

## **"Heading to the Promised Land" Introduction to Numbers – Message 1**

After 400 years of slavery, the nation has left Egypt and they are heading for Promised Land. There is something like 2 1/2 million of them and they are on foot. The journey should have taken 11 days, but it took 40 years! At the start of this book, God tells Moses to count the men over the age of 20. The opening chapters are a record of who comprised the 603,550 men plus their families. We know because we have read the story, that only two men survived the journey, Joshua and Caleb. Even their leader Moses didn't survive. The hymn 'Guide me O great Jehovah' is the story of Numbers.

The title could be quite off-putting, but I think the title should attract us to read the book. The Bible is not titled well for sales! Numbers has a few titles actually. 'And He said' - or literally - God said.....The Hebrew title can be translated as 'In the Wilderness'. Numbers is a call to follow God in the wilderness when he moves. This fire and presence of God that sits over his people. But because the people disobeyed clear directions God had given them over and over again, it took 40 years for them to reach their destination. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Bible from Hebrew) the book is called 'Arithmetic'. You can understand why because right through the book are numbers...everything seems to be counted. There are two complete counts of the people. In the opening two chapters (603,500) and then a year later again in chapter 26. (601,730)

**There are three Divisions of the Book. Chapters 1-10 Preparations** – There is order and a plan from God for the journey. If you read these chapters, every detail is numbered off. Every person is catered for; every offering bought is measured and listed when the Tabernacle is dedicated. The pattern of where people would live and what they would do was clear. Instructions are given for every conceivable health condition and event especially relating to purity, marriage and intimacy. Instructions are given for each clan to participate in some area of service and expertise, even down to who would carry the tent pegs and erect the poles of the tent where God would dwell, who would prepare the offerings, who would lead the worship and which musicians would play. Now to most of us, this would appear rather strange that such detail would be given, but it speaks of **order and responsibility**. It reminds us how seriously God takes the distribution of gifts and the offering of ourselves to his work. Underlying this detail, we will see that this was the very character of God. That he is **inclusive**, that **every person matters**, that he is **holy**, that holiness cannot be compromised, and that he **desires relationship** and the best for us (if we will but trust Him and not turn away to chase what appeals to us and take the exit ramps to the road of life.)

**Chapters 11 – 21 Wanderings** – this is the part of the book we will concentrate on during this series. **Chapters 22 – 36 Warnings** - On the verge of going into the land, God gives final instructions to the people and deals with specific details relating to their keeping the agreement He has made with them.

The rest of today's message speaks to something that underlies this book; indeed much of the scripture. **What do we do when Gods ways or actions are Incomprehensible?**

We say glibly – God is control – I trust Him. But how does that work when life events turn sour or when the unexpected, happens? How does faith and trust work when it might appear to you that God has not turned up for you, been there, saved you or delivered you from pain? That's when we are most tempted to take an exit ramp to the road to life. All of us will have stories from our lives where stuff happens that we never expected, intended or wanted. Where despite our anguish or prayers, the heavens were silent. Where some event occurred that challenged our faith – God are you really in control? Where what we believe is truly tested because life events appear to contradict what faith tells us to be true.

Number reminds us that the same **God of the harvest is also the God of the desert**. Could it be possible that sometimes God thwarts my plans in order to destroy my shallow understanding of his love? Could God allow difficult circumstances to come into my life so I could wrestle with who He really is? Maybe messing up of my plans is exactly what I need. To what lengths will God go to confront a false belief, or repair a cracked foundation in our faith? He does this not out of anger but out of love. Actually, the Bible is full of these kind of stories. We typically respond in one of three ways when God acts incomprehensively. They are depicted in the lives of Jonah, Saul and Habakkuk.

### **1. Jonah – Resist and Run**

The first example of coping with this Incomprehensible God is found in the story of Jonah. And his coping mechanism for the Incomprehensible God is to resist and run. Jonah's complaint against God – your way makes no sense. I've got to walk 900 miles to Nineveh and tell those pagans to repent, and if they do, you might even forgive them! No, they deserve to be blitzed off the earth and anyway, it's not what I want to do. So I'm not going to talk to you about this – I will just *resist and run*. What God wants does not come on Jonah's radar because it's outside of his obedience zone! Jonah is viewing life through the perspective of **what he wants** and what he feels God should do, what he wants trumps what God says! How many of us have done exactly that when God has asked us to do something outside our comfort zone? We go in the opposite direction! You know the story, God has his way of getting Jonah's attention again, there is nowhere for him to run and a storm comes which is clearly sent by God is used to confront Jonah. It's a resist and run story, and it's a strategy we can easily adopt when God acts incomprehensively.

### **2. Saul – Distort and Deny**

The second response might be that Saul, who became the Apostle Paul, opposed what God was trying to do in his life (kicking against the goads) – so he lived with a kind of **distort and deny** coping mechanism to quieten God's voice in his life. Born into a well to do family and sent to train under Gamaliel, he had a zealous, passionate temperament, was proud of his heritage, eager to pursue and was a goal-orientated kind of person. But Saul fought against God – he kicked against the 'pricks' (of conscience) in his life. *"We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'" Acts 26:14*

You see Saul's was passionate about his beliefs, but he had so distorted and denied his thinking about these Jesus followers that his mission was to destroy them. He watched while Stephen was

stoned to death, he threw them in prison, his personal goal was to stamp out all of these Jesus people – but the more he did this, the more his conscience was tortured. He just would not face it until that day on the Damascus Road.

Holding **distorted beliefs** is very common, even among so-called mature followers of Jesus. God wants us to examine our beliefs carefully and to expose them when they don't align to truth.

**Here are some misbeliefs that you might hold which will trip you up.**

**Some of them are dangerous because they are partially true.**

1. God is committed to give you a good life.- Not true.
2. Our efforts in life are honoured and we get in life what we deserve. - Not true
3. I can earn favour with God by the way I live. – Not true
4. Ministry is for the pastor to do and we pay him to do it – Not true
5. Worship is what we do on Sundays at 10am – Partial / Not true
6. Church is where we meet on Dodson Avenue – Partial /Not true
7. Forgiveness and repentance is what I do when I first believed - Not true
8. If I follow God, he will ensure I don't have major problems – Not true
9. Responsibility to share the gospel message is for those with the evangelism gift – Not true
10. The purpose and mission of God in this world is inside the church – Not true

God will go to any lengths to get your attention and redirect your life and correct your misbeliefs. This is the story of Numbers.

### **There is a third option Habakkuk - Tremble and Trust**

Israel's legal system had broken down, mayhem and crime was at an all-time high, those doing evil seem to do so unchecked - and there were many more of them than those who stood for what is right. The nations faith is at an all-time low, expectation of God is almost nil and Habakkuk cries out to God – when are you going to do something!!!!

**Chapter 1 V5** God replies, "I'm going to do something and you will be amazed. But my plan will not fit your prescription. What you are wanting and expecting won't happen." **V6-11** Violence is coming and it's coming to a city near you! Your enemies are going to rout you and you will be defeated and overrun. "But God, this is not what we are praying for," says Habakkuk! **V14-17** and Habakkuk cannot reconcile what he knows about God and this devastating prediction. This is the struggle that we face too – when what we expect God to do does not happen - or God does something off the grid of our thinking and asks us to trust Him. It appears like God has gone on leave, that he has been caught off guard, that he was busy somewhere else. But in truth, here is what is going on. God is in the events of our life – even the most traumatic –speaking into our lives to get us to tremble and trust Him.

**Chapter 2 V1** Habakkuk **climbs** the watchtower and **stands** at his guard post.

Here is a great verse for when you don't know what to do.... and I will **wait** and see what God says in answer to my complaint!!! Friends that sometimes is the best we can do; to watch and pray and wait.

Then God says to Habakkuk – Some of the things I am showing you is for a future time.

*"But my righteous will live by faith" (this verse caused the reformation when Martin Luther was trying to reconcile on what basis man would be put right with God....) That means we don't always understand everything about what God does and is doing....but we trust Him...its by faith not works or penance or indulgences. It's something only God can do when we trust him. It means that sometimes God's ways are not ours – but we trust him. It means God's time is not always our – but we trust him. It means that God's methodology is not ours either.....but we trust Him*

The rest of chapter 2 goes into great detail about those who have set themselves up well with **wealth and houses** and savings and how suddenly it will all become nothing! What God is saying in Chapter 2 is that he is **writing a larger story that is not easily seen and his methodology for achieving His purposes look abhorrent**. What Habakkuk and the people were seeing was a smaller story. And yes we go.....it might be small but it's still my story!! God says tremble and trust to us.

**Chapter 3** What Habakkuk does here is **he remembers**: And its good advice when your world falls apart to remember - He remembers the deeds of God in the past – **deliverance (what he can understand)** He remembers the power of God in **creation (what he can see)** He remembers the **promises** of God to his people – his covenant. **V16** *"When I heard this I trembled inside, my lips quivered with fear, my legs gave away beneath me and I shook in terror. But for this day I will wait quietly."*

He **trusts** **V17** Though the fig tree does not blossom, there are no grapes, harvest is not happening, **there are** no olives and the fruit is not coming. The fields lie empty and barren; no sowing or reaping. The flocks die in fields; no new life is coming. Cattle barns are empty; no milk or meat, no supply. **Yet I'm going to rejoice in the God of my salvation**. The signs all around me are not good. But I'm going to trust God – God up to something.

Lord, I don't understand your ways. Your deeds give me great reason for concern. Your plans make me tremble, but I trust you. To what ends will God go to win you, shape you, change you and secure your abandonment of all else and all others but him? He will go to any lengths, including most things we would hate to happen to us. Why? Because thats how much he wants us to turn to Him and tremble & trust.

And he says to us. **Don't resist and run, don't distort and deny but tremble and trust.** **Now how does this fit into Numbers.....?** It's what they didn't do and it's why they took another 39 years 354 days to do an 11 day journey!!

**THINK ABOUT THIS** *"Whatever we turn to in order to find satisfaction becomes our God. Our determination to fill the hollow core becomes our tyrant, and we revolve our lives around whatever we wrongly believe will provide the fullness we desire."*