now why does God command Moses to number his people it happens twice in the book that's why it's called number it's not number it happens here in chapter 1 but it also happens in chapter 26 there's two census census is census whatever the plural is about and there's a message in the numbers the census is not senseless there's a reason for it now let me try and apply it to you this is the numbering of the people of God this is a people who were not a people but now they are a people and that is something worth noting here is something that has appeared in the world a people who were not a people but now they are a people they are God's people and where did they come from how did they come into existence to what do they owe their existence and the answer is the word of God the promise of God that just as God spoke the word in the beginning and the world was made out of nothing creation out of nothing that's the doctrine of creation there was nothing and God spoke and he imagined it and he spoke it into being he spoke the word and the world came into being so he spoke the word to Abraham and the people came into being out of nowhere so do you remember the promise to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 the first 11 chapters of Genesis are all about the history of the universe the cosmic in scale and then in Genesis 12 you go to one little man and the next 13 chapters are about Abraham and what God promises to Abraham leave your country and your father's household go to the land [9 : 45] I will show you and I will make you into a great nation I will bless you I will make your name great and you will be a blessing and I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you and all the people on earth will be blessed through you Abraham that is the gospel in advance according to Paul that's God's promise to Abraham to form him into a nation and to bring that nation into a land and through that nation in that land to bring bless him to the ends of the earth that's good news isn't it that's the gospel that is what God promised to do and now you come to the book of Numbers and it is materialising and here as we open Numbers we see that the promise is being kept they're not in the promised land no and yet God's promise is being kept here in Numbers before our very eyes is a nation who were once not a people but now they are the people of God what's then the point?

God keeps his promises you can trust the word of God you can't trust the word of a politician but you can trust the word of God God will always do what he says in verse 46 look at the numbers and all those listed were 603,550 that makes a nation that's the kind of men over 20 their heads that makes a nation of somewhere between 2 to 3 million do you see what is happening? David God says to Abraham you won't be able to count them in the end there'll be so many of them they'll be like the grains of the sand on the seashore there'll be more than the stars in the sky and already it's beginning to happen John of Exodus chapter 1 Joseph is already in Egypt isn't he? and Jacob and his sons they come down and do you know how many of them were at the start of the book of Exodus? these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob each with his household all the descendants of Jacob in Exodus 1 verse 5 were 70 persons 70 in all and Joseph was already in Egypt verse 8 of Exodus 1 now there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph and he said to his people behold the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us come let us deal shrewdly with them lest they multiply even though Pharaoh is trying to stamp them out even though Pharaoh is deliberately trying to adopt a policy of ethnic cleansing genocide to stop this nation God multiplies them in Egypt and so when they went into Egypt they were 70 but now in Numbers 1 there's 2 to 3 million of them how do you explain that there's God keeping his promise to Abraham and you can trust this God

God is as good as his word he is faithful and he will always do what he promises to do and that is both isn't it for us tonight both encouraging and scary because some of the things that God promises to do you wouldn't want to be on the other end of if you're not a Christian if you're not trusting in the Lord Jesus I'm sorry I'm going to have to take this off it's driving me mad I'm sorry is that fine I'll speak louder it's both scary and encouraging because if you're not trusting in the Lord Jesus you will not want to be on the receiving end of God's anger but if you trust in the Lord Jesus you will have eternal life and you can count on that you can trust God's word there's nothing more sure than it he is faithful another thing about these numbers it's not it only shows us that he's faithful to his word but it shows us how much God cares for his people you know when a child you go on a school trip and you have to wear one of those bibs you have an orange bib or a bib and when you get on the bus and off the bus or into the post office or in the cafe the teacher or the teaching assistant what do they do they count you all the time not they they're always counting you they count you in and they count you out why do they do that it's not good enough is it if the teacher comes back and says well I got 98% of the class back with me or I got 84% of the class it's not good enough if you're a teacher you can lose your job if you leave a child scrambling on the E3 they are responsible you remember the parable of the good shepherd who leaves the 99 in the fold and he goes after the one who is lost because that's what shepherds do because shepherds count their sheep don't they and shepherds know how many sheep they have and so the shepherd leaves the 99 in the fold and he goes looking for the one that is wandering and shepherds count their sheep because their sheep are valuable to them and it's their job to look after them and God is the great shepherd isn't he the Lord is my shepherd and so he numbers his people and it's not surprising is it in the new testament

