

# **In the Wilderness: Counted by God, Centered on God**

*Scripture Readings: Numbers 1-2; Eph 6:10-20; Revelation 21:1-3; 12-27 • Text: Numbers 1-2*

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Who among you, as young children, did not learn to sing “I’m in the Lord’s Army,” complete with motions, marching steps and salutes? Who among you, as adults, do not know the popular 19th century English hymn, “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” exhorting you to be good soldiers of Christ marching to war with the cross and banners of Christ?

A Christian’s battle is not like the medieval Crusades fought with swords and shields, but a battle against the evil spiritual fought with the armor of God. The Bible’s frequent theme is the Lord as a conquering Warrior going to war against his enemies. One of God’s titles in the Old Testament is “The Lord of Hosts,” which means “The Lord of the Army.” Even in the New Testament, the theme of Christian warfare is used often, like the text we read in Ephesians 6:10-20. It is not surprising then that warfare has always been a favorite Christian theme with its good and bad consequences. On the good side, a 19th century mission to the poor, Salvation Army, was organized using military terms. However, on the bad side, one of the most tragic episodes in Christian history is the failed medieval crusade wars to retake Jerusalem from Muslims.

Last week, we started with a general introduction to the book of Numbers: its author, date of writing, audience, purpose, main themes, and distinctives as an important part of Scripture. Today, we will start with a study of chapters 1 and 2. These two chapters comprise one of the reasons why people do not like reading this book: it is full of seemingly unimportant and irrelevant names and numbers.

Chapter 1 consists of a census of all of Israel’s males 20-60 years old, a census according to the twelve tribes of Israel. As we read Chapter 2, we will discover that it deals mostly instructions on how the people are to be arranged when in camp and when the whole nation is marching towards the Promised Land. In this arrangement, we see that God is the center of Israel’s worship and life. Our theme this afternoon, then, is **IN THE WILDERNESS:**

1. **Counted by God**
2. **Centered on God**

## **Counted by God**

As Numbers begin, God commands Moses to take a census of the Israelites after they were in Mount Sinai for a year. In antiquity, there were usually two purposes for taking a census of the people: (1) assessing military strength; and (2) taxation. In addition to the census in Numbers, there are two other prominent census events in the Bible. David took a census during his reign, and incurred God’s wrath. Why? Because the census was not commanded by God, but David only wanted to assess how powerful he was. During the time of the birth of Jesus, emperor Augustus ordered a census of the whole Roman empire to be taken, apparently for the purpose of taxation (Luke 2:1-2).

Today, all nations take a regular census. In the Philippines, the census frequency is not regular as seen by censuses in 2000, 2007 and 2010. In the United States, a census is done every ten years, the next one coming in 2010. In most countries, these are taken for the purposes of allocation of government representation, taxation, and funding of projects.

So why did God command Moses to take a census in the Sinai wilderness? Because Israel has greatly increased in number, God wanted to demonstrate his faithfulness in fulfilling his promise to Abraham of children as numerous as the stars in heaven and the sand on the seashore. A second purpose is obvious from verse 3, *"From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company."* It was not for taxation, representation or funding of government projects, but for military conscription.

The results of the census showed that the total number of men between 20-60 years old was about 600,000. Some scholars estimate that this number project to about two million Israelites from Egypt. Some point out difficulties and inconsistencies with these numbers. Most cities in the ancient world at that time were much smaller. Even today, the population of Palestine is only about three million. Also, many critics, not believing that God can do the impossible, doubt that a clan of 70 people would not be able to grow to two million in 400 years.

Solutions proposed to solve this problem are unconvincing. One proposal is that these numbers are only symbolic, not literal. Others point out Scribal errors as the culprit. A small minority point out that these numbers reflect the population during the time of King David 500 years later and not during the time of Moses.

Setting aside the uncertainty about the census results, what are we to conclude in studying these verses? First, **God was faithful.** What he promised to Abraham, he fulfilled: a great nation, bigger than all of the nations in Canaan. We can trust God's word, because with him, nothing is impossible. He can create life with his Word and with the Breath of his mouth.

**Second, God chose Israel in his love and faithfulness.** He made his covenant with them, and not with the Egyptians, Assyrians, or Babylonians. And his choice was not based on their greatness in number or might because they were the "fewest of all peoples," but because God loved them and was faithful to the covenant he made with their forefathers (Deut 7:6-8).

**Third, God protected and provided for his people.** The family of Jacob could have died during the severe famine in their land. But God provided food, shelter and protection for them through Joseph. When Joseph was gone from the memory of the Egyptians, God protected his people through severe hardship of slavery in Egypt for 400 years. During their escape from Egypt, God provided gold, silver and other possessions for them to take to the Promised Land. Not only that, God protected them from the pursuing army of Pharaoh who was bent on taking them back to Egypt to be slaves again. Finally, God gave them food, shelter, clothing and protection from their enemies in their 40 years of wilderness wanderings on their way to the Promised Land.

**Fourth, the people were willing to serve God.** Our text implies that all the men were willing to be counted. None opposed the census, so they were all willing to go to battle. To be sure, later, we learn that the people doubted God's Word that he would fight for them and give the land to them. And so they disobeyed his commands. But when this census was taken, they were all prepared to march against God's enemies.

Dear friends, do you trust God's Word and his promises, even when hard times and sufferings come? God is faithful in loving, protecting and providing for his chosen ones. When suffering, pain and sorrow come, let us praise him for redeeming us from sin and for rescuing us from God's sure wrathful judgment. Let us thank him for giving us hope in the midst of this hopeless, sinful world.

Let us then be willing to "stand up and be counted" to do battle against this sinful world, and against trials and temptations that come our way in this wilderness of our lives.

## **Centered on God**

As God's people preparing for war against his enemies, Israel needed to be organized. First was the census taken to gauge their strength. Second was their arrangement in camp and in their march towards the Promised Land.

Chapter 2 of Numbers details how the camp was to be arranged and the order in which the tribes were to march. At the center of the camp was the tabernacle, where the Ark of the Covenant is where God dwells with his people in the Most Holy Place. Surrounding the tabernacle are the priestly sons of Aaron and the Levites who guarded the sanctuary from intrusions by unauthorized laypeople. Their arrangement and duties are described in more detail in Chapter 3.

Beyond the Levites the lay tribes are encamped. The 12 tribes were divided into four groups of three. In premier position, east of the tabernacle camp, were Judah with Issachar and Zebulun (2:2-9). Next in rank came the tribes which were camped to the south of the tabernacle, Reuben with Gad and Simeon (vv. 10-16). After them on the west came Ephraim with Benjamin and Manasseh (2:18-24). Finally, on the northern side of the tabernacle camp were Dan with Asher and Naphtali (2:25-34).

The same sequence was to be maintained on the march. The Judah group headed the march, followed by the Reuben group. Then followed the Levites carrying the tabernacle. After them came the Ephraim group of tribes, and the Dan group brought up the rear (2:31). Like all armies of the world, each of the tribes has its own banner or ensign.

This is nice and good information, but how does this relate to my Christian life?

First, if the life of Israelites in the wilderness is a constant physical warfare, the Christian's life in this world is a constant spiritual warfare. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 6: 12, "*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*" We are not

to be like Muslim jihadists, or medieval crusaders, or the Anabaptists during the Reformation, or the Catholic Inquisition, who waged holy war against their enemies. Ours is a spiritual warfare against the evil, sinful world full of temptations, trials, persecutions, and sorrows.

Second, notice that the tabernacle is in the center of the arrangement. We know from ancient history that Rameses II, an Egyptian pharaoh who lived near the time of the Exodus, employed a similar strategic layout. The pharaoh, who claimed to be divine, had his tent pitched in the center of his military encampment. In the same, God wanted to demonstrate to the Israelites that he is their covenant God who is to be the center of their life in the wilderness and in their battles against their enemies.

In the same way, the message to us is this: God must be the center of our lives, our families, our careers, our goals. If the center of our lives is money, family and career, we will not be successful in our spiritual battles against sin, suffering and temptation.

Third, if anyone who is unclean, or any foreigner, came near the dwelling-place of God, he will be destroyed and God's judgment will come upon the people. This prohibition has implications in our worship. No one can come to the presence of God without forgiveness of sin that only Christ can give. The only acceptable worship of God is when we are justified by faith alone in his Son alone. No worship is acceptable unless that worship is offered through the Son of God.

Fourth and last, only Levites can come near the tabernacle, God's dwelling place. Only priests can come inside the tabernacle. This also has implications in worship: the worship of God can only be led by priests who were appointed and ordained by God for that purpose. In the same way, in New Testament worship, only those who have been called and ordained by God to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments should lead worship services. The Great Commission involves preaching, baptizing, and teaching, tasks which were given to the Apostles then and pastors today. We will be studying this in more detail in the next chapter of this book.

## **Conclusion**

In the wilderness, before marching towards the Promised Land, God prepared Israel for battle. He counted them and then arranged them in an orderly, strategic manner in their camp and as they marched.

Dear Christian brethren, our battles today are fought, not with physical swords and shields against physical enemies, but with the spiritual armor of God against evil spiritual forces. And the goal of your warfare is so *"that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm"* (Eph 6:13). As you wage spiritual battles in this world, your weapons are these: the belt of truth; the breastplate of righteousness; the shoes of readiness given by the gospel of peace; the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; the helmet of salvation; and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6:14-17).

Truth, righteousness, readiness, faith, salvation, and the Spirit of God: these are your weapons of war.

In the New Testament, the square arrangement in Numbers 2 is found again in Revelation 21:16: *"The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width... Its length and width and height are equal."* This heavenly city, the dwelling place of God's elect, has twelve gates and twelve foundations: *"It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates..., and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed... And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb"* (Rev 21:12-14).

This heavenly city is not earthly Jerusalem. It is the heavenly city, the Church, whose designer and builder is God himself, whose citizens are Jews, represented by the twelve tribes of Israel, and Gentiles, represented by the twelve Apostles. As the tabernacle was in the center of the camp of Israel in the wilderness, so will God be in the center of this heavenly city:

*"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God"* (Rev 21:3).

There is no temple there, *"for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb"* (Rev 21:22). As God dwelt in the Tabernacle in the wilderness with his people, so does Christ dwell in your hearts in your own wilderness pilgrimage. The apostle John says this also in his gospel, *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). This Tabernacle in the wilderness is Christ himself who indwells you now through his Spirit.

The book of Numbers and the New Testament consistently warn you to make sure that you can enter this heavenly city by being united to Christ by faith. If you are not, then you will be like those Israelites who died in the wilderness because of unbelief. They were not able to enter the Promised Land. Without Christ, like the unclean, unbelieving Israelites, you will not be able to come near the Tabernacle. Again, John says in Revelation 21:27, *"nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life."* If you do not trust Christ as your Lord and Savior, you are unclean and will end up outside looking into the city of God.

But for those among you who are God's chosen and cleansed people, Paul has an exhortation, *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God"* (Col 3:16). AMEN.