

## **Into The Wilderness**

Numbers 1:1

### **Slide 1**

Have any of you ever read the book of Numbers? The 1st chapter starts off by naming all the tribes of Israel and how many were in each tribe.

Many people think, *“This has got to be the most BORING book ever written!”*

If you’re like me, you’ll be tempted to give up, but don’t! There’s a treasure trove laying just beneath the surface.

To paraphrase Augustine, *“The bible is shallow enough for a child to paddle in, and yet at the same time, deep enough to drown an elephant.”*

There’s more in Numbers than meets the eye! In fact, Numbers is actually one of the most exciting, insightful and interesting books in the bible!

In this book we learn about the nature and personality of God and how He deals with us, His people!

So, let’s look at the first verse of the first chapter of Numbers and use it as an overview of the book as a whole.

### **Slide 2**

Numbers 1:1, *“The LORD spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.”*

As you start to read the book of Numbers, you begin to realize that it really doesn’t have a beginning. It kind of starts in midsentence.

That's because Numbers is a continuation of God's dealing with His people that started in Genesis, then continued through Exodus and on into Leviticus.

Now, surprisingly, if you jump ahead, you'll notice that Numbers doesn't really have an ending either! It peters out with the story of some daughters who want their father's inheritance.

On top of that Numbers is a little circular. It starts out in the wilderness, and it ends up in the wilderness.

No wonder the Hebrew name for this book is "*In the Wilderness.*" It's the story of God's people going around in circles in the desert!

They started out getting ready to enter into the land God promised them, and at the end of the book they found themselves in the exact same place.

From beginning to end, it's 36 chapters, covering 40 years and one whole generation of people wandering around in the Sinai desert!

You'd be tempted to think that the Book of Numbers is a total mess. No beginning? No end? A circular plot with people wandering around in the desert. Ever feel that way about your life?

God's trying to teach you something, but you're either too stupid or too stubborn to learn it, so you find yourself taking "*one more lap around the desert!*"

But don't judge a book by its cover because, as you're going to see, God knows exactly what He's doing every step of the way.

In verse 1 we pick-up on a conversation that God and Moses are having in the “*Tent of Meeting*” or Tabernacle. The “*Tent of Meeting*” was a place where Moses went to meet God face to face.

Verse 1 even tells us WHEN this meeting took place. It was “*on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.*”

In other words, it’s been a year since God had miraculously delivered the nation of Israel out of 400 years of Egyptian slavery and brought them to Mt. Sinai.

It was there He entered into a “*Blood Covenant*” with them. They were to be His people and He would be their God.

He would protect them and fight for them. He would give them land and establish them as His ‘chosen people,’ so that the rest of the world would see it and want to get in on the action.

### **Slide 3**

The problem was... they weren’t at the promised land! They were standing between the Exodus and the Promised Land.

They were ‘*Betweeners*,’ and that’s what we are. We’re ‘betweeners!’ If you’re a true Christian, you’ve been saved from the bondage of sin, but you’re not quite to heaven!

We live between salvation accomplished and salvation completed. Jesus bought our salvation at the Cross, but we’re still living here in this world waiting for Him to return.

We’re living in the wilderness, and living between the Exodus and the Promised Land isn’t any fun.

Wars, sickness, sin, broken relationships, misunderstandings, pain, cancer, tears, COVID... it's all a part of the wilderness experience!

Calvin Miller had it right when he said, *"The world is poor because her fortune is buried in the sky, and all her treasure maps are of the earth."*

But, if you think about it, we have a lot in common with these Israelites. Remember where Moses was in this verse? He's standing in the "Tent of Meeting," which was located smack dab in the middle of the camp!

See, God didn't bring them out of Egypt and then just dump them in the desert like trash and say:

*"Okay, My job's done. I delivered you from Pharaoh, now you're on your own! Good luck in making it to the other side! You're going to need it!"*

NO! God's in the wilderness WITH THEM! And God's with us, today! Remember... Jesus promised to be with us in our wilderness.