[15:13] Jesus says my father your heavenly father he doesn't just number you he numbers the hairs on your head that's how much he cares for you tonight he doesn't know just how many people are here in this room he knows how many hairs are on your head and God is saying to us as we look at this long list of names God is saying to us in these numbers you can trust his word he's doing what he says he was going to do he cares for these people he knows his sheep he counts them I know who you are I know where you come from I know your name I formed you in your mother's womb I know how many you are I know your needs so let me ask you as we start this book and we move on are you numbered amongst the people of God the book of numbers should excite us this list of names is a list that should interest us when I came to the school rugby team on a

Wednesday morning the list went up on the board and you ran to the board to see if your name was on the list if you were in the team proud parents look in the newspaper don't they when the results are there and they scan the results to see their child frightened loved ones will scan the internet and they look at the list of names of those still to be accounted for when there's been a terrorist disaster families wait with strained faces for lists to be published there's life and death isn't there in some of those lists of names that we see on the internet sometimes the stakes are high so let me ask you are you numbered amongst the people of God do you belong with the people in the wilderness has God rescued you out of Egypt and set you free from your sins yes you're in the wilderness but do you have a future and a hope do you know that you have eternal life when you die and in the wilderness do you know that even the most difficult place and the most frightening place you will know

God's presence with you and we're going to see that in the book of numbers there are great stories in the book of numbers stories you've probably forgotten fleshing out what a wonderful thing it is to belong to the people of God firstly founded on the promises of God he speaks them out of nowhere and that's where we come from as a church it is the word of God that has brought us into being diverse people from different backgrounds and different temperaments and different nationalities but God has spoken his word and gathers his people together the church secondly faithful to the purposes of God at least that is what they were called to do they failed as we'll see that's why there are two censuses and numbers one and then numbers 26 are separated by 40 years and there's a lost generation in that now listen to me because there may well be a lost generation in this congregation there was a lost generation in numbers the total number in the second census when you look at it is pretty much the same as the number in the first census but listen not a single person from the first census is in the second census apart from two people Caleb and Joshua the whole generation that came out of Egypt missed out on the promised land and the writer says do you know why they missed out they missed out because of unbelief so come

with me to Hebrews chapter 3 Hebrews chapter 3 let me read you what it says it says to you and I take care brothers and sisters there's both ways lest there be in any of you an evil unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God but exhort one another every day as long as it is called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin that's what happened in the wilderness and the writer to Hebrews remedy is meet up with one another come and hear the word of God speak the word of God to one another you're in real danger unless you've got someone speaking the word of

God to you so he says in verse 13 he says exhort one another every day as long as it is called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin for we have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end verse 16 for who were those who heard and yet rebelled who were they was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses and with whom was he provoked for 40 years was it not those who sinned whose bodies fell in the wilderness and whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest but to those who were disobedient so we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief chapter 4 verse 9 on the same subject says for whoever has entered!

[20 : 42] let us therefore strive to enter that rest isn't that brilliant? I don't know if you've thought about that I haven't got time to look at it therefore strive work hard to enter that rest do you get that?

so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience for the word of God is living and active sharper than any two-edged sword piercing to the division of soul and of spirit of joints and of marrow and discerning thoughts and intentions of the heart that is massive isn't it?

that is a warning to you and I in the book of Numbers that's why Moses wrote the book of Numbers to call the people back to God to enlist them to mobilize them to call this second generation back to God after the first generation had blown it back to numbers 1 verse 2 take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel by clans by father's house according to the number of names every male had by hand from 20 years old and upwards all in Israel were able to go to war you and Aaron shall list them company by company and when you go through the list and 14 times we're told about people who are enlisted in the army what is he doing?

God is mustering an army John Scott way back in the 1950s he's a minister in all souls he's reported in the Newtimes newspaper in 1953 he said this until every Christian becomes enthusiastic for Christ as every communist is for his party's propaganda we will not see our country transformed the manpower he said is there drowsily slumbering in the pews it's not the western church slumbering drowsily in their seats and that's why we need the book of numbers because the book of numbers is a call to wake up and it's a call for us to stand up and it's a call to be counted it's a call to arms it's a call to act on the promises of God and take possession of God look at chapter 2 he's taken the census he's enlisted all these people into the army of Israel and then we read there in verse 1 of chapter 1 and 2 of chapter 2 book of

Exodus book of numbers chapter 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 father's house and they shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side who is this in the wilderness it's an awesome sight it's an awesome sight isn't it in verse 2 of chapter 2 of the people of God mobilised we scarcely know what that looks like chapter 24 there's a false prophet it's a famous story of Balaam Balaam is being paid to prophesy against Israel and he does so reluctantly and he's intimidated by what he sees he's impressed against his will and when he's taken to view the camp of Israel in chapter 4 just listen to what he says what is written in Numbers 24 verse 2

