

Teachings in the Book of Numbers (I)

Passages: Num 1; 2; 9; 10; 26

Memory Verse

“At the command of the LORD they remained encamped, and at the command of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the command of the LORD by the hand of Moses.”
(Numbers 9:23)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Works [Behavior]
The Israelites’ journey through the wilderness shows God’s guidance, provision, training, and chastisement, all for the purpose of transforming His children into a holy nation.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. God is our heavenly Father. We can be assured of His love, knowing that He will provide everything that we need on our journey of faith.2. The Lord is our commander. He is the Lord of hosts.3. From the beginning of creation to the end of time, God works tirelessly to save mankind. He is the author and finisher of our faith.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. We need to revere and fear God, and be faithful in keeping and obeying His commands.2. Have faith and trust in the Lord’s power and presence in good times or bad.

Overview

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- A. Numbering the People
- B. Encampment and Marching Order
- C. The Pillar of Cloud and Fire
- D. The Sound of the Trumpets

Life Application

1. Whose Way Is It Going to Be?
2. Making Jesus Our Commander

Memory Verse

Conclusion: If we follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and practice His words, we give God His rightful position as Lord and commander in our hearts. We will find that not only is it the best way, but it is the only way to experience the amazing promises and blessings that God has planned for us.

Spiritual Teachings

Introduction

The night the Israelites left Egypt, they were a mass of slaves, untrained, unskilled, and unorganized. Yet the Bible describes the Israelites that night as the army of God (Ex 12:51). Outwardly, they may not have looked nor behaved much like a trained army, but in the eyes of God, the chosen people were His army and God was their commander. To shape and train His army, God led the people into the wilderness. It was at the foot of Mt. Sinai that the training began. Let's explore what God wanted His people to learn.

A. Numbering the People

(Activity, Part One: In small groups, have the students read Numbers 1:1–46. Pass out markers and twelve pieces of construction paper or index cards and assign different tribes to each group. Have them write down their assigned tribes and its total population, one tribe per page/card. Later in the lesson, for part two, the students will use glue/tape and a large poster-sized paper to arrange the tribes according to their assigned camps around the tent of meeting.)

Why do you think God asked Moses to number the people? Taking a census was likely a long and tedious job, but it wasn't pointless. There were several reasons God wanted Moses to do this:

1. To know their identity

Every man twenty years and over was registered and identified according to his name, family, clan, and tribe. By doing this, each man was able to know his own identity and prove that he was a legitimate member of God's people, a descendant of Abraham. This was important, as only descendants of Abraham were able to inherit the blessings and promises of God. Similarly, when we are baptized, our names are registered in the Book of Life, making us members of the household of God and partakers in God's inheritance (cf. Eph 2:19; Col 1:12).

2. To prepare for warfare

To obtain the promised land, the people had to destroy the enemies who lived there, so it was important to take a census of the able-bodied to determine Israel's military strength. Israel had a total of 603,550 soldiers, not including the Levites. This reminds us that every believer is a soldier in God's army. In our journey of faith, all of us are engaged in spiritual combat, with no exceptions. We fight not only to defend our own souls, but also to win souls for God. Through daily spiritual cultivation, and by attending church training programs such as convocations and seminars, we can equip ourselves with the full armor of God and fight our spiritual battle.

3. To know their duties

By taking a census of the people, Moses could assign specific tasks and duties for the different tribes. The service in the tabernacle was carried out by the priests and the Levites, but the other tribes were needed to fight, make offerings of animals and gifts, and use their special abilities to help with the construction of the tabernacle and everything in it. We need to identify and utilize the different gifts that God has given us to edify the church, so that each member can grow and mature in their faith (Eph 4:11–13).

4. To distribute their inheritance (Num 26:2, 51–56)

As the new generation of Israelites were ready to enter the promised land, God instructed that a second census be taken. This time, the population size of each tribe would determine how much land they would get—the larger tribes were to be given more land, the smaller tribes less land. Similarly, when the Lord comes again, He will reward each of us according to the works

we have done. Therefore, our work on earth is not in vain; the more we serve God, the greater our future rewards will be (Mt 16:27, Col 3:24; Rev 22:12).

