

In the Wilderness (Numbers)

Big Idea: God cares for his people, but we're prone to rebel. But God is still faithful despite our disobedience.

Have you ever read a book because of its title? I have. The first time I heard about [The Four-Hour Workweek](#), I knew I was going to read that book. I didn't know if I would like it or not, but I knew I would read it.

The same applies to Carolyn Weber's book [Sex and the City of God](#). It combines the title Sex and the City with the title of Saint Augustine's classic *The City of God*. One of my friends joked that if someone believed that "the perfect book title doesn't exist," he'd show them a copy of this book.

A good title can grab you, but a bad title can turn you away.

Out of the 66 books in the Bible, I believe that the one with the most off-putting title is the book of Numbers. Some of you may get excited when you hear of the book of Numbers, but you'd be in the minority. It gets that name because the book has two censuses, one in chapter 1 and the other in chapter 26. But if you think that Numbers is about numbers, you'd be absolutely wrong.

The Hebrew name for the book is much more accurate and much more interesting: "In the Wilderness." Does that sound like a book that could interest you? Another Hebrew title that's sometimes used for this book is "The LORD Spoke," because that phrase, or something like it, appears in every chapter of the book. "In the Wilderness" or "The LORD Spoke" come a lot closer to expressing the theme of this book than the English title Numbers.

God rescued Israel from Egypt. He promised to bring them into the land of Canaan. Numbers describes the in-between phase between Egypt and the Promised Land. It's a diary of the early days of Israel's relationship with God outside of Egypt. It's a travel diary.

That's why the title "In the Wilderness" is such a good one. It's also why it's sad that this book is so neglected, and why so many people are afraid of it when they get to this part of the Bible.

This book contains three messages that we need to hear.

One: God cares for his people.

God rescued Israel from Egypt. But God didn't stop caring for his people then. For the first year, God kept Israel at Mount Sinai preparing them for what was to come.

Here's what we've already seen this year:

- God is very faithful in caring for his people. Look at everything that happened that year at Sinai.
- God revealed himself to them so they would know what he was like (Exodus 19).
- God gave them his law so that they would know what he expected from them (Exodus 20).
- God rewrote his covenant with them even after they broke it. He gave them a second chance (Exodus 34).
- He gave Israel instructions to build him a tabernacle so he could live among them (Exodus 35-40).

- He provided a system of sacrificial substitutes so that he could live among them even though they were sinful people (Leviticus).

But here's what Numbers adds to how God worked among them in that first year of their freedom:

- He equipped and organized the people with everything they needed (Numbers 1-4).
- He taught them about purity so that they would realize that they lived in the presence of a holy God (Numbers 5-6).
- He invited them into worship (Numbers 8-9).
- He led them with his visible presence (Numbers 10).

Imagine what it would be like to live in that first year, to see God care for you in such a careful and deliberate way.

God was truly present with his people. He was committed to keeping his promises to them.

You could capture God's care of Israel through a couple of passages in this first part of Numbers. Let me just mention one. It may be familiar to you because I use it a lot. Numbers 6:22-26 says:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

What an amazing passage. God is so committed to his people that he commands his priest to bless them. God commands his representative to pronounce his protection and favor on his people. Hear that: God is determined to give his people his protection and favor. He gives his people what they most need to protect them from harm.

Think for a minute about what it means for the LORD’s face to shine upon you:

This is the heart of blessing: to have the Lord delight in us so much that it is as if his face shines whenever he sees us. Blessing is not just that our faces shine when we look at the beauties of God, but that he delights to turn his face toward us and look at us. Blessing is our heavenly Father’s face beaming as he looks upon us. Can you imagine God delighting in you in this way? (Iain M. Duguid)

See what I mean about Numbers not being boring? This is what we most need, what we most want, and Numbers says that it’s what God gives to his people.

Let me give you another passage that summarizes God’s heart for his people.

And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, “Arise, O LORD, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.” And when it rested, he said, “Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel.” (Numbers 10:35-26)

God is their advance guard. God fights for his people. As long as God was fighting for them, victory was assured, no matter how outnumbered they may have been.

God really does care for his people. The same is true for you today. Have you considered all the ways that God cares for you? Have you ever sensed how much God has done for you, how his favor and protection have been the story of your life? If you have trusted Jesus, then God has forgiven you and made you his own. He cares about every detail of your life. He is watching over you. He will hold you fast. God really does care for his people.

But the next lesson we learn in Numbers is this:

Two: We really are prone to blow it.

God cares for his people. They saw God deliver them from Egypt. They saw God's glory fill the tabernacle. They saw the Lord lead them in a pillar of cloud and fire.

How do they respond? Numbers 11:1 gives us a foretaste: "And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes..." (11:1). Over and over again, they fail:

- Moses' own siblings challenge his leadership (Numbers 12).
- They spy the land, but 10 of the 12 spies refuse to believe God's promises (Numbers 13-14).
- Led by a man named Korah, the people assemble against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16).

From the very beginning, and over and over again, they fall into habitual rebellion. They never miss a chance to doubt God, discourage his leaders, and damage themselves. God is determined to bless them, but they seem determined to forfeit his blessings.

The worst rebellion comes in Numbers 16 and 17, which is the theological and literary center of the book. The people try to overthrow God's appointed leaders. They grumble and wish they were back in Egypt. In a dramatic act of judgment, God consumes some of the rebels with fire.

Did the people learn their lesson? The very next day, we read: "But on the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron..." (Numbers 16:41).

This is not a boring book! God cares for his people, but they rebel over and over again. Because of their disobedience, they experience God's judgment. God decides an entire generation must die off. A journey that should have taken about 11 days ends up taking 40 years.

Is this just about Israel's rebellion? No. It's about ours too. At least twice, the New Testament picks up on these rebellions and cautions us:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. (1 Corinthians 10:6)

*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,
"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your fathers put me to the test
and saw my works for forty years.
Therefore I was provoked with that generation,
and said, 'They always go astray in their heart;
they have not known my ways.'*

*As I swore in my wrath,,
'They shall not enter my rest.' "*

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:7-13)

Ian Vaillancourt [writes](#):

Christians should read the book of Numbers and stand in fear. We should see that none of us is beyond the "root sin" of unbelief that can manifest itself in so many other sins. Ultimately, this sin is capable of leading us to fall away from the living God ... If the fearful from the book of Numbers were not able to enter the promised land because of their unbelief, how much more should we read and fear the same outcome in our journey toward the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness dwells.

We should not think too highly of ourselves. We are capable of wandering. We are capable of doubting God. That's why we need each other. It's why we keep meeting together, why we need to encourage each other. It is possible to see God work powerfully and experience his care and still fall by the way. We are prone to sin and rebellion. "Take care...lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God..."

Don't take your devotion to Christ for granted. Don't grumble against God. Don't stop worshiping with his people. Learn from the example of the Israelites.

God cares for his people, but we're really prone to blow it. But there's one more lesson from Numbers that we can learn.

Three: God is faithful despite our disobedience.

Please don't miss the warning that Numbers gives us. But please don't also give up hope.

Because in Numbers 26 to 36, God raises up a new generation, and he is determined to keep his promises to them. In Numbers 26, God tells Moses to take a new census. What's he doing? He took a census in chapter 1; now, almost 40 years later, he's starting again. He refuses to give up on his people. Near the end of the book, they actually start to take possession of the land that God promised to them.

Numbers teaches us about God's judgment, but it also teaches us about God's relentless love, a love that doesn't easily give up, a love that keeps on pursuing us long after we've abandoned him.

I'll bet you thought that the book of Numbers was boring. It's anything but. It's the story of how God treats his wayward people. **God cares for his people, but we're prone to rebel. But God is still faithful despite our disobedience.**

How are you doing? Like me, you're prone to rebel. Stay tethered to Christ. Rely on his grace. He is our only hope. But even when you fail, cling to Christ, because "there is more mercy in Christ than there is sin in us" (Richard Sibbes).

Lord, you are so good to us. And we are so prone to rebel. Would you keep us close to you. Hold us fast.

Thank you that your grace is greater than our sin. May we run back to you even when we fail. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.