

7-SESSION
BIBLE STUDY

A STUDY OF THE
BOOK OF NUMBERS

WITH US
in the
WILDERNESS

LAUREN CHANDLER

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BOOK OF NUMBERS

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WILDERNESS

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EDITORIAL TEAM, LIFEWAY WOMEN PUBLISHING

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Women

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Chandler is a wife and mother of three. Her husband, Matt Chandler, serves as the lead teaching pastor at The Village Church in Dallas, Texas. Lauren is passionate about writing, music, and leading worship, not only at The Village Church, but also for groups across the country. The Lord has taken Matt and Lauren on a challenging journey, beginning with the November 2009 discovery of a malignant brain tumor in Matt. The Lord has been infinitely merciful to provide peace and comfort in uncertainty and joy in times of victory and healing. Lauren and her family have been given a deeper trust in clinging to the Lord and His cross during this appointed season of valleys and storms.



Session One

INTRODUCTION

The LORD spoke to Moses
in the wilderness of Sinai . . .

NUMBERS 1:1a

VIEWER GUIDE | SESSION ONE

Welcome to the *With Us in the Wilderness* Bible study! Each week, I've provided some discussion questions here to get the conversation started. Feel free to discuss what you learned throughout the week of study, ask any questions you may have, and share what God is teaching you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What drew you to this study? What do you hope to learn?

What comes to mind when you consider the Book of Numbers?

In the Book of Numbers, we see that God didn't remove His tabernacle from the center of the camp even though the people were rebellious. What might that tell us about God's character and how He feels about His people?

In our introductory teaching time, we talked about three themes we'll unpack in our study—comfort, warning, and hope. Of the three, which description most resonated with you? Why?

VIEWER GUIDE | SESSION ONE

Teaching sessions available for purchase or rent
at LifeWay.com/WithUsInTheWilderness



Session Two

HOLY GOD, HOLY PEOPLE

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.”

NUMBERS 6:24-27

DAY ONE

WHERE WE FIND OURSELVES

Pause. Breathe. Pray.

Sister, you are so welcome to this space in whichever state you find yourself: hungry to grow in your knowledge of the Lord through Scripture, limping in your own wilderness, or somewhere in-between. My prayer is that you make time, not to have all the right answers and all the blanks filled in, but to encounter the Living God in the study of His Word. He knows just what you need. I am praying He provides that for you here.

Where do you find yourself? Hungry? Limping? A little of both?

What would you like the Lord to do for you in the next seven sessions?

Write a simple prayer to the Lord asking Him to make His presence known to you as you study.

Every time I visit a new city or town, I look at a map to familiarize myself with the area. Which way is north? In what part of the city am I? How far away am I from _____? Understanding my geographical context helps me navigate the unfamiliar. Thus, I think it's a good use of our time together to take a moment to orient ourselves in the context of Numbers so we can navigate what might be an unfamiliar part of Scripture.

List the first five books of the Bible.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

These books are called the Pentateuch (also known as the Torah). Look up *Pentateuch* in a dictionary and write what you find here:

Pretty self-explanatory, right? The Pentateuch is more than just the beginning of the Bible; it provides the framework for what we read in the rest of the Old Testament and beyond. In the New Testament, we see how Jesus came to fulfill all that was promised in and pointed to in these first five books.

Let's do a little review of each book (or a brief introduction for those who are new to the Pentateuch).¹

GENESIS: A STORY OF BEGINNINGS

Genesis is a book of beginnings—the beginning of creation and of mankind. It tells the story of creation, mankind’s fall into sin and death and God’s plan of redemption through Abraham and his descendants.²