B. Encampment and Marching Order (Num 2:1–34)

For 600,000 Israelite men, not including women and children, setting up camp would have taken a space of about twelve square miles. For a sense of scale, the John F. Kennedy International Airport is about twelve square miles in size, and the San Francisco International Airport, thirteen square miles. It's also roughly equivalent to half of the island of Manhattan! This would have been one of the biggest campsites the world has ever seen. For such a large number of people to camp and travel in an orderly and efficient manner, they would have had to follow God's specific directions.

The nation of Israel was divided into four camps that surrounded the tent of meeting, Moses, and the priests. The Levites then positioned themselves around the tabernacle. They, in turn, would be surrounded by the twelve tribes:

- North camp: Dan, Asher, and Naphtali
- East camp: Judah, Issachar, Zebulun
- South camp: Reuben, Simeon, and Gad
- West camp: Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin

(Activity, Part Two: On a poster-sized paper, have the students display the tribes' camping arrangement using the construction paper/index cards made earlier for part one of the activity. See Figure 1: Arrangement of the Tribal Camps for details.)

What can we learn from the arrangement of the Israelites' campsite?

1. All the tribes pitched their tents according to their camps

Paul exhorted the church in Corinth, "Let all things be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40; cf. Mk 6:39–40). This applies not only to the church, but to our everyday lives too. For the church, our family unit, or even society to run smoothly, we need to follow rules and regulations. By doing so, we respect the authority of God, our parents, pastors, and teachers who are appointed by God to shepherd us. Rules also exist to protect ourselves and others, so that we can live in a peaceful and harmonious environment and be blessed by God.

In the Book of Numbers, God's wrath and judgment came down swiftly when Moses' authority was challenged. In each case, they did not know their own positions, nor did they recognize that it was God who appointed Moses as the leader of the people. They did not remain in their "camps" as God had assigned because they did not respect God's authority.

2. Each camp was made up of three tribes

God ordered that each camp be made up of three tribes, which reminds us of the need to get to know the different families and members in the church. It is common to have a habit of mingling with the same group of friends during mealtimes and even services. As a result, some people have plenty of people to talk to while others sit alone. As a part of God's household, we need to promote greater understanding between members, and show care for every individual, not just our closest friends. What are some ways we can do this? *(Examples: Each week, greet someone you are not familiar with; sit beside someone you've never sat with during lunch; share something about yourself with someone you don't know too well, or ask them about their work, family, or hobbies.)*

3. The tabernacle was in the middle of the camp

Our education, friends, hobbies, or extracurricular activities should not be the focus of our lives. Rather, God should be the center of our lives. In all that we do, we need to seek His way and glorify Him. Our hearts and our lives should revolve around the Lord.

C. The Pillar of Cloud and Fire (Num 9:15–23)

One of the miracles that the Israelites experienced was God’s constant presence, in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. But what was the purpose of this pillar?

1. To abide with them

The night the Israelites fled from the presence of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, God went before them in a pillar of cloud and fire (Ex 13:21). Through their years of traversing the wilderness, the pillar was always before them to guide their way (cf. Neh 9:12, 19), and to guard and protect them (Ex 14:19). In the same way, the Holy Spirit continually abides with us as well. The Holy Spirit is our counselor and Helper, sent by God to help us on our journey to the heavenly kingdom. Like the pillar, God’s Spirit is evidence of His vast and unimaginable power, something to respect, fear, and find comfort in.

2. To guide and direct their steps

Numbers 9:15–21 mentions nine times that the Israelites moved only at the command and charge of the Lord. Whether by day or night, or for a duration of days, months, or years, the Israelites would march or stay as God’s pillar moved or stayed. As we travel along our life’s journey, we too need to firmly fix our eyes on Jesus and follow His lead. We cannot run ahead of Him or away from Him but must learn to be totally submissive to His will.

