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Numbers Overview



Bible Book Overviews - Steve Gregg

In this overview of the Book of Numbers, Steve Gregg highlights its biblical significance and relevance to Christian life. Though sometimes disliked for its numerical content, Numbers tells the story of the Israelites' wilderness wanderings and their rebellion against God. The New Testament repeatedly refers to Numbers, particularly in passages discussing Christ's finished work and the importance of spiritual rest in Him. Despite potential doubts surrounding the census numbers, the Book of Numbers remains an important reminder of God's patience and grace towards His people.

Transcript

We're here to do an introduction and an overview of the Book of Numbers. We've been meeting about once a month in this location, and each month taking a different book of the Bible. We started with Genesis, of course, and now we've gone through Exodus, Leviticus, and this is our fourth month doing this.

And we give you a month in between to read the book. So the introduction is hopefully helpful to make the reading of the book afterwards somewhat more meaningful, easier to follow. And so that's why we're just going through the Bible this way.

Now the Book of Numbers is not one of the books of the Bible that people usually describe as one of their favorites. There are favorite books of the Bible that many people would name, but I don't know if Numbers is on anybody's list. Even in the reading through the Bible, when people determine to read all the books of the Bible, sometimes they skip a little bit in the Book of Numbers.

And one of the reasons for that is there's whole chapters, there's whole blocks of chapters that really are just giving mathematical information, basically giving the number of people between 20 and 60 years old who are males in each of the 12 tribes and the number of sacrifices that each tribal had brought, which is the same in every case. It goes through all 12 of them and so forth. And it gives all the details in each case.

So it's a little burdensome reading. It is called Numbers because the Greek Septuagint called the book Arithmoi, which in Greek means numbers. And in the Latin Vulgate, it

was Numeri, or from which we get our word numbers.

In the Hebrew Bible though, the original, the meaning of the book, the name was not numbers. It was simply the fifth word in the book, which is Bemidbar, which is translated in the wilderness. And that's really a pretty good description of it too.

Certainly to call it Numbers makes good sense since most of the chapters are full of numbers. Though it doesn't make it sound very interesting. Makes it sound like a mathematical textbook or something like that.

Where in fact, it is a story of the children of Israel wandering through the wilderness. Now in the earlier books, and there have only been three that we've encountered so far, Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus, we had in Exodus the escape from Egypt by the slaves who had Israelite ancestry and God brought them out under Moses' leadership out of the land of Egypt across the Red Sea and into the wilderness. And that's where we find them in this book.

Now we found them in the wilderness also at the end of Exodus and the book of Leviticus. There is no chronological movement in the book of Leviticus. Basically at the end of Exodus, they set up the tabernacle.

And the book of Leviticus was about things that happened when they set up the tabernacle. There's about a week of progress there. And most of Leviticus is just laws that were given to them at that time.

So that we don't really have historical movement in the book of Leviticus. But in Numbers we do. We also have chapters that don't have historical movement.

We have chapters that are merely long lists of numbers. But there are also some important stories in the book of Numbers. Some of them important enough to be repeated or alluded to at least in the New Testament.

And we can see that the New Testament writers found the book of Numbers to be important. Well, it's important partly because it's one of the books that Moses wrote. And Moses was a prophet and not only a prophet, but as it says in the book of Numbers, greater than most prophets.

In the 12th chapter of Numbers, when Moses is criticized by his brother and his sister, Aaron and Miriam, because they too had received revelations from God. And yet Moses seemed to get all the attention and all the credit for being the leader. And Miriam and Aaron said, does God only speak by Moses? Doesn't he speak by us too? God got angry at them for rebelling against Moses.

And Miriam was struck with leprosy, although by Moses' intercession, she was healed. But they were both rebuked. And God said, if I, the Lord, raise up a prophet or a dreamer

of dreams, I will speak to him through visions and dreams and dark sayings.

But my servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all my house. With him I will speak face to face, mouth to mouth. And he will even apparently, I'll appear to him.

Now what God is saying is that many prophets receive oracles and receive dreams and visions from God. And some of them wrote books in our Bible. We think of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel as classic examples of prophets that received a lot of revelation from God of this sort, visions and dreams.

But God said, Moses is not even in a class with them or they're not in the class with him. But he's been faithful in all of God's house as the leader of the children of Israel. And God gives him very intimate revelations, face to face communication.

Now, God himself said that about Moses. So we can see why anything that Moses wrote would have particular weight for those who are interested in knowing what God has to say to his people. Frankly, if we had a real prophet in the church here, I'd be very interested in hearing what that person had to say in the name of God, because I am always interested in knowing what God has to say.

But if it were Moses who stands above the other prophets, his writings are particular weight. And he wrote the first five books of the Old Testament. As I've mentioned, when we've gone through the earlier books there are people who dispute whether Moses wrote these books but they don't have real good reasons.

There arose a trend in liberal scholarship in the late 19th century to basically question the traditional authorship of most of the books of the Bible and Moses was particularly targeted. The idea arose that the books of Moses were not written by Moses. None of them were written by Moses.

In fact, originally they felt that he couldn't have written them because their writing was not invented in the days of Moses yet. They were wrong and writings from much earlier than Moses time have been found since those claims were made. Notably the writings of Hammurabi, the laws of Hammurabi inscribed on stone, which date probably five or 600 years before Moses.

So certainly the suggestion that Moses couldn't have written any of it, which was the original reason for doubting it, has disappeared. There's no valid reason to say Moses couldn't have written it. Moses was a very educated man.

He was raised in the Egyptian court. It says in the book of Acts in chapter seven that he was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and he was 40 years old before he left Egypt so he had gotten a complete education. He was very literate.

He was trained to be obviously a nobleman in the king's family and got the best

education available so that he could write laws and he could write history and he could write songs and he could write poetry as we find in the Pentateuch, the first five books, is not too surprising. If anybody in the Old Testament had the training that would probably render him capable of doing that, Moses would be the man. But mostly we believe that Moses wrote it for because the Bible says so.