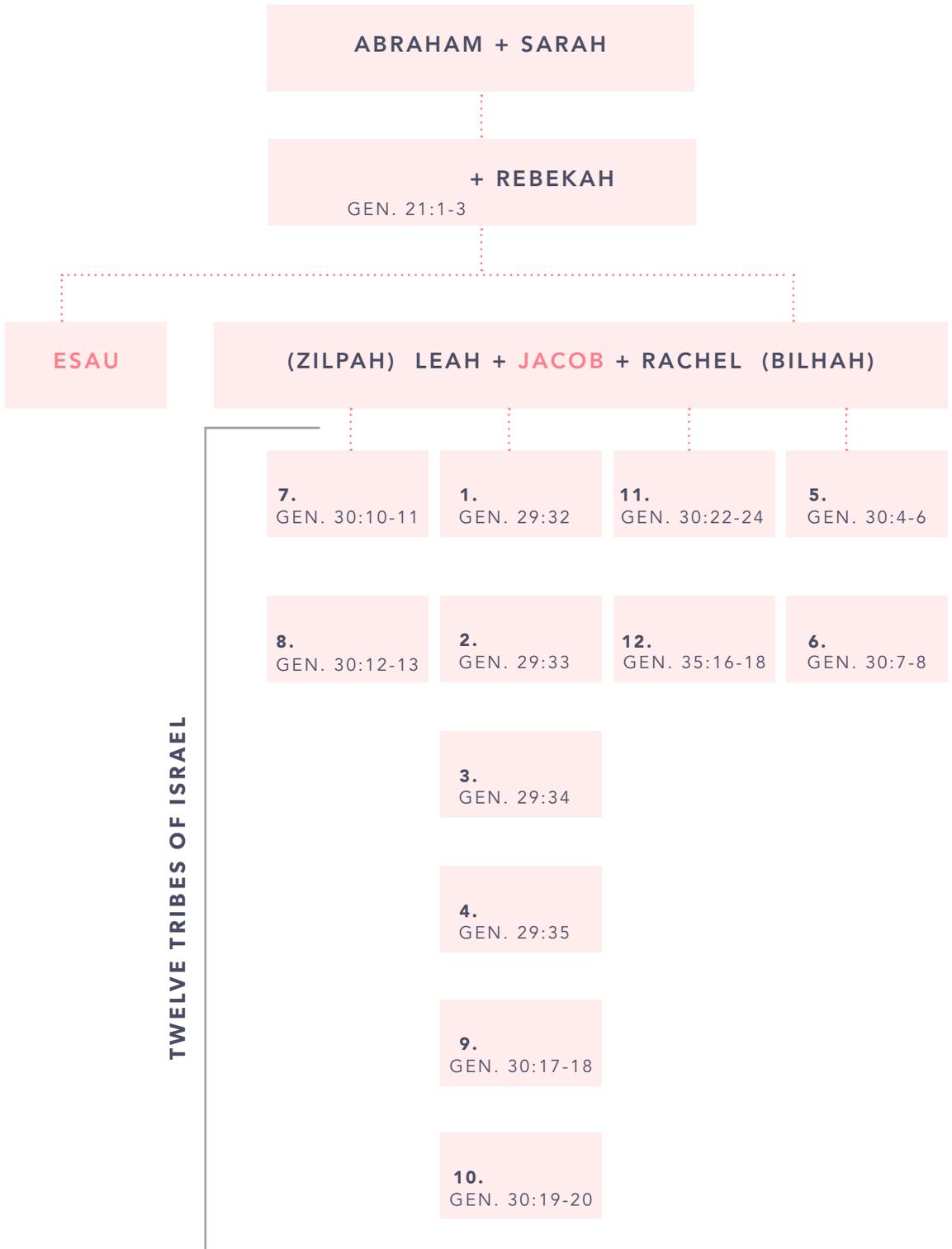
Turn to Genesis 12:1-3 (ESV) and fill in the blanks below.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great _____, and I will _____ you and make _____ great, so that you will be a _____. I will _____ those who _____ you, and him who _____ you I will _____, and in you all the _____ of the _____ shall be _____.”

Abram’s call (God later changed his name to Abraham) will be important to remember in our study of Numbers. We will see this promise come true in various ways among Abraham’s descendants, the Israelites.

Abraham’s family tree is quite complicated. The branches get a little confusing, especially since two of his granddaughters-in-law had a reproductive showdown. We will do our best to trace this family’s somewhat sordid story and hopefully find comfort that our own family’s history isn’t the only story with scandalous plotlines. As we do, we will see that God can use it all for His glory.

Turn to the Scripture reference under each box on the next page and write the person’s name that belongs there. (Hint: once you get to Jacob’s sons, it will be easiest to follow the numbers!)



I hope you were able to keep straight all the wives, wives' servants, and whose children belonged to whom! You might be wondering a few things. First, what about Esau's children? Although Esau was the firstborn, he gave up that right for a bowl of stew (Gen. 25:29-34). Yep, this was not an even (nor wise) exchange. Esau was notorious for following his physical compulsions no matter the cost. Jacob, on the other hand, was notorious for being sneaky. In fact, he stole his brother's blessing by deceiving his father so the birthright and blessing followed Jacob's line, not Esau's. Are you starting to feel better about your own family drama? Second, why were they called the twelve tribes of Israel instead of the twelve tribes of Jacob? I'll let you dig for the answer.

Turn to Genesis 35:10. What accounts for this difference?

Genesis closes with the children of Israel (a.k.a. Jacob) living in the land of Egypt. Through another complicated series of events, Joseph (number eleven) was put in a position of honor and power in Egypt and saved his father, brothers, and their families from ruin.

Read Genesis 50:24-25 and summarize what Joseph asked his family to do for him.

EXODUS: A STORY OF DELIVERANCE

Exodus opens with the descendants of Jacob (a.k.a. Israel) living in Egypt and being fruitful and multiplying (i.e. having lots of children). The freedom they enjoyed didn't last long. A king arose who forgot about Egypt's friendly alliance with Joseph. Instead, he perceived Joseph's family as foes.

Read Exodus 1:8-14. What did Pharaoh do to the people of Israel?

Moses was one of the many children born to the people of Israel. He will be an important character in our study of Numbers. Moses' first forty years of life are worth a whole Bible study alone, but for the sake of time, I will summarize his

story: Moses was an unlikely candidate whom God chose to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the promised land.