D. The Sound of the Trumpets (Num 10:1–10)

If you were Moses, how would you have made yourself heard above all the people? What method would you have used to give commands to two million Israelites to move forward, stop, camp, defend themselves, or gather to worship? Such a task was no easy feat. But God understood what Moses needed, so shortly after leaving Egypt, He commanded Moses and Aaron to make two trumpets of hammered silver, which would give clear instructions to the Israelites. The trumpets were then used to convey messages with different signals.

- Two trumpets meant that the entire assembly was to gather at the tabernacle (v. 3).
- One trumpet was a summons for only the leaders and heads of the divisions of Israel (v. 4).
- Different trumpet blasts were used to break camp and move onward (vv. 5–6).
- The trumpets were used to sound the alarm during wartime (v. 9).
- The trumpets were also used to sound times of gladness and different feasts and were used during celebrations of the beginning of the month (v. 10).

God clearly thought everything through for the Israelites and for Moses, helping them to come up with a system that could help them communicate more easily. But what can we learn from the trumpets and their signals?

1. They gave instruction

Just as the trumpets called the Israelites to gather, follow, prepare for battle, and to rejoice or celebrate different feasts, God’s word does the same. The Bible has the power to cleanse, sanctify, and equip us for salvation (2 Tim 3:16).

2. Made of hammered silver

The word of God is like silver (Ps 12:6). Being made of hammered silver demonstrates how the

gospel was established through the great sacrifice and sufferings of our Lord Jesus; He was wounded for our transgressions and through His stripes we were healed. Like Jesus Christ, we also need to go through a “hammering” process in order to become useful for God.

3. Blown by the priests

In Moses’ time, only the priests, Aaron and his sons, could blow the trumpets. Today, every believer is a priest of God, with similar duties. We must communicate with our fellow members when there is trouble or joy in the church, and we must call others to the gospel. Moreover, God commanded Moses to make two silver trumpets, not just one. It is impossible for us to serve God alone—we need to work in unity with our coworkers in Christ.

4. Blown during wartime

Communicating danger is of vital importance during wartime, and the danger that we need to communicate today is not physical, but spiritual. When we spread the gospel, we are engaging in a spiritual warfare to rescue the souls of mankind from the hands of Satan. We need to preach the gospel bravely and contend earnestly for the truth.

5. Blown during feasts

Aside from travel or wartime, the trumpets were also blown during days of gladness, “in your appointed feasts, and at the beginning of your months” (Num 10:10). They were also used among God’s people to gather them together. In times of joy, fellowship, and plenty, we should not forget that such blessings are from God.

Check for Understanding

- 1. Why was it important for the Israelites to take a census?** To know their identity; prepare for warfare; know their duties; and to distribute their inheritance.
- 2. What lesson does the tabernacle’s position in the camp teach us?** God should be the center of our lives. In all that we do, we need to seek His way and glorify Him.
- 3. The Israelites traveled and camped according to the pillar of cloud and fire. What can we learn from this?** As we travel along life’s journey, we too need to firmly fix our eyes on Jesus and follow His lead. We cannot run ahead of Him or away from Him but must learn to be totally submissive to His will, as He knows what is best for us.
- 4. What messages did the trumpets convey to the Israelites?** To gather, whether all the Israelites or just the leaders; to break camp and move onwards; to sound the alarm during wartime; and to sound times of gladness, different feasts, and during celebrations at the beginning of each month.
- 5. In the Old Testament, the trumpets were only blown by the priests. What can we learn from this?** We are the priests of God today, so we have similar duties. We must communicate with our fellow members when there is trouble or joy in the church, and we must call others to the gospel.

