

## The Bible in One Year Week 11: Numbers (Pt. 1)

(Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 13-14; Joshua 1:9; Psalm 16:8; 2 Timothy 1:7)

### • Courage

- Think of a time you had to summon your *courage*. When was the last time you had to be *courageous*? What happened and what did that feel like? Maybe you were given a task at work and you had no choice but to roll up your sleeves, grit your teeth, and go for it. Or maybe you had to choose between an easy path that was wrong, and a hard path that was right.
  - I was talking to a mentor about courage recently and he said the funny thing about courage is this: no one *feels* courageous when they're doing it. It feels *terrible*—you usually *feel like crap* when you have to face your fears—and then it's done. You don't act courageous because you *feel* courageous; you act courageous because your heart is set on what is right and true.
- The missionary Hudson Taylor said, "There are three stages to every great work of God; first it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done."
- I used to think courage was just for certain people: like, there are the special people who are called to be courageous who are just endowed with certain qualities and then...there's everyone else. But walking with Jesus is teaching me that courage is a potential of every human heart—in fact, it's an outflow of God's image.
  - When God created the first humans, male and female, in His own majestic image, it says, "God *blessed* them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground,'" (Gen. 1:28). *Rule over every living creature?* Humans were made in God's image for a great *adventure*. This was going to take *courage!* And the courage to rule and reign would be the natural outflow of their intimacy with God and of knowing *who they are*. But then, everything went wrong: we were deceived, we reached for life apart from God, and lost it all.
- The Story we've been reading from Genesis, to Exodus, to Leviticus, and now Numbers, has been about *renewing* that blessing, *recovering* that image, and *restoring* that intimacy from the Garden. And this journey from Fall to Redemption, from Captivity to Freedom, from Wilderness to Promised Land is going to take *courage*. It takes *courage* to walk with God.
  - Courage is not just a personality trait that either you have or don't have. Courage comes from the strength of heart to assert my will in spite of my feelings and circumstances. It's most truly activated when my heart and my will are aligned with God's. It comes down to *what you really want*: do you want God's will, or do you want your own way? It takes *courage* to move towards God's purposes in a world that opposes them. It takes *courage* to live with a heart of, "*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*"
  - Today as we get into the book of Numbers, we're going to grapple with the issue of courage in a specific story from chapter 13. Let's start with a quick look at the big picture.

### • Justice and Mercy

- First, rewind back to Exodus 34. God gave Moses a revelation of His character that's repeated throughout the Old Testament: "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.*"
- Now, this might seem like a conflicting statement: first, God says He's compassionate and gracious, then He talks about punishing the children's children's children? What's going on? Well, it's really a poetic and profound statement that holds in tension the mercy and justice of God. God is fundamentally gracious and compassionate, but this doesn't mean He turns a blind eye to evil. God would not be truly good or loving if He was not *just*: something has to be done, love moves to make wrongs right; but God's heart is to *forgive* rebellion and sin if we will only turn to Him. And notice the disproportionate ratio between mercy and justice: maintaining love to *thousands*...and only punishing sin *to the third and fourth*. It's not even a contest. Like

James 2:13 says, “*Mercy triumphs over judgment.*” God’s goodness and love do not make Him *soft* or *weak*, but He continues to be astonishingly faithful even when we’re not.

- We see the tension between God’s mercy and justice throughout the Torah and especially in Numbers. If Leviticus is about the problem of a Holy God dwelling with a sinful people, Numbers is about the tension between God’s faithfulness and our *unfaithfulness*. Which will win: God’s faithfulness or our rebellion? At times in the story, you really wonder! But the beautiful thing is, in the end, God’s faithfulness always wins: His grace really is greater than our sin.
- **Numbers in a Nutshell**
  - When we pick up the story in Numbers, Israel has been camping out at Mt. Sinai for a year; now it’s time to continue the journey. First it was Egypt to Sinai; now it’s Sinai to Promised Land.
    - Numbers has this boring title because of the way it begins with a big census where the hundreds of thousands of Israelites get organized and mobilized. But it’s definitely not a boring story—at least if you can get past the numbers. The Hebrew name for it is a lot better: “Bemidbar” which means “*in the wilderness.*”
    - Numbers explains how a journey that should have taken them *just about 2 weeks* turned into *40 years of wandering in the wilderness*. 2 weeks to 40 years. Something like this can happen in all our journeys: we’re all faced with the potential for victory or wandering. But God doesn’t waste the wilderness. Let’s dive in.
      - The story is organized around the three major geographic locations of their journey, and with two small intermediary travel sections: it starts at *Mount Sinai* with chapters 1-10. Then there’s a brief travel section in chapters 10-12 which links to the next main portion, Chapters 13-19 in the *wilderness of Paran*. After that, it’s another brief road trip section in chapters 20-21, and the final main chunk is chapters 22-36 in *Moab*. Pretty much the whole journey is interspersed with moments of complaining and rebellion, followed by judgment and restoration.
      - The first section at Mt. Sinai is where every tribe is counted and precisely ordered for travel: the Tabernacle of God’s presence is in the middle, surrounded by the priestly Levite tribe. Then, the rest of the tribes are arranged evenly around them with the tribe of Judah leading the way. It’s a very cool image that shows how God’s Presence is literally at the *center* of the people’s lives. Everything is ready, God is in the midst, right there with them, and they’re ready to journey to the Promised Land! And, somehow, that’s when everything starts to go wrong.
      - As soon as they begin moving in chapters 10-12, the people start to complain and even Moses’ own brother and sister question his leadership. Then we get to the next main section, chapters 13-19 which take place in the wilderness of Paran, and this is where it gets *really bad*.
  - In Numbers 13, God tells them to send 12 spies into the Land they’re going to inhabit: 1 leader from each tribe goes to scope out the territory for 40 days. They come back with good news and bad news: it is indeed a land “flowing with milk and honey,” it’s a good place to live! But the bad news is, the people are well fortified, they’re strong, and some of them are like *giants*!
    - Caleb and Joshua, 2 of the 12, try to tell the naysayers, “Guys, we can do this! This is what God has brought us all this way for!” But the people get worked up into a frenzy of fear. The Israelites despair and complain that God has brought them all this way into the wilderness just to be devoured by their enemies. They feel completely exposed and powerless out here with these big people and their walled cities; some say it would be better to die in the wilderness. They’re ready to overthrow Moses, find a new leader, and go back to Egypt.
    - God is understandably outraged. He tells them they’ll get what they want: this generation will wander in the wilderness until they’ve all died out and only then will their children move into the land. Notice here the combination of justice and mercy: they’re given over to the consequences of their foolish rebellion; and yet, the sentence of Exodus 34, “punished to the third and fourth generation” is reduced to just one generation. Their own children will still get to settle in the land “flowing with milk and honey.”
    - Then something really ridiculous happens: the people feel gutted and they decide, after all, they *do* want to go in to the land! Moses warns them that it’s too late. The Lord is not with them and