The Bible says Moses wrote it. Moses himself is said to have written at least some of these portions in numbers and if some, then of course the suggestion that he wrote all of it is not unreasonable, especially since that is what the Jews always believed to be the case. In Numbers chapter 33, for example, in verses one and two, says, these are the journeys of the children of Israel who went out of the land of Egypt by the armies under the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Now Moses wrote down the starting points of their journeys. At the command of the Lord. And these are the journeys according to their starting points.

So it says Moses wrote down these things in this chapter. And if in that chapter, then obviously in any of the other chapters, it would not be unreasonable to accept him as the author of them as well. He was a witness to the things.

It was his lifetime that these events happened in and he was the leader of the nation. Certainly there's no one more qualified than he to have written it. In chapter 36 of Numbers and verse 13, it says, these are the commandments and the judgments which the Lord commanded the children of Israel by the hand of Moses in the plains of Moab by Jordan across from Jericho.

So Moses is the one by whose hand God gave these commands, we are told. And this is what the Jews have always believed, not only about the book of Numbers, but about all of the first five books of the Bible. Which is going to include one more besides the ones we've covered and this one, Deuteronomy.

Now these books were called the Torah or the law. The Jews called them that. Torah is the Hebrew word for law.

And it was understood that it was Moses who gave the law. And even Jesus confirmed this. Jesus said to the Jews, did not Moses give you the law? And yet none of you obeys the law.

He said that the leper who was healed or cleansed by Jesus said, go and show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded. And there are other times when Jesus mentioned Moses. In fact, he said in John chapter five to the Jews, don't think that I'm the one who will accuse you on the day of judgment.

He says, there's one that will accuse you, not me, but Moses in whom you trust because he spoke of me. And he said, and if you do not believe his writings, how can you believe

my words? Now, if you don't believe Moses writings, how can you believe Jesus words since he believed them? How could Jesus be credible if he believed Moses wrote these things and Moses didn't? So believing in the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible is not only in agreement with the tradition of the Jews and with the claims of the books themselves, but also with the affirmation of Jesus who took the same position the Jews had always taken and the church has always taken until the last century or so when liberal scholarship began to come up with other theories about authorship. Suffice it to say, the arguments they have given for their alternative theories are not compelling and certainly nothing is more compelling than what Jesus said on the subject.

So we accept this book as one of the five that Moses wrote inspired by God, so that he, and he was a special spokesman of God. The story picks up about a month later than the erection of the tabernacle at the end of Exodus. And it was during that month that the book of Leviticus apparently was written, but at the end of Exodus, the tabernacle was set up in chapter 40 and God's glory entered the tabernacle and they were then able to use it as a worship structure.

In Leviticus chapter 10, they began to use the tabernacle, although the priests made a mistake and rebelled against some rules God had given them. And a couple of the priests were killed, supernaturally by fire out of the presence of God, but the worship at the tabernacle only had been going on for less than a month. What numbers begins? So the Israelites had been out of Egypt for about one year.

They camped at Mount Sinai for about a year and then they began to travel. Their travels begin in the book of Numbers. They're still at Mount Sinai when this opens.

And by the end of the book, it is 37 or 38 years later and they are at the edge of the promised land. Now you may remember when God brought them out of Egypt, he promised to take them into the land of Canaan and to give it to them. And that was the idea.

The reason they left Egypt was not so they could wander around in the wilderness. They left Egypt so they could go to the promised land. And it was only about 11 days walk from Egypt to the promised land.

But they spent 40 years in the wilderness because of their rebellion against God. Now that rebellion had not occurred at the beginning of the book of Numbers, but it's in chapter 13 of Numbers that we read about that rebellion. And the New Testament makes reference to it also in Hebrews chapter three and four.

And so this was a turning point for Israel. They came to Kadesh Barnea in chapter 13 and there they sent spies into the promised land to see exactly what kind of land it was. And they brought back a good report in some respects.

They said the land is very fruitful, it's a beautiful land. It certainly is real estate that is desirable to possess. In fact, it's so desirable that some people a lot bigger and stronger than us already have thought the same thing and they've moved in and they control the place.

In fact, they're giants. And we could never take it from them. Now, of course, God had told Israel that he would dispossess the Canaanites and the giants and put Israel in the land.

But the people didn't believe God could do this. They looked at the giants and they said, well, there's no way we're gonna be able to conquer this land even though God said we could. And because of this lack of faith in God on their part, God became angry, he was provoked.

And this time was called the provocation. It's so referred to in Psalm 95, which where the Psalmist says to his own generation, do not harden your hearts as they did during the provocation. He's talking about the time when they decided that they didn't think they could take the land even though God said they could.

And God heard their complaints. And among the things they complained, they said, has God brought us out in the wilderness to kill us and our children? And God said, well, now about your children. They will not be killed here in the wilderness, but you will.

Every one of you who's over 20 years old is gonna die in the wilderness here. And your children who you thought would die are actually the ones who will receive the promised land. I'm actually gonna bring them in, but it's gonna be a generation delayed.

And all of you who are above 20 years old at this point, at the point of that rebellion, will die in the wilderness. Not all at once. Some of them certainly died in groups because there were massive judgments of serpents that bit them and killed them and wars and a plague at Baylepor and so forth.

And so many of them died rather in large groups. But those who didn't died one at a time. And over a period of 40 years, every last person of that generation that came out of Egypt who is over 20 at the time died, except for two men, Joshua and Caleb.

Now, Joshua and Caleb were made an exception because they were two of the spies that were sent in to spy out the land. There were 12 spies sent in, one from each tribe. And 10 of the spies had disheartened the children of Israel and told them that the giants were too big and the walls were too tall of the cities they had to conquer and that they couldn't do it.