Life Application

1. Whose Way Is It Going to Be?

Did you know that Burger King’s slogan used to be “Have it your way!”? It was to promote the idea of choice for their customers. Why do customers like having choices? What does this mean to you? We all like to make our own choices and decisions; what we wear, what we eat, what music we listen to, what we do with our spare time, or what kinds of friends we hang out with. This is us having it “our way.” But how many times have you said to God, “Alright, I’ll have it Your way”? Let’s try to think of a few people in the Bible who did or did not say this to God.

- Who in the Bible told God, “I’ll have it Your way”? (Noah, Mary the mother of Jesus, Jeremiah, Paul)
- Who in the Bible told God, “I want it my way”? (The Israelites, Jonah, Judas, King Saul)
- Who in the Bible said, “Sometimes Your way, sometimes mine”? (Gehazi, Peter)

(Activity: Write each response on a separate sheet of paper, then post up in the corners of the room.)

I am now going to read a few scenarios. For each, choose a corner that best reflects your honest response if you were the person in that situation. Would you say to God, “I’ll have it Your way, God!”, “I want it my way,” or “Sometimes Your way, sometimes mine.” After each scenario, I will invite someone to share their reasons for choosing that response.

Scenario 1:

You have finally made it on to the school volleyball team! You’re quite pleased with yourself as you’ve practiced hard, and you love the sport. But you discover that you are obligated to play in Saturday matches that conflict with your RE classes. What do you decide to do?

Scenario 2:

Lately, you and your mother have been arguing a lot over the amount of time you spend playing computer games each day. You tell her that you have finished your homework assignments, and that you should be allowed to use your free time however you’d like. Your mother, on the other hand, feels that your free time should be used more productively. What do you do?

Scenario 3:

Lately, a guy in your math class has been giving you a lot of attention. At first, you don’t really respond to him, but as time passes and you get to know him more, you find that you really enjoy his company, and you eagerly look forward to seeing him each day at school. You confide all this with a church friend who reminds you that you are too young to date, and that you should find someone in the Lord only at the right time. You tell her that he’s simply a friend you enjoy hanging out with at school and that you have no intentions of dating him. But there is a struggle in your heart.

Scenario 4:

You and your friends at school are having a conversation about a certain classmate who recently openly declared that he was a homosexual. Your friends admire his courage and have decided to accept him. They argue that God has made everyone unique, and that we should be respectful of everybody’s differences. Up until now, you have remained silent, but then your friends ask you what you think.

2. Making Jesus Our Commander

Doing things God’s way can be a struggle for us at times. It is especially difficult when we don’t understand His will or are unwilling to accept His will. How then can we submit ourselves to God’s lead?
(Have students brainstorm possible ideas.)

a. Confess and surrender

At times, we may be unaware of things that we hold tightly to and that have taken first place in our heart. These things prevent us from following God closely. Let’s read Matthew 19:16–22. It wasn’t that the rich young ruler didn’t love Jesus. He did, having obeyed the commandments since his youth. But Jesus pointed out that he still loved his riches more than he loved the Lord. In that regard, he needed to change his heart and reprioritize his life. God wants us to do the

same. Take a moment and try writing down the things that you hold tightly to in your heart. This week when you pray, tell God about them, and ask Him to help you surrender these loves and focus your heart on Him instead.

b. Know God

Unless we know the God we worship and obey, we may struggle to entrust everything to Him. What makes this God so special that He deserves all our love and obedience? How wise is this God that we should follow His ways rather than our own? How loving is this God that even in the worst circumstances, His thoughts towards us are always good, to give us a future and a hope? The more we know God, the more we are willing to commit every aspect of our lives to Him, and to make Him our Commander and Lord.

c. Increase our faith

Let's read Hebrews 4:2. "For indeed 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." The word of God was given to the Israelites, but because they did not receive it with faith, instead of obtaining the blessings and promises of God, they met with wrath and destruction.

We may intellectually understand why we need to obey God, but if we have difficulty putting God's words into action, then it is often because we lack faith in God's words and promises. If this is the case, we need to pray for the fullness of the Holy Spirit and ask God to increase our faith. Our faith can also grow if we reflect upon all the testimonies from the great cloud of witnesses found in the Bible and from the experiences of our brothers and sisters (Heb 12:1).