Matthew 28:20, *"And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

No matter what happens to us between the day of our salvation and the day of our consummation, Jesus promised that He would be with us.

His presence would be with us through thick and thin, in all our trials and tribulations, hardships and disappointments.

So, if you think you're currently living in the 'promised land' and everything is going to be hunky-dory from here on out... you need a reality check! See, we're still in the wilderness!

But at least we don't have to go through it alone! We have the presence and the power of God's Spirit every step of the way!

However, our greatest temptation along the way is the temptation to forget the end goal! The people of Israel constantly doubted that there really was a Promised Land ahead.

When they awoke every morning and looked out over the horizon...

- All they could see was the barrenness of the wilderness.
- All they could hear was the howling wind of the wasteland all around them.
- All they could taste was the hunger and thirst of the wilderness.

It was a tough life! On some days it must have seemed like life was nothing more than a series of unrelated and random events; that they were going nowhere.

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That's where we are today. As we go from one day to the next, we lose track of the goal. We wake up, go to work, and go to bed.

There's never enough time or money to do what we want to do, and so life gets all tangled and twisted.

We're tempted to believe that the wilderness we see is all there is. That God's not in charge; that there's no real purpose or meaning in it.

That there's no real 'promised land.' It's just something we made up to help us deal with the barrenness of our lives.

On the surface we feel like we're just wandering from one place to the next, going around in circles, just like in the book of Numbers.

But don't doubt that under and through it all, there's a guiding hand, a divine author who knows where we are, and where He's taking us.

There IS a story line to our life! It's complicated, and there are a lot of twists and turns along the way, but eventually, if we'll stick with God, He'll bring us to the promised land He's prepared for us!

That's what it means to live by faith: to believe the reality of God's plan for our lives even when we can't see it with our eyes.

There are 2 generations of Israelites in Numbers. The 1st generation refused to live by faith. Instead, they only believed what they're eyes saw and distrusted what God told them.

In the end they missed the promised land. They abandoned God and died in the wilderness.

However, the 2nd generation of Israelites got another chance to live by faith. They were the ones who actually entered the Promised Land.

Which generation are you? Are you just living life day by day as if this is all there is?

Is your life motto... *"Get all you can, can all you get, and then sit on the can"* ...OR... are you living and trusting God in everything you do, whether it makes sense or not?

Ask yourself, *"Is my life different in the way I act and make decisions because I know there is a heaven or is my life no different from anyone else in the worldly wilderness?"*

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See, the reason we grumble about the conditions and the accommodations of this life is because somewhere along the way, we forgot that this isn't our real home!

If the way you live your life isn't radically different from the non-believers around you then it's because you've lost the plot of the story!

You're wandering around, totally forgetting that you're in the middle of this incredible Exodus from death to eternal life! Many people have gotten so used to being in the wilderness, they think that's all there is.

They remind me of the story about some scientists who decided that they were going to develop a fish that could live outside of water.

Selecting a healthy herring, they bred and crossbred, hormoned and chromosomed until they finally produced a fish that could exist and live out of water! Only one problem, the project director wasn't satisfied.

He suspected that even though the fish had learned to live on dry land it still had a secret desire for water. "Re-educate it", he said. "Change it's very desires!"

So again, they went to work, this time retraining even the strongest reflexes. Finally, they achieved their goal. A fish that would rather DIE than get wet! Even humidity filled this fish with dread!

The director, proud of his triumph, took the fish on tour. Then, one day, the unthinkable happened.

Accidentally, the fish fell into a lake! It sank to the bottom, eyes and gills clamped shut, afraid to move, afraid of becoming wetter.

And it dared not breathe! Every instinct said "NO!" but breathe it must. So, the fish drew a tentative gill-full. Its eyes bulged. It breathed again and flicked a fin.

It breathed a 3rd time and wriggled with delight. Then it darted away. The fish had discovered water!