it won't succeed, but they try to move in anyway—without Moses, without Aaron, without the Ark of God's Covenant—and they get *demolished*. It's all a crazy mess. But in the end, God continues ever so slowly to move them forward in His faithfulness toward His purposes for them.

- **A Different Spirit**

- Here's all I want to focus on here: there were 12 spies. All 12 of them had seen God do the impossible. All 12 of them had watched God deliver them from Egypt. All 12 of them had seen God meet with Moses in glory on the Mountain. All 12 of them had witnessed how, in spite of the Golden Calf, God came with them anyway. All 12 of them knew God's promises to Abraham to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, where they would live as God's special people. All 12 of them had scoped out the same land and seen the same blessings and obstacles.
  - *Only 2 of them actually believed that God would be faithful. Only 2. They were looking at the same things, but they were not seeing the same way. Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?*
- It takes courage to walk with God. He's inviting you into a great adventure, He's created you to bear His wonderful image, but you'll have to *choose* courage. You'll have to *choose* in spite of your feelings and circumstances *to trust God* if you want to see the Promised Land.
  - And you *can* do it. You can be courageous. Because in Christ He's giving you a new heart.
- The most revealing insight in this story is after the rebellion when God issues their judgment, but he says something striking about Caleb (and by inference Joshua, too): "...because my servant Caleb has a *different spirit* and follows me *wholeheartedly*, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his decedents will inherit it," (Numbers 14:24).
  - Caleb and Joshua had a *different spirit* than the others. They saw the same challenges as everyone else, but they were *wholehearted*. They followed God *wholeheartedly*, fully, completely. They exercised *courage* because their hearts and wills were aligned with God. Unless you follow God *wholeheartedly* the giants will seem bigger than God's faithfulness.
- I want to have that different spirit, I want to have that courage, I want to be wholehearted. I don't want to be like one of those 10, I want to be the 2! I don't want to fall away when it gets scary, when my faith is tested, or when I'm faced with criticism or persecution. But I am weak. I'm probably not as strong as I'd like to think I am.
  - Praise God, there is good news: He has put a *different Spirit in us*. "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid [or fearful], but gives us power, love, and self-control," (2 Tim. 1:7).
  - The disciples who walked with Jesus were just like Israel: they saw the power, the miracles, the goodness of Jesus—and in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour they deserted him, Peter even denied him! But Jesus conquered the grave and his faithfulness was *greater* than their unfaithfulness.
  - We're just like those disciples and just like those Israelites. But thanks to Jesus' finished work, we can have a *new heart*. We can become *wholehearted* and *courageous* like him. (By the way, did you know that Jesus is just the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*?) We have *the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus Christ within us*. And as we yield to him, he's making us wholehearted and courageous. (After all, the ratio got better with the disciples—just 1 Judas who fell away, and 11 stuck who with it in the end!)
- I never saw myself as a leader. I am naturally quite timid. I tend to be an accommodator. I know you might not believe that if you've only ever seen me as "Pastor David," but honestly, I've always struggled with feeling weak and wondering if I have what it takes. God has led me into a life I never thought possible: in my weakness, He is strong. And He is making me new, He's renewing my heart.
  - If you're waiting until you *feel* courageous, you never will be. It's not about your *feelings*. If you're waiting until it feels *comfortable* or *safe*, you'll never step out into that place which requires courage to rise in you. "You'll never walk on water if you don't get out of the boat." Peter didn't step out of the boat because he felt unafraid, he stepped out because he loved Jesus! Joshua and Caleb stepped out because they were wholehearted for God! Love God with your whole heart, follow where He leads, step out in faith *even when it feels like crap*. Don't think about being courageous: set your heart *wholly* upon God, and He will lead you.
  - Let us walk by His Holy Spirit, not by our fearful spirits; let us be *courageous*. Amen.