Memory Verse

"At the command of the LORD they remained encamped, and at the command of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the command of the LORD by the hand of Moses."
(Numbers 9:23)

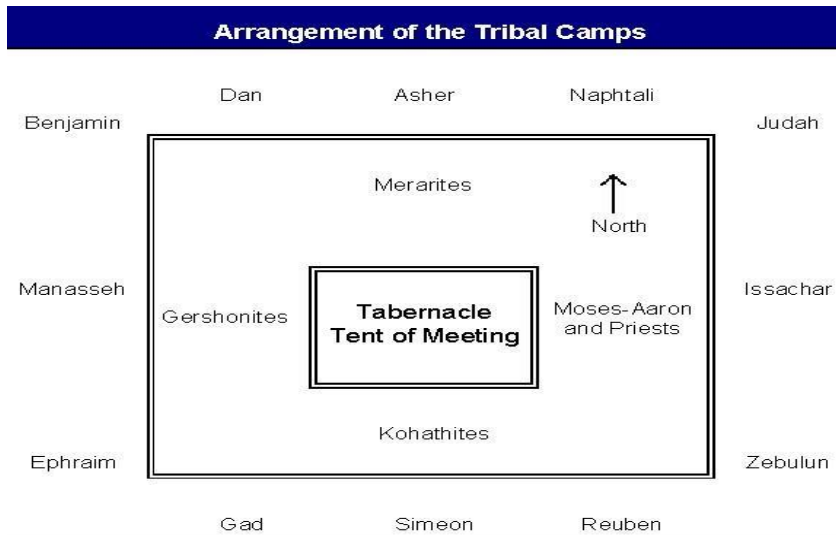
Meaning

The Israelites' entire lives were provided for and guided by the Lord. He not only gave them food and water in a dry desert, but also ensured that their clothes and sandals did not wear out for the forty years that they traveled in the wilderness (Deut 29:5). The pillar of cloud and fire was not only a sign of God's glory, but also of His guidance and everlasting presence. Our own "pillars," God's word and the Holy Spirit within our hearts, are also signs of God's provision, presence, and guidance. We need to learn to follow the Spirit and the truth, just as the Israelites followed the pillar in the wilderness.

Conclusion

God's way of leading His people was direct and clear. They had to look and follow the movement of the pillar of cloud and fire. They had to listen to and hear God's instructions through the trumpet calls. If we follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and practice His words, we give God His rightful position as Lord and commander in our hearts. When we do, we will find that not only is it the best way, but it is the only way to experience the amazing promises and blessings that God has planned for us.

Figure 1: Arrangement of the Tribal Camps



Lesson 1 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. What can we learn from the memory verse about how we should live our own lives?
We need to learn to follow the Spirit and the truth, just as the Israelites followed the pillar in the wilderness.
2. “The _____ of the LORD are _____, like _____ tried in a _____ of earth, _____ seven times.” (Psalm 12:6)
words, pure, words, silver, furnace, purified
3. Pick one of the four reasons they took a census and explain what it teaches us about our own lives.
 - a. *To know their identity: When we are baptized, our names become registered in the Book of Life, making us members of God’s household and partakers of His inheritance.*
 - b. *To prepare for warfare: This reminds us that every believer is a Christian soldier in God’s army.*
 - c. *To know their duties: We need to identify and utilize the gifts that God has given us, to edify the church and our fellow members.*
 - d. *To distribute their inheritance: The more we serve God, the greater our future rewards will be.*
4. Explain in detail two of the lessons that you learned from the sound of the trumpets.
See Spiritual Teachings, Section D.
5. Can you think of an aspect in your life in which you avoid saying, “Have it Your way,” to God?
Personal answers.
6. Was there ever a time when you or someone you know made Jesus their commander? Briefly share.
Personal answers.