Now, that's a parable of how you and I, educated and re-educated by the world's system first reacted to the thought of God before our salvation. In fact, we'd been conditioned by the world to reject God!

Even the thought of God “filled our gills” with fear and dread. So, we ran away from Him. Yet, in spite of all the world’s efforts to change our desires, we still had a secret longing to know Him.

Then one day, almost by accident, something happened to get our attention. Slowly, painfully, eyes that were clamped shut to spiritual things, began to slowly open.

Against everything we’d ever been taught, we took in a tentative breath and to our surprise we discovered God! And to our delight, we found out that we were actually created to know and love Him all along!

Acts 17:28, puts it this way, *“For in Him, we live and move and have our being!”*

There’s a sense, a feeling that things aren’t right but you just can’t put your finger on it. Listen, this is NOT your home! This world is NOT your natural environment!

Don’t let the world convince you that this is all there is! We weren’t made for this world! We were made for heaven! Open up your gills!!!

## **Slide 6**

So how do we keep our faith alive as we’re walking through the wilderness? The answer is found in remembering that God is right here with us!

It’s no coincidence, along with telling us that these people had come out of Egypt, that verse 1 mentions the presence of God speaking to Moses in the Tent of Meeting.

The function and purpose of the “Tabernacle” was a place of communication from God to man! See, we follow a God who really speaks and gives direction and purpose to our lives!

All through the book of Numbers, God reminds His people of His covenant laws.

In other words, He's telling them, *"You're accountable to ME and no-one else! I am your God and you need to center your life around ME, and nothing else. In fact, centering your life around anyone or anything else is idolatry!"*

So how do we center our life around God? Well, first of all, we need to seek His face on a daily basis, secondly, we need to read His Word.

This world is sending out so many different messages and if all you do is soak in media through Facebook, TV, movies, and music, then this world is going to seem more and more real, while God is going to seem more and more distant.

The third thing you need to do in order to make sure you're centering your life around God is to gather together with other believers.

See, the "Tent of Meeting" or The Tabernacle" wasn't a place for individuals, it was a place of corporate worship.

It's where the tribes of Israel worshiped together. If you separated yourself and isolated yourself from the other tribes, you died!

The same is true today. Isolated believers get lost and die alone in the desert. We need each other so we can be encouraged and challenged.

People who think they don't need the church, who think they can do fine all by themselves end up getting lost in the wilderness and left behind.

If we don't make sure that God is in the middle of everything in our lives, eventually the wilderness is going to look more real than the promised land!

Listen to John 1:14, *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

Did you know that the word, "dwelling" in the Greek is literally translated "to pitch a tent" or to "tabernacle" among us? So, do you know what that verse is saying?

It's telling us that the same God who set up the "Tent of Meeting" in the wilderness has now come to "dwell" or "tabernacle" with us in the person of Jesus Christ!

He came from Heaven and took on Himself the frustrations and temptations of the "wilderness life" in which we live.

After His baptism Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days, where He faced the exact same temptations that the Old Testament Israelites faced in their 40 years of wandering.

With one exception... He remained faithful and never sinned like they did. He voluntarily faced the same temptations and tests that we face every day, only He never failed them like we do.

- Where we grumble constantly...He never grumbled.
- Where we doubt and question that God cares and provides, He never doubted and never questioned.

According to Hebrews 12:2, Jesus is *"the author and perfecter of our faith."*

He went through the wilderness for us and accomplished our salvation. He did what we couldn't do!

## **Slide 7**

### Conclusion

We're doing the "wilderness walk" right now, but someday it's going to end and we're going to arrive at the promised land of rest.

You may ask, "*How can you know that for sure?*" Simple, because Jesus has already arrived there before us! And He's promised that where He is you and I will be forever.

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ this morning, His destiny is your destiny! If you're following Him, you're going to end up where He is.

As we study the book of Numbers, my prayer is that it will give you a greater determination to make it faithfully through the wilderness and to the goal of your heavenly home!