

Hearing the Voice of God

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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Bible Text: Numbers 7:1-89
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You know, I couldn't have asked for a better transition when he said about 1,262. I don't know what about that is, that's pretty exact, brother, but he mentioned that there is a Bible, that they are and have presented to the church that we're going to be able to keep from time on end, and as he mentioned it's the word of God from cover to cover, it even has some special helps in the back for the questions that people ask, but there is something very unique to this Bible is that a lot of people who stepped foot on this campus for the very first time in their lives from a lot of different places, took time not only to give us their names but to give us an encouraging note and maybe even to cite a favorite Scripture verse. The reason that is important and the reason that is unique not just to the last three weeks but also to the message today, is that every name that is in those pages, the fly leaves at the front and the back, are names that you probably were not aware of apart from three weeks ago. They may be from locations that you have never nor do you ever plan on visiting, and if we had given you a list of those names a month ago, they would have meant nothing to you, it's just a name, it's just a location, it's just a census, for lack of better terms, but now that they've been a part of our community, now that they've been a part of our lives, now that they've sat at the table with us for a meal, now that they have lived in our Sunday school rooms, now as they have deployed from our parking lot, their lives, their stories, their name and their location even mean something more special to us. It is with that transition that I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Numbers 7.

For those of you that our guests or visitors with us, I want to encourage you if not already to join us on a very special journey. It's about a three year journey in length where we as a family of faith are walking through the Scriptures, typically a chapter maybe two chapters a day, and over the last week we have been invited and hopefully you have been participating in probably the second most dreaded section of this journey. We got through Leviticus and we all survived but now we're in Numbers and it is the book of Numbers that has this stigma to it, not just those of you that are fearful of mathematics and such, but when you begin to read the book of Numbers, let's just admit it, let's confess it, let's get it out there, it is not that exciting, is it? I will prepare you though, by the time you get to chapter 11, it gets pretty good. But what we call the book of Numbers, we do so because there is not one, there are actually two censuses that are contained therein and we discover that the number of Israelites and those that gathered with them that came out of

Egypt numbered 603,550 men over age 20 plus their wives and their children, their livestock, etc. This incredible group of people, they come out of Egypt, they go across what we know as the Red Sea on dry ground and the book of Numbers is not just a collection of names, locations and ages, the book of Numbers is actually the story of the Israelites as they went through the experience that we call the wilderness. So it's easy to look at this as just a census of names or a list of places but what I want to challenge you to do, particularly as we go forward in this study, is to see their story as your story.

We've all been in a wilderness, have we not? Sometimes that wilderness was a corporate wilderness, sometimes it was an individual wilderness, sometimes it was longer than expected. How many of you have had a three-year wilderness experience but it felt like 40? We've all had those moments in life where we felt like we were wandering throughout the desert of life, wondering if God even knew our location or even cared at all. That is the story of the book of Numbers and, guess what, that's oftentimes our story as well.

When we come to Numbers 7, we actually find ourselves in the second longest chapter in the Bible. Next to Psalm 119, this is the longest chapter. There are 89 verses in chapter 7 of the book of Numbers. If we read them all today that's all we would do before the service ended so we're not going to do so but I want to address a very important subject matter, whether you're in the wilderness of life or not, this is an important question to ask: how do we hear the voice of God, but particularly when we're in the wilderness? When we pray and it feels like it bounces off the ceiling? When we shout out and all we hear is the echo of our own voice?

I would encourage you to fast-forward to the very last verse of Numbers 7:89. Allow me to give you kind of a context here. The Israelites are in what we know as wilderness, the tabernacle that was begun in Exodus 25 and it was dedicated in Exodus 40, it has been constructed at the hand of Moses and the Israelites and what we experience in chapter 7 are the people of God preparing to hear the voice of God. In verse 89 it says,

89 And when Moses was gone into the tabernacle of the congregation to speak with him, then he heard the voice of one speaking unto him from off the mercy seat that was upon the ark of testimony, from between the two cherubims: and he spake unto him.

Now there's an old joke, you may or may not be familiar with it, if you want to know the words of God, read the Bible, if you want to hear the voice of God, read it out loud. I don't know if you've ever heard that one before, but that being said, when we read a verse like this to hear the voice of God, how does that happen in our lives? How does that happen in the wilderness of life?