[23 : 56] Balaam lifted up his eyes and he saw Israel camping tribe by tribe and the spirit of God came upon him and he took up his discourse and he said the oracle of Balaam the son of Peor the oracle of the man whose eyes opened the oracle of him who hears the words of God who sees the vision of the almighty falling down with his eyes uncovered how lovely are your tents so Jacob your encampments so Israel like palm groves that stretch afar like gardens beside a river like aloes that the Lord has planted like cedar trees beside the waters water shall flow from his buckets and his seed shall be in many waters his king shall be higher than Agag and his kingdom shall be exalted and God brings him out of Egypt and his fame like the horns of the wild ox he shall eat up the nations his adversaries and he shall break their bones in pieces and pierce them through with his arrows he crouched he lay down like a lion and like a lioness who will rouse him up blessed are those who bless you and cursed are those who curse you that is the church it's the church in the wilderness that's the people of

God who are fulfilling the purposes of God there's nothing been seen like it before it's like a mighty army the church of God the church militant that's why we're called that martin Lloyd Jones used to describe the church as a barrack for soldiers not a hospital for six saints now there is a place for six saints but for many of us we sit around nursing our grievances and licking our wounds instead of getting on with what God has called us to do Moses wrote numbers to call God's people to fulfil God's purpose which is to win the world for Christ and that is what God has called us to do to build this church that's what God said to Moses in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed that's what we're called to do we're a lot further down the track and these people were in numbers but the battle is the same it's the battle to bless the world the church is to go into all the world preaching the good news baptising in the name of the father the son and the holy spirit and making disciples of every nation there's a lovely story in numbers 10 just come there with me such a great book numbers chapter 10

Moses said to Hobab I've been trying to work out how Moses is related to Hobab I still can't work it out but the interesting thing is Moses said to Hobab the Midianites numbers 10 and verse 29 Moses said to Hobab the son of the Midianite Moses father in all we are setting out for the place of which the Lord said I will give it to you come with us and we will do good to you for the Lord has promised good to Israel but he said to him I will not go out back to my own land and my kindred and he said please do not leave us for you so they set out that's just a lovely picture of the book of numbers in miniature come with us come with us God's people we know where we're going don't we the book of numbers is so that there will no longer be hangers on a kind of adherence or kind of connected to the people of

God Moses is saying to Hobab you've got natural gifts you've got experience in the wilderness think how God can use you you'll be useful to us we know where we're going we're going the promised man and God is going to bless us and you can share in those blessings so let me say to some of you tonight you will hang us on you come regularly we're absolutely delighted you come regularly but you're you're not committed to the Lord Jesus Christ come with us another message of the gospel come with us don't stay on the fringes it's a matter of life and death tonight there's so much stake here there's so much blessing to have come in amongst us come with us that is the message we have for healing and green and parable come with us for our work colleagues we're on our way come and join the church come on Sunday we're not going round in circles we're not on the treadmill of life we know where we're heading

God has called us to the new heavens and the new earth we have something to look forward to come come and join us so what we must be saying here is the church in the wilderness founded on the promises of God faithful to the purpose of God and lastly fired by the presence of God look again at verse 1 verse 1 can you see it's fascinating in the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the tent of meeting where did the Lord speak to Moses in the tent of meeting there is a tent of meeting it's a wonderful thing there is a place for those people to meet with God or for God to meet with them so what distinguishes the people of Israel from every other nomadic tribe who were wandering round and round in the wilderness it's what distinguishes us from people that are not Christians there is a place for us to meet with God and for

[29 : 36] God to meet with us it doesn't have a steeple or a pipe organ or pews or seats it is Jesus we have Jesus in our lives we have Jesus in our midst the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the tent of meeting it makes all the difference doesn't it look at verse 47 what you have here at the end of those verses at the end of this chapter is a description of setting up the tabernacle the Levites the priestly tribe they were responsible for the kind of setting up and the dismantling the tabernacle the tent of meeting and right there in the middle of the tribe the tribes are arranged around it as you read through chapter 2 you see all the four points of the compass are there north, east, south and west and the tribes are gathered round the tent of meeting and there's a buffer zone of Levite priests protecting the tent and the protocols and the regulations so the tent is protected but right in the middle is God in the tent of meeting

God's presence central geographically but in every other way Dave Allen Billy Allen's dad he was an Irish comedian he was a pretty blasphemous bloke but he ended every routine with may your God go with you may your God go with you that's a different numbers our God does go with us and that is what we're going to see in the book of Numbers fleshed out in many ways our God travels with his people Tertullian in the second century wrote this he describes the church in his days it's really good to hear this it's a great corrective to the individualism of our day he says about the

church we are a society with a common religious feeling unity of discipline a common bond of hope we meet gathering and congregating to approach God in prayer massing our forces to surround him this violence that we do him pleases