And they disheartened the people and God was angry at them, but he was not angry at Joshua and Caleb because they tried to counter this negative report. They were saying, it's a beautiful land, we're well able to take it. God will deliver those people into our

hands.

They're meat for us, with God on our side, we can't lose. So there were two of the 12 spies who actually had strong confidence in God in this matter. And God was pleased with them.

And he eventually said that they alone of that generation would enter the promised land. They would be the two oldest men alive at the time that Israelites would cross the Jordan into the promised land and begin the conquest there. In fact, one of the men, Joshua, who is one of the two oldest men alive at the time in Israel was the leader of the armies, though he was over 60 years old.

Everyone else died before they reached the age of 60. Now Moses was already older than that. And now I shouldn't say everyone died before they reached the age of 60.

I should say that the oldest people who survived to go into the promised land were 60. Everyone older than that had died, including Moses and Aaron and Miriam. These died off one at a time.

And apparently in the case of Aaron and Miriam of natural causes, but Moses was taken away by God. And we read about that in Deuteronomy, not here in numbers. He was allowed to see the promised land across the river, but he was not allowed to enter it.

So even he didn't go in. Of that generation, only Joshua and Caleb, only two men went into the promised land. They all would have gone in if they had trusted God, but they didn't trust God.

And that's what we see in the book of numbers, this major turning point in the fortunes of those who had come out of Egypt. And so there's a certain point at which the book of numbers just skips over about 37 years without comment. It is summarized for us that they encamped at all these different places.

We saw, we read just a moment ago in chapter 33, a list of the encampments that Moses wrote down. There were 42 encampments in the course of 40 years. And they were not evenly spaced out.

They would stay maybe a few weeks in one place and maybe over a year in another place. But they would move around, they would not settle in. They'd move as the cloud moved.

You see, the glory of God appeared in the form of a cloud over the tabernacle. And when the cloud would begin to travel, the tabernacle and the company of Israelites had to travel with it. And so they'd have to break camp.

Breaking camp meant also tearing down the tabernacle. It was a big prefab building that

they could disassemble and put on carts and haul it around through the desert. And when the cloud would move, they broke camp, they took down the tabernacle, they moved, they followed the cloud until it stopped.

And when it stopped moving, they set up the tabernacle, set up their camp again, and stayed as long as the cloud stayed put. And as I said, sometimes this was only maybe a few weeks, and sometimes it was probably many months. But they never knew how long it would be.

They had to be keeping their eye on the cloud. There had to be a watchman who would say, and had to blow a trumpet when God would begin to move and say, we better break camp here. So this is what they did for 40 years.

Although, like I said, 37 of those years are passed over without specific comment. Apparently it got a little monotonous. If you think the Book of Numbers is monotonous now, just think how it would have been if we just read about them breaking camp and setting up camp and so forth.

But there is enough of that 40 years told that we get some insight as to how God was dealing with his people during their wilderness wanderings. And the Book of Numbers is the story of the wilderness wanderings. And therefore, the Hebrew name of the book, B'midbar, which means in the wilderness, is a very apt title for the book.

It is about these 40 years in the wilderness of the children of Israel. Now, in the New Testament, although, as I said, New Testament writers and even Jesus said that Moses gave the law, they never quoted directly from Numbers and attributed it to Moses. They did quote from Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy and say Moses wrote or Moses said this and quoted something from those books.

There are no quotes from the Book of Numbers in the New Testament where it says Moses wrote this. But as I said, Jesus did say Moses gave the law and the Book of Numbers is part of the Torah, the law, so that would be included. But it's obvious that the New Testament writers believed the Book of Numbers to be true, including no doubt the claims that Moses received these oracles from God.

In other words, they believe that this was communication from God through Moses, guiding the people of Israel during those 40 years before they entered the promised land. And many of the stories in it are alluded to as if true. For example, when Jesus was speaking with Nicodemus in John chapter three, and talking about the need to be born again, Nicodemus was having a hard time grasping what it means to be born again.

Initially, he thought that Jesus was referring to going through the whole birth process from a mother's womb again. And Jesus clarified, now I'm talking about a spiritual birth. And Nicodemus said, well, how can this be? And Jesus gave a somewhat longer answer

than this, but part of his answer, given in John chapter three and verse 14 was as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so the son of man must be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

So Jesus made reference to this story, which actually comes from the book of Numbers, that there was a time when Israel was rebelling against God, and God judged them by allowing deadly serpents to come into the camp and bite a bunch of them, and they were dying. Many of them did die and others were dying slowly, and Moses interceded and God said, make a bronze serpent, hang it up on a pole, and anyone who looks at that serpent will be healed of their snake bite. And apparently this is what happened.

He did make a bronze serpent and people were spared death. And of course, Jesus likened that to himself being raised up on the cross, because people who don't know Christ, obviously are dying. The wages of sin is death, and we need to be saved from that.

And people simply had to look at the serpent and the effects of the snake bite would be cured. And Jesus said, just like that, whoever believes in me will not perish, but have everlasting life. So Jesus likened his own death in principle to that story in the book of Numbers and that event.

It's kind of interesting that later on in the revival that Josiah brought, that we are told in a much later book in second Kings, that the children of Israel had kept this bronze serpent and had almost begun to idolize it. They began to burn incense to it. And the king in bringing about the restoration of pure religion in Israel or Judah, he broke it up into pieces and he gave it the name Nahuštan.

He called it Nahuštan, which just means a piece of brass. It's not a God, it's just a piece of brass. And it's kind of interesting to find that out so many hundreds of years after Moses' time, that the bronze serpent that he had made was still kept and had even become something of a relic that was venerated.

But that story of the making of the bronze serpent comes from this book. Another place where numbers is referred to in the New Testament is in 1 Corinthians 10. And there we have an extended passage where Paul summarizes quite a few of the stories in the book of Numbers.

And he says that these things are a type of our life. Now by type, he means something that foreshadows and depicts in a pictorial way, spiritual truths about our lives. And in 1 Corinthians 10, you'll find in verse one, Paul wrote, "Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud and passed through the sea.

All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual rock that followed

them.

And that rock was Christ. But with most of them, God was not well pleased for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things became our examples." The word examples in the Greek is types, which means a pattern.

Their experience was a pattern for us. They were our types, they were our patterns, our examples. "To the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted.

And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. Nor let us commit sexual immorality as some of them did.

And in one day, 23,000 fell. Nor let us tempt Christ as some of them also tempted and were destroyed by serpents. Nor complain as some of them also complained and were destroyed by the destroyer." Now, all these things happened to them as examples, or again, the word types.

Twice in verse six and in verse 11, Paul uses the word types or patterns. The experiences of the children of Israel were a pattern, a type and a shadow of the Christian experience. And a warning to us.

He says, they were given, they happened as examples and they were written for our admonition or our warning, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Now, he does mention some things that were in the book of Numbers. He talks about passing through the sea.

He talks about the receiving of manna, which actually occurred first in the 16th chapter of Exodus. He even talks about how they sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. That's actually from Exodus also, has to do with the golden calf incident in Exodus.

But other things he mentions here are from the book of Numbers. When he says that we shouldn't commit sexual immorality as some of them did. And in one day, 23,000 fell.

That's talking about the incident at Bealpeor, which is in the book of Numbers. Actually, the book of Numbers says 24,000 fell. And that's been one of the areas where some people have thought there's a contradiction in the Bible.

Almost certainly it is simply a textual corruption. That is no doubt Paul and the book of Numbers both had the same number originally, but one of those has been recopied incorrectly. So it's come down to us changed.

But he is talking about the same incident, Bealpeor where 24,000 or 23,000 in one day died under the plague. He also mentions, let us not tempt Christ as some of them also tempted and were destroyed by serpents. That again is the same incident as we were

talking about earlier with the bronze serpent.

These people were killed by deadly snakes. And he says, nor let us complain as some of them also complained and they were destroyed by the destroyer. These are events that happened to them during their wilderness wanderings and which are recorded in the book of Numbers.

Now, Paul said those things all happened to them as an example for us, for our warning, which means that the book of Numbers is not some irrelevant archaic document about things that happened thousands of years ago to people that we can hardly relate with. It may be that in many ways we can't relate with them. I've never had God speak to me audibly from a visible cloud.

I've never wandered around the wilderness and camped in various places. I don't have all the same experiences, but what they did go through have spiritual parallels to what we go through. And therefore the wilderness wandering of Israel in the 40 years is a picture of the Christians life in some respects.

In that they, he mentions they were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Now, of course, it may seem strange to suggest that they were baptized in crossing the Red Sea. But what Paul is trying to do is tell the story in such a way as to show the parallels to us.

They crossed the Red Sea. That is like us being baptized when we become Christians. They were baptized into the cloud too, the presence of God, and we are baptized in the Holy Spirit.

They ate the bread from heaven. He's talking about the manna. Of course, Jesus said, I'm the true bread that comes down from heaven.

And whoever eats of me will have eternal life. He says they drank the spiritual drink that came from the rock. That rock was Christ.

What he means is that rock is parallel to Christ in the analogy he's given. In other words, he's saying he could have told other stories besides these, but he's telling the ones that specifically he can use to show parallel our experience of conversion, of being saved, of following Christ, of being nourished by Christ. But he says that although they all had these experiences initially, God eventually caused some of them, well, a lot of them, to die in the wilderness under his judgment.

With many of them, God was not well pleased, it says. And so he's saying that's a warning to us because we have been baptized. We've walked in the spirit.

We've eaten of Christ. We've drunk of the spirit of God, the water, the living water, like they did. But that doesn't mean there's no danger to us because if we rebel like they did,

then we could come under his judgment as they did.

And he says, so let's not commit idolatry. Let's not commit immorality. Let's not tempt Christ because they did all those things and they were killed in large numbers as a result.

So he says that's a warning to us. And this is how Paul applies the book of Numbers here in 1 Corinthians chapter 10. I mentioned that Hebrews chapter three also deals with numbers and especially with what he calls the provocation or the rebellion in some of the modern translations.

The writer of Hebrews, interestingly, is talking about a concept of rest that the children of God are to experience. And Christian commentators are not fully agreed as to what rest he's referring to. As he develops the idea in chapter three and four of Hebrews, he makes it clear that there are two stories in the Old Testament that he's connecting.

One of them is the story of the creation where God made all things in six days. On the seventh day, he rested. Then there's the story of the Israelites coming to Canaan because Moses had spoken to them in Deuteronomy of entering Canaan as entering their rest because they were gonna rest from their wanderings.

You spend 40 years moving around, camping around, wandering around, you're not really resting. You're not settling in. Coming into the land of Canaan was a settling in, a rest, coming into their rest, resting from their continual travels.

And so the word rest had been used both in Genesis of God resting after he created everything, and also of the children of Israel coming into the land of Canaan after they had wandered for 40 years. I'd like to look at what Hebrews says about this because it develops this idea. Both of these ideas of rest are combined as if they're the same idea and that they correspond to the rest that Christians come into.

Now, I'll just tell you in advance, the two opinions that Christians have about this are very different from each other. Many commentators, when they deal with Hebrews 3-4, and they discuss the rest, they think of it as the rest that we will have from our labors when we go to heaven. The Bible does on several occasions, including the book of Revelation, talk about those who die in the Lord, they enter into their rest.

That is to say, we rest from our turmoil in this world, from our trials, and from our, you know, exhaustion of just trying to wage warfare against the world and against the flesh and against the devil. We enter into rest from that when we die and go to heaven. And after all, if Paul does describe the Christian life as being similar to the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness of numbers, then the coming into the promised land at the end of that would perhaps correspond with the end of our lives when we no longer wander in the wilderness, we no longer are in danger of rebellion and so forth.

So many commentators believe that the rest of which the writer of Hebrews speaks is a rest that is in heaven when we die. Others have been fairly convinced that the rest that we enter into is not a reference to heaven, at least not only a reference to resting in heaven, but there's a sense in which we enter into that rest now. And the way he talks about it in Hebrews chapter four, it sounds as if he's talking about something he wants his readers to enter into now, entering into God's rest.

And in Hebrews, if you take the context of the whole book, you find that he's describing the Old Testament order and the tabernacle and the sacrifices and the priesthood and so forth as a laborious activity that goes on and on without rest or without cessation. For example, in chapter 10 of Hebrews, the writer says, we see in the Old Testament, the priests always standing, offering again and again and again, the same sacrifices that never really get the job done. In other words, the priests, although they sometimes would sit down, he says in the tabernacle, they didn't sit down.

In the Old Testament worship, they had to be standing all the time. There were no chairs there. There was the mercy seat, but only God sat on that.

The priest didn't. The priest always had to be standing, which the writer of Hebrews takes to be a posture of not being resting yet. But then he contrasts Christ and he says, but this man, Christ, after he offered one sacrifice for all time of himself, sat down at the right hand of God.

And so the idea here is that the Old Testament religion was one of ceaseless labor, ceaseless efforts to cleanse from sin again and again and again. And yet Christ has done that with a single act. And as a result, he sat down because there was nothing more that had to be done to accomplish our salvation.

And so Christ, in a sense, is able to rest. He's seated, he's reclined in a way that the priest in the Old Testament never could be. And this contrast is made to suggest that there's a rest that we enter into when we enter into Christ's rest.

Christ is at rest in a sense. Christ is seated. God rested when he finished the creation.

He rested because the job was done. And Christ has rested as a result of finishing our redemption and therefore we enter into his rest in a spiritual sense when we cease to labor for our own righteousness and we rest in the finished work of Christ. Now, I'd like to read to you the verses in Hebrews relevant to this.

And I will not settle the question because there are better minds than mine that have disputed one way or the other as to what the rest is he's speaking of. And certainly he might have both in mind that we enter into a spiritual rest when we cease to strive and cease to work for our own righteousness and our own salvation. And we just rest and trust in Christ.

We come into a full relationship of faith in what he has done instead of what we can do. But then of course, there's a more complete and total final rest. Once we've died, we enter into an activity that is restful.

We will be doing things after we've died. We will, in the resurrection, we'll be doing things, but there will not be this struggling, this striving that there is in this life. First of all, there won't be any warfare because there'll be no enemy there and it'll be a peaceable and therefore restful existence.

But he begins talking about this in Hebrews 3, verse seven. "'Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,' now he's gonna quote a lengthy passage from Psalm 95, but this Psalm is recalling numbers. It's recalling the provocation, the time when the Jews did not trust God and they said, we can't conquer the land and God got angry at them and said, okay, you're gonna wander for 40 years and you're gonna die in the wilderness and your children will go in.

And this is remembering that, the Psalm that he's quoting here. "'Today, if you will hear his voice, "'do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,' the King James says in the provocation. "'In the day of trial in the wilderness "'where your fathers tested me, tried me, "'and saw my works for 40 years.

"'Therefore, I was angry with that generation. "'I said, they always go astray in their heart "'and they have not known my ways. "'I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.'" Now in this case, I swore they will not enter my rest was when God said, all of you who are over 20 years old at this time, you will not enter into Canaan.

You will die here in the wilderness and your children will go into Canaan, into the rest. So entering into the promised land is what is referred to as the rest that he said they would not enter into. Then in verse 12, he says, "'Beware brethren, lest there be in any of you "'an evil heart of unbelief "'in departing from the living God.'" Now it's interesting that the writer of Hebrews and Paul both make reference to the book of Numbers and to the rebellion of the people of Israel there and use it as a warning to us not to backslide, not to depart from the living God.

And obviously he wouldn't give this warning if he didn't think that was a real danger and a real possibility. There are some people today who believe that if you're truly a Christian, you cannot fall away, that God will inevitably preserve you in the faith until you die if you're one of the elect. But, and if you do fall away, that you never really were a Christian, you just thought you were.

But that is not the opinion of the writer of Hebrews. Notice the people he's writing to in Hebrews 3, 1. He says, "'Therefore, holy brethren, "'partakers of the heavenly calling.'" So he's not writing to people who aren't Christians. He's writing to people who are Christians, they're holy brethren.

He's writing to the ones among his readership who are partakers of the heavenly calling. And he says to them in verse 12, "Beware brethren," again brethren is Christians, "lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief "in departing from the living God." And he's saying it's like the Israelites, they had an evil heart of unbelief and they came under God's judgment rather than blessing. They did not enter into his rest in Canaan.

He says, "But exhort one another daily "while it is called today, "lest any of you be hardened "through the deceitfulness of sin." Why does he say, while it is called today? Because he has just quoted Psalm 95 that begins with the word today. "Today, if you will hear his voice, "do not harden your hearts," as in the rebellion. The psalmist was warning his own generation, which was centuries after the time of Moses, that they should not make the same error that the people in the time of Moses had made.

And the psalmist is saying to his own generation, today, if you hear his voice, don't make the mistake they made. And the writer of Hebrews says, "Now we're living a thousand years after the psalmist "and I have the same thing to say to you, "while it is called today." As long as there's a day, we don't know if there's gonna be a tomorrow, but right now there's a today. And as long as you have the opportunity now, I'm gonna give you the same exhortation the psalmist gave in Psalm 95.

"Don't harden your hearts, "but rather do enter into his rest." He says, "For we have become partakers of Christ "if we hold the beginning of our confidence "steadfast to the end." Again, it's a big if. We are members of Christ's body. We're partakers of Christ.

We're saved if we continue. That's a condition, isn't it? And he says, "While it is said today, "if you will hear his voice, "do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." Again, referring to Psalm 95. Now, the author of Hebrews begins to make his own commentary on this psalm.

He says, "For who, having heard, rebelled? "Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, "led by Moses? "Now with whom was he angry for 40 years? "Was it not with those who sinned, "whose corpses fell in the wilderness? "And to whom did he swear that they would not enter "his rest, but to those who did not obey? "So we see that they could not enter because of unbelief." Now, here we have the chapter division, but the writer didn't put it in there. That was put in centuries after this was written. There's no chapter division in the mind of the author.

He continues, "Therefore, since a promise remains "of entering his rest, let us fear, "lest any of you seem to have come short of it." Now, why does he say there remains a promise of entering into his rest? Well, I think what he's saying is the psalmist seemed to think so. Even though the psalmist lived a long time after that second generation of Israelites actually did enter Canaan, they actually did enter into the rest that their fathers failed to enter into. Yet centuries later, the psalmist is still talking as if there's a possibility of failing to enter into that rest if you harden your heart.

So the writer of Hebrews is taking from Psalm 95 the idea that, hey, this entering into rest isn't just for that one generation of the people contemporary with Moses. The psalmist, hundreds of years later, is exhorting his people to enter into the rest and not harden their hearts and not make the same mistake. And therefore, there does remain at all times, not just for that generation, but all generations, an opportunity to enter into God's rest.

He says, therefore, since a promise remains of entering his rest, let us fear, lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel, probably here should be translated good news, which is what the word gospel means, was preached to us as well as to them. See, we don't have any evidence of the gospel as we know it being preached to them, but they did have good news.

The good news was the promise of God that they could enter into the promised land and own this good land flowing with milk and honey. That was good news. He gave them a promise too, like he gave us.

The gospel was preached to us as well as to them, but the word which they heard did not profit them not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. And this is what he's gonna say. We enter into God's rest by faith.

They did not enter into God's rest because they didn't have faith. They didn't believe that God's promise was true. They didn't believe he could deliver the giants into their hands and give them the land of Canaan.

That's what this author is saying. He says, the word that they received didn't profit them because they didn't mix it with faith by implication, the word that we've received would not profit us if we don't mix it with faith. That's of course the connection he's making.

For we who have believed do enter that rest. Now see, this makes it sound like he's talking about something present, not dying and going to heaven. We who have believed do, present tense, enter into that rest.

Believing is resting. By trusting in Christ instead of in your own works, you have ceased from a mentality of righteousness by earnings, by works. And you therefore enter into a rest, a state of mind where you're not striving and worried about whether you're gonna do enough good works to justify you before God.

You don't have to worry about that. You don't have to strive about that. Christ has done all the work necessary to justify you before God.

He says, we who have believed do enter that rest as he has said, and he quotes again from the Psalm 95, so I swore my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. Although the works were finished from the foundation of the world, for he has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way. And here he quotes from Genesis two, and God rested on

the seventh day from all his works.

And again in this place, Psalm 95, they shall not enter my rest. Now he's kind of toggling between two scenes in the Old Testament. One is God resting on the seventh day.

The other is the rest that God was giving his people in the promised land. And now he's got them both in the picture here. God has called us to rest in Christ, to rest in what he has accomplished, to trust in him, and therefore to be reposed, to have peace.

Paul said that in Romans chapter five, and verse one, therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God, peace and rest, because we're justified by faith. Now, the rest that we enter by faith can be compared to, of course, the rest of the Israelites when they came into Canaan, but it can also be compared to God's rest. He rested after he had finished a work, the work of creation.

On the seventh day, he rested. Since Christ has also finished the work of redemption, we can rest in him. We enter into his rest.

He is resting and we are in him, resting in him. It's his rest that we're participating in, just like it's his life that we're living. It's this life that we have in Christ.

Now, he then, of course, mentions the creation. Then he moves from that back to the idea of Canaan. Verse six, since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, again, he designates a certain day, saying in David, in Psalm 95, today.

After such a long time, as it is said, today, if you'll hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Now, what he's working on here is the idea that if David, 500 years after Moses, or 600 years after Moses, could still be talking to his generation about the need to enter into God's rest, then there must be more to it than just what happened when the second generation of Israelites entered into Canaan, into their rest. There must be more to the rest than that if David, centuries later, is still inviting people to be a part of that.

And that's the point he makes in verse eight. For if Joshua had given them rest, of course, it was Joshua who brought them into the kingdom then, into the rest, well, the rest he gave them isn't the complete rest. If Joshua had given them rest, then he would not afterward have spoken of another day in Psalm 95.

There remains, therefore, a rest for the people of God. Now, this word rest in this verse is different than in the rest of these verses. The word rest here is a keeping of Sabbath.

Because he has mentioned God resting on the seventh day, he says, well, there remains a keeping of Sabbath for the people of God today. This one verse is the only one in the New Testament that could be said to teach Sabbath keeping. And so those who are Sabbatharians, always, of course, looking for some support for their view in the New

Testament, always will come to this verse, because the writer in Greek actually said, there remains a keeping of Sabbath for the people of God.

They say, see, there you go, we're still supposed to keep the Sabbath day. But he explains what he means when he says there remains a keeping of Sabbath. He says, for he who has entered his rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from his.

When we fully trust in Christ, we cease from a life of our own works. We do good works, but they are God working in us to will and to do with his good pleasure. It is Christ in us working.

We're not doing our own works. We don't have in our flesh the ability to do the works that would be necessary to please God or to justify us before God. We've ceased from our own works as a means of righteousness, and we've now entered into a trust in the finished work of Christ as adequate.

That's the keeping of Sabbath that we have. In other words, he says there is a keeping of Sabbath, but it's a spiritual keeping of Sabbath. It's a spiritual rest.

And by the way, when Paul says there's a keeping of Sabbath, although it sounds like he's saying we keep the Sabbath day, it's very much like when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5.7 or 5.8, let us therefore keep the feast, meaning the feast of unleavened bread in the context. But then he says not with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. In other words, keeping the feast of unleavened bread, which he advocates, is living a life of sincerity and truth, free from the leaven of malice and wickedness.

So when Paul says let's keep the feast, he means it in a spiritual sense. When the writer of Hebrews says there's a keeping of Sabbath, he means this spiritual Sabbath. We cease from our own works.

And thus he says, let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, in verse 11, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. So again, the writer of Hebrews, like Paul, is telling us that the children of Israel falling by disobedience are an example to us and a warning to us, and that we must be diligent to enter that rest. It's interesting that diligence would be necessary to rest.

But you see, our own human nature is always to be self-justifying, always to earn, not to be the one with the handout, not to be a humble beggar and saying, I cannot help myself. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Much more in our nature is to be like the Pharisees, that God, I thank you, I'm not like other men.

I fast twice a week, I pay my tithes of everything, I keep your laws. You should be very happy to have me on your side, God, because I'm very good and I do a lot. Jesus said the man who said simply, God, be merciful to me, a sinner, went home justified and the

other did not.

It's hard to simply rest when there seems to be so much that needs to be done. And especially once we have been saved and we find that we still are not perfect, we find we still fall. Many Christians have a real struggle with this.

Oh, I better strive more to do more good works now because I've got to atone for my failures. But that's not true, Christ atoned for our failures. It's simply repent and believe and keep walking with Jesus.

Anyway, this entering into God's rest is an interesting excursus that the writer of Hebrews goes upon. And as I said, there's some question as to whether he's talking about the spiritual rest we enter now or whether he's talking about when you die and go to heaven. A case can be made either way.

I wouldn't be surprised if the author had both of those things in mind, but it's hard to say. Another use of the book of Numbers in the New Testament is found in 2 Peter 2 and in Jude, both of whom have essentially the same thing to say. In 2 Peter 2, once again, this is in a warning against backsliding.

It's interesting how many authors in the New Testament warn against backsliding and use the book of Numbers as a case in point, as a warning to us. In 2 Peter 2, verses 15 and 16, Peter says, they have forsaken the right way and gone astray following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness. Now he's talking about false teachers who were once going the right way, but they've gone the wrong way now.

They've forsaken the right way. And they've been lured off by the same lure that got Balaam into trouble. Now, Balaam is a soothsayer whose story actually occupies a significant portion of the book of Numbers in chapter 20 and following for several chapters.

He's a enigmatic character. It's hard to know who Balaam really was. I mean, what he was.

He was not Jewish, and yet he had an acquaintance with Jehovah, Israel's God. But it's probable that he was more of a soothsayer who could consult any God he wished, because commonly people who weren't Jewish in those days, who weren't Israel, believed there were many gods. And they believed that Israel's God was a god too, that there was a Jehovah, a Yahweh, but there were other gods too.

And I suspect that Balaam, who was a pagan himself, was sort of an equal opportunity consultant with any god you wished to pay him to consult with. And Balak, who was the king of the Moabites, was afraid of the Israelites. And Balaam had a reputation throughout the region of having some kind of spiritual authority and power.

And whoever he cursed would be cursed. Whoever he blessed would be blessed. So Balak, the king, he sent messengers to Balaam and said, we'll pay you money if you'll curse these people, Israel, because I'm afraid of them.

They're coming into my territory, and I don't think I can defeat them. So I'll pay you good money if you'll just curse them, because whoever you curse will be cursed. Well, Balaam said, well, let me consult the Lord about this.

And he went and he spoke to Jehovah. And in this case, Jehovah spoke to him and said, don't do that. These people cannot be cursed.

They're my people. So Balaam actually commendably came out and said, I'm sorry, I can't do it. God, Jehovah, has said that these people can't be cursed.

And he said, even if the king would offer me a whole house full of gold and jewels, I couldn't accept. Hint, hint. Like, maybe I need to be offered a little more.

And they went back and told King Balak. And he said, nonsense, offer him more money. And so they came back with a bigger offer.

And Balaam said, well, let me ask God about this again. Now, there should be no need to ask God again. God gave a fairly definitive answer.

These people cannot be cursed. They are blessed. They're my people.

You cannot curse them. And Balaam, of course, knew that, but he wanted to, he was lured by the offer of more money. And so he did go in and consult God.

And God, in this case, accommodated him. Because he should have known better. He shouldn't have asked twice.

God said, go ahead. Yeah, go ahead. Just make sure you don't say anything more than what I tell you to say, but just go ahead and go with these men.

But when Balaam saddled his donkey and went to go with his men, it says God was angry at him for going. So it's clear that the permission that God gave him was not any more sincere than Balaam's motives in asking were sincere. If you wanna play games with God, he can play along.

If you're gonna keep asking until you get permission, I'll give you permission right now, but I won't be happy about it because I don't agree with it. And so God says, go ahead. And Balaam goes and God's angry.

And that's that famous story where an angel with a sword stood in the way to slay Balaam. The donkey saw him and Balaam didn't. And the donkey tried to avoid the angel and rubbed up against a mountain and crushed Balaam's foot.

And he was real angry. He started beating the donkey. And then they went a little further on and the angel with the sword was standing in a narrow place that they couldn't get around.

And the donkey just laid down under Balaam. And he got off and started beating the donkey. And it says, the Lord opened the donkey's mouth and said, why are you beating me like this? And Balaam said, because you hurt my foot and you're a rebellious donkey.

He was so angry, he couldn't even, didn't even stop thinking, wait a minute, I'm talking to a donkey. A donkey's talking back, that's even stranger. And the donkey's mouth had not been stopped yet.

Donkey said, have I ever been accustomed to acting this way before? And Balaam said, no. And then Balaam's eyes were open and he saw the angel. He finally got as smart as the donkey, as discerning as the donkey.

Here's a man who has had a reputation of being a spiritual man who can consult the gods and get information, but he didn't have as much spiritual discernment as a donkey had. In fact, it says in the book of Judges that, with reference to Balaam, that the dumb ass rebuked the madness of the prophet, which is kind of an interesting irony. Here the prophet usually does the rebuking, but the dumb ass rebuked the prophet.

Anyway, the angels, once Balaam saw the angel, the angel said, listen, it's a good thing your donkey laid down, because I would have killed you. Your donkey just saved your life. But the angel gave him the same instructions.

Go ahead, go with these men, but only say what God says. And what happened was when Balaam got to Balak, he went to certain places to offer sacrifices and things like that to the deities. And then he would go into a trance and he began to give an oracle.

And every oracle he gave was a blessing to Israel. And Balak kept getting angrier and angrier. He said, I'm paying you to curse them, not bless them.

He said, I can't say anything about what God puts in my mouth. And because Balaam was going into a trance, he didn't have any control over what he was saying. So God actually had him uttering these blessings on Israel.

And of course, Balak was angry about that. Now, the sequel to that, and we're gonna have to close here. The sequel to that is that Balaam still wanted to make the money.

And therefore he said to Balak, and we read about this in the book of Revelation, actually. In Revelation chapter two, it said, there were those in the church of Pergamum who had the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel to get them to eat meat, sacrifice idols, and to commit fornication. Now, Revelation is where we read about this.

Although in the book of Numbers, we find Moses also saying in a chapter much later, after the story of Balaam has receded into the past, there's a battle and so forth. And Moses reveals at that time that the women of Midian and Moab had been counseled by Balaam to go and seduce the men of Israel. Apparently, Balaam had told Balak, listen, I can't curse these people.

Every time I try, God just kind of gets ahold of my mouth and I just send a blessing. But I can tell you how to curse them. Send your pretty women in there into the camp of the Israelites, seduce them into sexual immorality, and draw them into the worship of Baal-peor, which is the god of the Midianites and the Moabites.

And then God himself will curse them. And sure enough, the women came into the camp of Israel, they did seduce a lot of the men, and they did begin to worship Baal-peor, and a plague came on the people. That's the time when 23,000 or 24,000 died in one day.

Anyway, this is how the New Testament takes these stories from the book of Numbers and applies them to us. You can read the stories for yourself. And there's quite a few other important things in the book of Numbers that are not brought out in the New Testament, but you can see their value as you read them.

Just persevere through those chapters that give the census numbers. Basically, some of the opening chapters, he takes a census of all the men over 20 years old, of each of the 12 tribes. The reason that over 20 years old is because he's numbering people who can fight in war.

He does not take at that time the census of the Levites, who took care of the tabernacle and the worship services, although he took their census later on. And then he took a census of the firstborn children of Israel and found out that the number of them was very close to the number of the Levites. Now God had claimed the firstborn for himself.

Remember when he smote Pharaoh's firstborn and all the firstborn of Egypt, God told Israel, therefore, your firstborn will be mine because I redeemed you at the cost of the firstborn of Egypt. So God kind of owned the firstborn in a special sense. But when the census was taken and showed the firstborn of Israel, the number of them, was very, very close to the firstborn, or excuse me, the number of the Levites, God said, I'll tell you what, I'll let you keep your firstborn, I'll take the Levites.

And they can be my special people. They'll be the ones who take care of the tabernacle and so forth. And so you see these different censuses, and there's a second census later on.

Interestingly, the number of Israelites in the second generation, after the old ones had died, was about the same. There's about 600,000 men in both censuses. Now that seems like a very large number.

If the men over 20 numbered 600,000, well then what about the women over 20? Probably about the same, another 600,000. That's over a million, 1.2 million. Then there's all the children who are under 20.

That could be equal to the number of adults. There could have been close to three million people. Now there are some things that have made people doubt that there were three million people, and some have suggested that one of the textual problems in the book of Numbers may be that the word thousands in Hebrew looks very much like the word chieftains in Hebrew.

So, and it is thought by some that where it says 600,000, it should be rendered 600 chieftains. And therefore we have not so many millions of people. There is a possibility of a textual corruption like that in the copying of it.

Someone could have miscopied a word. But that explanation doesn't fully work out because the 600,000 is arrived at by taking the totals of all the 12 tribes when their censuses are taken. And we have all the individual numbers of the 12 tribes and they add up to that.

And their numbers aren't round numbers. Their numbers are not so many thousands. It's so many thousands and 120s and so forth.

So you can't really do the chieftain thing with the individual tribes. Like you might get away with the total number. And yet the total number is based on the individual numbers.

So there are some problems with having such a large group cross the Red Sea and travel through the wilderness for 40 years. And like where are their bones? Where are their graves? Well, I guess jackals and vultures could have carried them off, they didn't all die at once. And by the way, that's the desert.

I mean, sand storms, there may be sand dunes on top of huge graveyards that we'll never discover. But the point is there are some who've doubted that the Israelites could have been so many. But it's hard to get away from the numbers if you're gonna take all the numbers in the book of numbers seriously and add them up as they do.

So we've got a very large group of people wandering through the wilderness. After the first generation has died off, they take a census again near the end of that time for the new generation. There's almost the same number of people.

There's still about 600,000 men over 20 years old. And that's the group that goes into the promised land with Joshua. And we come to that in the book of Joshua.

But the next book is Deuteronomy. And Deuteronomy, again, doesn't have very much historical movement. It's mainly sermons that Moses gave just before he died, which was

just before Joshua took the people into the promised land.

But as you read the book of numbers, by the way, in my notes, there's a lot more information than I'm able to cover in these lectures, including a thorough outline of the whole book and what's in every chapter and so forth. So the notes are there for that purpose. And I can only say as much as I have time to say, which means only a portion of what's in your notes, but you've got those.

And I hope that'll be helpful to you as you study the book of numbers.