Let me invite you to turn possibly multiple pages over to the first verse of chapter 7 in this very long chapter of the Bible and I want to begin in verse 1 just reading the first 9 verses. It kind of allows us to make some observations, shall we say, about this hearing the voice of God. It says,

1 And it came to pass on the day that Moses had fully set up the tabernacle, and had anointed it, and sanctified it, and all the instruments thereof, both the altar and all the vessels thereof, and had anointed them, and sanctified them; 2 That the princes of Israel, heads of the house of their fathers, who were the princes of the tribes, and were over them that were numbered, offered: 3 And they brought their offering before the LORD, six covered wagons, and twelve oxen; a wagon for two of the princes, and for each one an ox: and they brought them before the tabernacle. 4 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 5 Take it of them, that they may be to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation; and thou shalt give them unto the Levites, to every man according to his service. 6 And Moses took the wagons and the oxen, and gave them unto the Levites. 7 Two wagons and four oxen he gave unto the sons of Gershon, according to their service: 8 And four wagons and eight oxen he gave unto the sons of Merari, according unto their service, under the hand of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest. 9 But unto the sons of Kohath he gave none: because the service of the sanctuary belonging unto them was that they should bear upon their shoulders.

And you read those 9 verses and it's simply an introduction to this kind of odd story that over the next 12 days each of the tribes of Israel, each of the princes, the head of the families of these tribes, is going to come on a consecutive specific day and make a very specific offering unto the Lord. But in these 9 verses, I want you to see just some basic observations of how the Lord operates not just in their life but in ours as well.

I want you to notice the attitude of God. His attitude is simply this, he wants to speak not just into their lives but into ours. In fact, back in Exodus 25:8 when the tabernacle was first begun, in verse 8 the Lord made this statement, "Do all this so that I may dwell with you," and what we understand here is that it was much more than the spoons and the shekels of material and the specific day the specific tribe came, we need to understand that the Lord's desire in our lives is he wants to be in a real and active relationship in our life. It's more than building a tent, it's more than bringing certain objects on a certain day, the purpose is verse 89, "so that he might speak into and voice his voice into our life."

What's interesting about that attitude is the way in which he implements it. Notice it says that among these 12 tribes and princes there is going to be the allocation, and it may not seem significant to you but I promise you it was to them, a certain amount of oxen and a certain amount of wagons, so to speak, but did you notice it didn't work out quite exactly mathematically? I mean, you read it and you say, "Oh, that's okay, every prince, you know, he's going to share with another one and then they're all going to have their own oxen," but then when the Lord begins to divide it out, the first one gets the normal allotment, the second one gets a double fold, and the third guy says he gets none.

Now let me bring this to real life for a moment. I'm sure many of you are familiar with, or maybe not, the story of what we know as the prodigal son. It's found in Luke 15. It's the

story of a young man who decides he knows more than his own earthly dad. It's a picture of us in our relationship with God. He demands of his dad that he should get his inheritance. He goes and he wastes it in what the Bible calls riotous living. Then you know the incredible story of redemption where he comes to his senses and his father forgives him and he gives him the family cloak and the ring.

A few months ago, that was the story that was told in our student ministry here during the Sunday school hour church, and after church like we often do, we'll be sitting around the dinner table and kind of talking about, you know, who was there, who wasn't there, what friends, what did you study or whatever, and one of my sons, in fact I think it's very strategic to tell you it was my youngest son, he brought up the story that they had studied, the prodigal son, and he wasn't interested in hearing about him coming to his senses, he wasn't interested in him talking about all the pigs that he was feeding, he said, "Dad, I need to talk to you about how that whole allotment of the finances went." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Is it true," and you know when your child asks you that, you know you're in trouble, he goes, "Is it true that back in those days the first son got two thirds of the estate, the second son got one third of the estate, and the third son got nothing?" Now this is my third son asking the question and I said, "Son, I hate to tell you that but, yeah, exactly." He goes, "That stinks." And I said, "Aren't you grateful it's the 21st century?"

And the thing that that teaches us and what we realize here even in the book of Numbers is that when the Lord desires to commune with us – hear me clearly – he knows what environment is best for our ears to hear his voice. Sometimes we need a double fold and sometimes we need nothing at all. How many times are we guilty of saying, "Because it doesn't look the way I pictured it, he must not care"? This one family didn't have a single wagon, the other one had twice as many as what we perceive they should of, and yet it's the same voice and the same communication.

It reminds me of 1 Corinthians 13 where the Lord talks about that he gives unto us spiritual gifts. Have you ever struggled with what I call spiritual gift envy? Why did they get that one and why am I stuck with this one? Do you know what the irony is? That whoever you're saying that about, it's reversed in their life. They probably wish they had yours and vice versa, and we are oftentimes guilty of saying, "But it doesn't look the way I wanted it to." If you and I are going to hear the voice of God, one of the observations that we've got to make is that in spite of our circumstances, in spite of our environment, his desire to speak into our lives is no less or no more than if it looked the way we wish it did.

The second thing I want you to notice from this passage, it begins in verse 10 and we're not going to read 78 straight verses, I promise you, but hopefully you've already done so, is we discover that there is a very specific order to the way that God does things. Over the next 78 verses, it's going to be a certain day of the week, a very specific tribe, a certain amount of weight of a certain item in a specific vessel that is brought in a certain manner, and I think we're all guilty at some point as we read these stories in the Bible and we think they are pointless. Why does God care that it's a certain weight of a substance and a

certain vessel on a certain day? Why is that important? Let me tell you why it's important: it's important because we need to understand that we don't have the privilege of being the tail to wag the proverbial dog; we are not in the position to say, "Hey, God, I think it would be better if you did it this way." You see, that is what got us messed up in the garden of Eden. We think we know how to do better, do we not? And one of the reasons the Lord asks us to do it in a certain manner, in a certain way, is not only because he's God and we're not but he knows – hear me – he knows what we need to remove the distractions and to remove the false communication so that our focus is on him and him alone.

Now if you've read through this passage, there's a certain place where they have a certain item in a certain spoon and they're carrying it and I'm reminded, you know the egg race that we do as kids where you have the egg and the spoon and you're trying not to drop it and you're paying close attention? If you've ever done that, you can't focus on anything but that which is in front of you and that, my friends, is the best way to hear the voice of God, when there's nothing competing and it's only him that is speaking.

What do we see happen? Each one of the 12 tribes whether they had a double fold blessing or from our perspective none at all, they all received the same communication, they all received the same opportunity at the specified day that the Lord chose for them. Why is this important? Because what we discover is this, that nobody was overlooked. Nobody. You see, we oftentimes say, "Well, they're blessed more than I am. Maybe God listens and talks to them more than me." No, not so, for we discover that he spoke with each of them individually in the same manner, and even though they came on a specific day, in a specific manner, they all received – listen – equal access to the communication of God. This is so important for us to hear because we live in a world that loves to make disorder out of order and say, "Well, it would be better if we just all did it at the same time. It would be more efficient. Or this group needs to go in front of that group because they're larger and/or smaller."

You know, the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 14:33 God is not the author of confusion, and yet we struggle with that because we want to somehow make it all about what we think would be a better means of doing things. Let me give you a case in point. We live in a world today that oftentimes people will say, "Well, it doesn't matter what somebody believes as long as they're sincere, as long as it's heartfelt, as long as their motive appears to be genuine. Who are we to say that they are wrong?" And yet what did Jesus Christ say in John 14? "I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life, nobody comes to the Father but by me." We may be sincere but we might be sincerely wrong according to how the Lord has ordered things.

So we see here in Numbers 7 not only the Lord's desire to communicate and speak into our lives but he does so in a very specific manner. They did not have the right or the privilege to go beyond what he said or to write the script themselves. They follow his script and they receive his communication, which leads us back to verse 89, the opportunity that each and every one of us has as we picture ourselves in the story of the Israelites walking through the wilderness of life. It says in verse 89, "when Moses was

gone into the tabernacle of the congregation to speak with him, then he heard the voice of one speaking unto him from off the mercy seat that was upon the ark of testimony, from between the two cherubims: and he spake unto him." What we see here, the opportunities for you and I to allow our lives to be there in verse 89, and I think the first thing to grasp when it comes to the opportunity is that the Lord's desire, and I know it seems repetitive, is all this was not done just so that it could be accomplished. God was not checking off some heavenly checklist to say, "Got all 12. Got all the shekels. Got all the instruments." No, he did this and he orchestrated it so that they would have the opportunity to be in fellowship, to be in communion with, and to have a relationship with, and it's that part in the middle of the verse that is so strategic, the mercy seat. You see, the Israelites had the same problem that you and I have, they had a sin problem, they had a rebellion problem. They didn't like the way that God set up things, they thought they were smarter and wiser than God just like the garden of Eden, just like in your life. How many times have you known what God would want for your life and you said, "Yeah, but I think I've got a better idea"?

We're no different than they were. In fact, it was these same individuals who made the same offerings that within 11 days of being in the wilderness said, "Did God bring us out here to kill us in the desert? We were better off in Egypt." Now think about that. They had seen death. They had seen destruction. They had seen God deliver them in the land of Goshen, through the Red Sea, but they still doubted, they still struggled, they still questioned which is why the mercy seat was so important. What was the mercy seat? In spite of the tent that was built, in spite of all the shekels of all the material, it was that place in the midst of the tabernacle where the shed blood of an innocent animal would be given as a picture of the forgiveness of their sins and the atonement.

You know, as you read through chapter 7 of Numbers, 252 animals were utilized in that means. It's a picture that is somewhat disturbing at best, but you know, it's an incredible picture of the mercy seat of today. You see, when we talk about the mercy seat today, the Bible says it's not about bulls and bullocks and goats and turtledoves, it's about the fact that approximately 2,000 years ago Jesus Christ allowed himself to be the mercy seat. He allowed himself to have his blood shed. He was mocked, he was made fun of, he was placed on that cruel cross so that we could receive mercy. You know what mercy is, right? Mercy is not getting what you rightfully deserve. What did the Israelites deserve? I'm going to tell you what they deserved: death, destruction and damnation. By the way, the same goes for us too. They deserved to either be shipped back to Egypt or to die immediately but the Lord extended mercy. You know, each and every one of us today is a testimony of mercy. We've all rebelled. We've all messed up. We've all gone down paths we shouldn't have gone. But this story pictures for us what Jesus Christ willingly did on behalf of us.

You know, I know a lot of times we read through the Old Testament, particularly these portions, and we say, "How is this relevant to my life? How does this help me tomorrow when I go to work?" But yet these stories of God providing in days past show us how he desires to provide in days present. The mercy seat has already had the blood spilt upon

and you and I can again have a right relationship with the Lord that we forfeited with our own rebellion.

But the last thing I want you to notice is the very end of verse 89, it says, "and he spoke with him." We don't have the exact words, we don't know exactly what was said, and even though there is a period at the end of verse 89, there is a question in my mind what was said, what was addressed, what was spoken. You know, the only book in your Bible that ends with a question mark is the book of Jonah, a very famous story of a rebellious prophet swallowed by the whale, spit up on the beach, goes and he does obedience in spite of those whom he's preaching to, the Ninevites repent, he gets upset, the tree withers and he pouts. That's Jonah in four seconds or less. But at the very end of the book of Jonah, he is under this tree, he's pouting, he's whining and it ends with a question mark. Why? Because we don't really know the end of his story. We don't know what happened to Jonah post his Ninevite crusade and revival. It's kind of like this story. We don't know exactly what was said, we don't know exactly what was heard, we don't exactly know and the reason I believe is because if we knew exactly what Moses said and exactly what he heard, we'd somehow put it in print and we'd recite it in a repetitive prayer. "Somehow if I just say these magic words, I'll get what he got." And what we discover is that if we do it according to God's way and we accept the blood that was shed on that mercy seat, then we have communion and relationship with him and the question mark is, have you found yourself in that position in that place where that has happened in your life, where rather than becoming someone who just checks off boxes of religion, you're in an active, living, breathing relationship with him? It's up to you.

Let's pray.

With our heads bowed and our eyes closed, you know, maybe you're that individual today, maybe you're that person for whatever reason comes to a point like right now and says, "You know, this has never taken place in my life, there's never been a time in my life where I've quit trying to do it on my own and just trusted Jesus Christ alone." I've got great news for you, the Bible says in Romans 10 whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. You may ask yourself, "How does that happen? What does that look like?" Can I encourage you this morning just to have a conversation with the Lord. I know technically we would call it prayer and I would encourage you to have this conversation and not vocally necessarily out of your lips but with your heart, and it doesn't have to be the exact words maybe that I might say, it's not some kind of rote prayer. This is the cry of your heart to a living, merciful, forgiving God who wants more than anything for the sin that is hindering you in your life to be removed and his relationship with you to be restored. So maybe that conversation would sound a little something like this, "God, I just want you to know that I believe what you know to be true about me, I'm the problem. I've messed up, done things I should have never done. I've said things I should have never said. I've thought things I should have never thought. But I believe today that the only solution, the only answer to that sin problem is Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to pay

the price for my sins on his cross. And I believe three days later Jesus Christ rose from the dead so that that mercy and that grace and that salvation could be placed into my life. God, today I don't have all the answers to the problems of life but I do believe that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem, so the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads bowed and our eyes closed, if you're that individual today who had that conversation with the Lord, we'd love to celebrate with you. We'd love to have just a conversation with you. Or maybe you're here today, maybe you're already a believer, maybe there are other walls of obstruction, maybe there are other issues of life, maybe you need to pray with somebody, maybe there's another decision to be made, maybe you need to follow in believers' baptism as we saw displayed in this service, or maybe you're one of those who I have the privilege of talking with every week who say this is the family of faith the Lord has called us or me to. We'd just love to celebrate with you.

Lord, as we come to this time in our service, thank you that you are a God of mercy, and as your word says in the book of Isaiah, that there is no thing that we've done or place that we've gone that your hand of mercy is not long enough to extend therein. Lord, may we put away the excuses of the world, may we put aside the doubts of life, and may we be today as those Israelites who simply stared at that item just maybe a few inches or a foot away from themselves, and may our focus be on what you desire and not the voices of competition. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us, whatever decision we'll be right here at the front.