God it's a great view of the church we mass our forces to surround him that is the picture of Numbers 1 and 2 God is in the midst and his people surrounding him on every side coming together approaching him in prayer there's a unity of discipline a common bond of hope that is the glory of the church of the wilderness not Numbers but God's presence in the midst you know if you read your Bible there's another place in the Bible where there's another census 1 Samuel 24 and we're told that God incited David to take a census of Israel but it was a judgment on Israel because God was angry with them and it was a bad thing that David did but this is a good thing that Moses did how did Moses get away with numbering the people when David didn't what's the difference well the difference is this David numbered the people out of pride and out of a sense of self-congratulation and God will never stand for that he says my glory

I will not give to another he says that David's sin was imagining that the strength of Israel lay in its numbers and manpower but God himself is the strength of his people and that is huge applications for us today isn't it let's not play the numbers game it is God's presence we need in God's church we don't measure God's blessing by counting heads or by logging how many people go onto the website God save us from such a narcissism God save us from leaders that are really self-congratulating leaders no we need don't we the sort of motivation of Exodus chapter 33 who after the golden calf episode Moses goes and he prays for the people and God says to him in Exodus chapter 33 he says in verse 2 I will send an angel before you I will drive out the cave lands the Amorites the Hittites the Parasites go up to a land flowing with milk and honey but then he says God says but I will not go up among you lest I consume you for you are a stiff necked people God says to Moses Moses you go up you go up and you take the promised land but I will come with you and if God doesn't come with us it's not the promised land anymore is it so God goes Moses goes on to pray and pleads with God in verse 14 of Exodus 33 let me read it to you and he said my presence will go with you and I will give you rest and he said to Moses said to God if your presence will not go with me do not bring us up from here if you don't come with us Moses says we're not going and that is the kind of desperation that I think we need in Christ church Robert Roberts of Clannog he was a preacher in 18th century

[35 : 01] Wales he was one of the Methodist preachers a funny man really and he was down to preach and there were two or three preachers it was one of the kind of preaching days it was a great kind of celebration and Robert Roberts was doing a preacher couldn't find him anywhere kept singing because they thought he'd turn up but he hadn't turned up and eventually somebody said he's in his lodgings in his bed and breakfast and somebody went to knock on the door and they found Robert Roberts talking in his room to someone and he was saying as they stood by the door I will not go unless you come with me I will not go unless you come with me they thought there was someone in there with him and there was he could not face standing in front of a congregation on his own I'm not going to do it unless you come with me and that not only applies to preaching does it but it applies to the whole of our life the whole of church life we dare not go forward unless God is with us we can have all the trappings of religions we can have a great new building but unless

God comes with us it's a total mockery John White said God's portrait has place of honour in our boardroom but he is chairman emeritus we don't even miss him church in London has its programs and has its term cards and all too often we get carried along by our own momentum a brand new building what is the point if God doesn't come with us numbers is real and very relevant you can be so busy you can be so active in church life you can do all sorts of things and the Christian world is really impressed with that but unless God is in it it's pointless that's why he's at the prayer meeting so important that we come en masse as a congregation to plead with God that we say to him we will not go forward Lord unless you bless us and so when we read numbers two things we will be shocked firstly and we will be embarrassed because as you read the book of numbers and as you engage with it you realise that you're not actually looking through a window you're looking in the mirror and you discover that there are people just like us who complain and murmur about their leaders they rebel they give way to doubts they give in to the majority they prefer the wilderness for now to the promised land they long to go back to Egypt even the good old days before they were even redeemed it's not like looking at a tribe of quaint old nomads we see ourselves and how can God live amongst such a people like that and like us the gospel tells us that

God himself has shared in our wilderness wonder that's the note to end on that in the beginning was the word and the word was with God face to face with God and the word was made flesh and literally John 1 verse 14 says God tabernacled amongst us the word tabernacled amongst us that is who Jesus is Jesus is the tent of meeting he is the tabernacle and he began his ministry do you remember where he began his ministry he began his ministry in the wilderness he was sent by the spirit into the wilderness where his people had wandered around for 40 years and he was sent for the symbolic 40 days and he was tempted as the people were tempted but this Israel the true Israel did not fail and this Israel did not falter and though he faced the same temptations he never complained he never murmured he never grumbled he never doubted he passed the test and he entered the promised land and he did it on our behalf and he did it for us and he did it in our place and you will discover as I have discovered in the book of numbers much to your delight that this book is all about Jesus the gospel isn't

Jesus made it in the wilderness so you can too that's not the gospel the gospel is Jesus went through the wilderness for you and he will bring you safely to God's presence let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray