

Message #2**Numbers 1:1-54**

Times were exciting for Israel when this book of Numbers opens. According to **verse 1**, Israel had been out of Egypt for one year and one month. She had set up a national campground at Mt. Sinai and had built a Tabernacle, established a Priesthood so she could worship God. God had given Israel His law in Exodus and Leviticus and the nation was getting ready to move to the Promised Land.

Exactly one month after the completion of the Tabernacle, **verse 1** opens with a statement that is critical to the book of Numbers: “the LORD spoke to Moses.” As one writer said, don’t “dismiss that statement casually.” This fact that “the LORD spoke to Moses” is stressed in Numbers more than any other book. **That point is specifically stressed over 150 times in the book of Numbers.** Jehovah is speaking to Moses and He will speak through Moses. **Numbers is a book in which God speaks.**

So all Israel would need to do was to listen to Moses as he would speak the Word of God to them and obey it and she would be led to the great blessings of God. If she would listen to what Moses communicated to them, she would have a great journey filled with blessing upon blessing.

What that reveals to us is if God’s people are going to move forward and get to where God wants them to go, they will need to listen to God’s Word accurately communicated. These people were not going to make it to the great blessings of God in the Promised Land on their own. To get there they need Moses and they need to listen to what he has to say because the LORD is speaking to him. In this first chapter it is clear that the people need to carefully follow his instruction or they are not going to make it. Truth is they don’t make it. That’s the problem.

This is a key point in any dispensation: God’s Word needs to be obeyed if God’s people are going to end up where they are supposed to be. God’s Word is to be carefully communicated and the Word of God must be obeyed and if God’s people obey His Word, He will take them to wonderful blessings. This is the point Israel has missed.

Now the point of chapter 1 is not too difficult to see:

GOD COMMANDS THAT HIS PEOPLE BE NUMBERED FOR WAR PURPOSES AND HE ALSO DEMANDS THAT THE LEVITES BE SEPARATED FOR TABERNACLE PURPOSES.

What we see from this thesis statement is that all of God’s people do have responsibilities. God knows and numbers each person and each has some job to do. Not all responsibilities are the same, but all have responsibilities. God has a plan, a place and a purpose for everyone and everyone needs to do his or her part in the plan and program of God.

Now the chapter breaks down into five key parts:

PART #1 – The command to Moses to number the men for war purposes. 1:1-3

The first census to be taken is to be taken for the purpose of organizing for war. Getting to where God wants His people to go will be a war and there needs to be those who are faithful soldiers, who will fight it.

The command of God came to Moses and told him to take a numbering census of all of the sons of Israel, every male, head by head and one by one (1:2). We are people who are fascinated with documented lists. Some of us read the sports page and we read the lists of names and the stats. Many people read the list of obituaries to see the list of people who have died and read data about them. The lists here are lists of those names of people dedicated to God, who are willing to do something for God.

Nine months before this census was taken, Moses had taken a previous census, not for war purposes, but for a tax to the Lord purpose (Ex. 30:11-16; 38:25-26). God wanted every one of His people to invest in His work and tabernacle and that was the purpose of that numbering, which actually turns out to be identical with this numbering (603,550 - Ex. 38:26/Num. 1:46).

The purpose of this numbering, that is stated over and over again, is that they are taking this numbering ancestry census to determine the number of men who are 20 years of age and older who are capable of going to war. So this is a registration for military service. This point is stressed 14 times in this chapter (vv. 3, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 45). See this was the plan.

The plan was to number them and get this show on the road. The plan was to get these guys numbered and send them out to war to take the Promised Land and enjoy the blessings of God. That is the plan and that is the purpose of this numbering.

So the purpose of this is to identify the numbers of warriors who would be able to immediately serve in battle when Israel entered the Land. When Israel would get to the Promised Land you would need fighters.

Most people don't want to think that life in a right relationship with God is a warfare. Most want to think that Christian life is a life of serenity. Yet when one reads Exodus 15:3 that says, "The LORD is a warrior" and when we read the New Testament military images used by Paul (Rom. 8:31; Eph. 6:10-18; II Cor. 10:3-5; I Cor. 9:7; II Tim. 2:1-4), it is obvious that we are in war and God expects us to fight a good fight. Dr. Warren Wiersbe said, "The Christian life is a battleground, not a playground, and there's an enemy to fight and territory to gain for the Lord. God declared war on Satan long ago (Gen. 3:15), and there can be no neutrality in this spiritual conflict for Jesus said, 'He that is not with me is against me' (Matt. 12:30)" (*Be Counted*, p. 21).

If we as individuals and we as a church are to get to the desired goal or destination, we need to be "good soldiers" and realize we are in a war.

We are not fighting physical enemies, but we are up against spiritual enemies that include the Devil and his evil demons (Eph. 6:11-12). It is a high honor to be numbered as a soldier for Jesus Christ.

By the way, it is a God-honoring thing to stand up and be counted for God. It is a good thing to say I am part of this church. I support it; I stand with it and I defend it. The writer of Hebrews alludes to the fact that when you stand with the church there is some enrollment record (Heb. 12:23).

PART #2 – The command to single out designated helpers for the numbering. **1:4-16**

Now to get this numbering done efficiently and quickly, Moses and Aaron needed help so God directed them to select one man from each tribe, excluding the Levites, to help do this job. God knows who his faithful people are and this is His choice. This is not Moses' choice, but God's. God classified these men as competent, faithful leaders and helpers to Moses:

Tribe #1 - From the tribe of Reuben - the helper is Elizur the son of Shedeur. **1:5**

A. C. Gaebelien said that almost every one of these names of leaders is a name that glorifies God and is an encouragement to the faith. These are not duds. **Elizur means My God is a rock.**

Tribe #2 - From the tribe of Simeon - the helper is Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai. **1:6**

Shelumiel means at peace with God.

Tribe #3 - From the tribe of Judah - Nahshon the son of Amminadab. **1:7**

Nahshon means one who is Divine or a Diviner in touch with God.

Tribe #4 - From the tribe of Issachar - Nethanel the son of Zuar. **1:8**

Nethanel means the gift of God.

Tribe #5 - From the tribe of Zebulun - Eliab the son of Helon. **1:9**

Eliab means my God is Father.

Tribe #6 - From the sons of Joseph: Ephraim, the helper is Elishama the son of Ammihud; **1:10**
Manasseh, the helper is Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur

Elishama means My God has heard; Gamaliel means My God is rewarder.

Tribe #7 - From the tribe of Benjamin - Abidan the son of Gideoni. **1:11**

Abidan means My father is judge.

Tribe #8 - From the tribe of Dan - Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai. **1:12**

Ahiezer means brother who is helper.

Tribe #9 - From the tribe of Asher - Pagiel the son of Ocran. **1:13**

Pagiel means event of God.

Tribe #10 - From the tribe of Gad - Eliasaph the son of Deuel **1:14**

Eliasaph means God adds.

Tribe #11 - From the tribe of Naphtali - Ahira the son of Enan **1:15**

Ahira means brother is evil.

These men were the heads of their tribes and they had been designated by God to help in the census. By their names they were strong men of God.

Now it does not initially appear to be a real limelight job to simply help Moses in regard to this matter. But their work was important to God and their names are forever in the Word of God because they took their work seriously.

PART #3 – The congregation is assembled and numbered in obedience to the Word. **1:17-19**

As soon as the helpers had been gathered, Moses and Aaron took them and they gathered the people together and each recorded names of those who were twenty years and upward. Notice the end of **verse 18** says this was done “head by head.”

There will be a head to head numbering and accountability given to God.

PART #4 – The first census results of the numbering. **1:20-46**

Now in **verses 20-46**, we get the results of the census. **God demands that His people take an honest inventory of themselves.** There are two war censuses that are taken in the book of Numbers and obviously this is the first. The second is taken in **Numbers 26**. What we want to do is compare the numbers so we may clearly see and understand this:

Census #1 - Reuben - 46,500 (**1:20-21**); **Census #2** – Reuben - 43,730 (26:5-7) = -2,770

Census #1 - Simeon - 59,300 (**1:22-23**); **Census #2** – Simeon - 22,200 (26:26:14) = -37,100

Census #1 - Gad - 45,650 (1:24-25); **Census #2** - Gad- 40,500- (26:18) = -5,150

Census #1 - Judah - 74,600 (1:16-27); **Census #2** - Judah 76,500- (26:22) = +1,900

Census #1 - Issachar - 54,400 (1:28-29); **Census #2** - Issachar 64,300 (26:25) = +9,900

Census #1 - Zebulun - 57,400 (1:30-31); **Census #2** - Zebulun 60,500 (26:27) = +3,100

Census #1 - Ephraim - 40,500 (1:32-33); **Census #2** - Ephraim 32,500 (26:37) = -8,000

Census #1 - Manasseh - 32,200 (1:34-35) **Census #2** - Manasseh 52,700 (26:34) = +20,500

Census #1 - Benjamin - 35,400 (1:36-37); **Census #2** - Benjamin 45,600 (26:41) = +10,200

Census #1 - Dan - 62,700 (1:38-39); **Census #2** - Dan 64,400 (26:42-43) = +1,700

Census #1 - Asher - 41,500 (1:40-41); **Census #2** - Asher 53,400 (26:47) = +11,900

Census #1 - Naphtali - 53,400 (1:42-43); **Census #2** - Naphtali 45,400 (26:50) = -8,000

The total for the first census is 603,550 (1:46).

The total for the second census is 601,730 (26:51).

So from the first census to the second census there is a decrease of 1820 soldier/men. What we will observe is that the numbers in the tribes do change significantly.

Now here is the big question of this numbering business. **Why was there a need to take two censuses?** If the first census here in chapter one is to calculate the men who are ready to go to war and take the Promised Land, why do you need another census later in the book?

The answer is those numbered in this first census won't make it. Not one of them will make it into the Promised Land. The reason they won't make it is because of their sin and rebellion. In fact, God said about these very numbered people, "For forty years I loathed that generation and said they are a people who err in their heart and they do not know My ways. Therefore I swore in My anger, truly they shall not enter into My rest" (Psalm 95:10-11).

This first census concerns the first generation of saved Israel and the second census is the second generation of saved Israel. The first group won't make it because of their unfaithfulness. So they will have to regroup and recount all over again.

This is so sad. They had been redeemed by God and they were numbered and ready to go to the great blessings of God. But they won't make it. Instead of triumph their story will end in tragedy. We must not ever let that happen to us.

No matter what we face, we need to stay faithful to God and we need to stay focused on God and His Word or we can short change what God wants to do with us and for us.

What these two censuses prove is that you can be faithful at one moment in time and heading toward the great blessings of God.

But then it is possible to become unfaithful and miss out on the totality of what God wanted to do. I am sure this first census was an exciting time. They were counted faithful and ready to go, but they won't make it.

Had they stayed focused on listening to Moses communicate the Word and obeying what Moses told them to do, they would have gone into the land and experienced the blessings of God. But they didn't. As a result, they didn't even make it.

PART #5 – The Levites are separated for Tabernacle ministries. **1:47-54**

The Levites were one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Kohathites were one of the three families within the tribe of Levi and the priests were descendants of Aaron's family which were part of the Kohathite family.

The Levites were not numbered for war but their job was to carefully protect the Tabernacle. It was the responsibility of the Levites to carry it from place to place and take care of it and put it up and take it down.

Now **verse 51** gives a warning and that is if a "layman," who is not one of the Levites, comes near that tabernacle, he is to be put to death. The other tribe members have their place where they are to camp and it is not to be near this tabernacle.

No one will ever experience the blessings of God without a reverence for God. The worship of God is demanded for one God will bless. It is not some free-for-all. It is to be reverent and decent and orderly.

Verse 54 ends "the sons of Israel did according to all which the LORD had commanded Moses, so they did."

Had this been the testimony of Israel, they would have been in that Promised Land in a few weeks and perhaps within a few days. Instead, they will wander around for the next 38 years. Why? They will wander for 38 years because they will not listen to the Word of God and do all that the Lord commands.

God is a God who carefully counts and calculates everyone. He knows people name by name and head by head. He sees who obeys Him and His Word and who doesn't.

Taking inventory of ourselves is a great thing to do, but even though we take inventory of ourselves, does not mean we will continue to pursue the Word and will of God. We could number everything and still be disobedient. That reality is seen in this book of Numbers.