The Book of Exodus is named after the Israelites' departure (or exodus) from Egypt and the tyranny of Pharaoh. Exodus closes with the people of Israel out of Egypt and in the wilderness of Sinai. They received the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20), built the tabernacle (Ex. 25–31) (more on this later), and were poised to follow God's lead through a cloud by day and fire by night (Ex. 13:21).

LEVITICUS: GUIDE TO LIVING IN THE LAND

I'm sure you are probably intimately acquainted with the Book of Leviticus. I imagine it's your favorite part of a Bible reading plan! I hope you can hear the sarcasm because I am laying it on thick! While Leviticus isn't necessarily the most enjoyable book to read in the Bible, it does provide a picture of how serious God is about holiness and how He desires His people to live holy lives.

Among other things, Leviticus is a book of Law. Take a moment and consider our own laws and regulations. What is the purpose of law?

As God's people transitioned from slaves in a foreign land to free people in a foreign desert, why would they need laws to be spelled out so specifically?

In the Book of Leviticus, the Lord gave instructions to Moses about how God's people were to live, including: sacrifices, offerings, worship, the priesthood, ceremonial cleanness, the Day of Atonement, holy feasts, holy days, and the Year of Jubilee. This isn't a book of random rules or hoops God created for His people to jump through. Through the law, God set the standard of living for the flourishing of humanity. What makes this even more amazing is He knew His children would not be able to keep the law on their own, so He provided a way of atonement through sacrifices and offerings. His goal is to dwell among His people. In order for a holy God to live with sinful humans, we must be made holy. Leviticus showed Israel how.

NUMBERS: WILDERNESS WANDERINGS

Spoiler alert! Here's a brief overview of our study, but don't be too disappointed. We will unearth much more gold in this book.

Numbers opens in the wilderness of Sinai with God telling Moses to take a military census of the people. They were readying themselves to enter the promised land. However, as a consequence of their lack of faith, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. The generation that had been delivered from Egypt died in the wilderness (Num. 32:13). Praise the Lord the story doesn't end there! God still had a plan for His children. He ordered another military census of the new generation. Numbers closes with Israel positioned to settle in the promised land.

As the Israelites stood on the edge of the promised land, which part of God's call of Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3) might have come to mind?

DEUTERONOMY: MOSES' FINAL WORDS

The fifth and final book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, is Moses' last charge to Israel. It is a series of sermons and prophetic poems written to the children of Israel as they were about to inhabit the land God promised to Abraham.

Like a good grandfather, Moses reminded the Israelites of God's faithfulness, despite the previous generation's rebellion and lack of faith. He urged them to remember, love, trust, and obey the Lord so that it might go well for them in this new land. The end of the book marks the end of one era and the beginning of another.

What event is recorded in Deuteronomy 34?

Describe the impact of this event on the people of Israel.

Moses died before the people went into the promised land. God chose Joshua to lead the people in Moses' place.

At the end of our study of Numbers, you might be a little perturbed that Moses didn't make it. Moses learned a lot of leadership lessons the hard way. And the people didn't exactly make it easy for him! But what Moses did get to experience in the wilderness was worth the hardship. Moses experienced God's presence. God was with him in the wilderness.

What do Exodus 33:11 and Deuteronomy 34:10 say about how Moses related to God?

Exodus 33:11 says the Lord spoke "to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." I don't know about you, but I can only imagine what that might be like. Yes, as a believer in Christ, I have received the Holy Spirit and can speak with the Lord whenever and wherever I am. I don't want to lose the awe and wonder of that reality. But to speak face-to-face? That will be something!

Record the promise found in 1 Corinthians 13:12.

Moses experienced an intimacy with the Lord we won't see this side of heaven, and yet, God's heart hasn't changed toward His people. The invitation to draw near to Him still stands. In the letter to the church in Laodicea, Jesus invites us to commune with Him. I love the New Living Translation of Revelation 3:20:

Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.

This appeal is extended to you too. Do you hear Him knocking? Will you open the door? Jesus doesn't care if you've tidied up or not. He simply desires to sit with you as you would sit with a dear friend over a meal together—all the laughter, all the tears, all the depth of conversation and communion.

What do you say to His offer? Write out a prayer, thanking Him for His presence and invitation.

DAY TWO

PEOPLE AND PLACE

Pause. Breathe. Pray.

Now that we have our bearings regarding where Numbers fits into God's redemptive story, it's time to home in on the book itself. There's no better place to start than at the beginning.

Write Numbers 1:1 below.

THE LORD SPOKE TO MOSES ... (NUM. 1:1).

Let's pick up where we left off yesterday: the incredibly mind-blowing notion that Moses spoke with the Lord as a man speaks with his friend. It wasn't always like this.

Read Exodus 3:1-6 and answer the following:

Where was Moses when God first spoke to him (v. 1)?

How did God appear to Moses (vv. 2,4)?

What instructions did God give Moses in approaching Him (v. 5)?

What was Moses' response (v. 6)?

I normally don't hide my face from my friends when they speak to me, but Moses had a good reason to hide his. His response reminds me of Isaiah's response to an encounter with our holy God.

In Isaiah 6 the prophet Isaiah received a vision of the Lord "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (v. 1a). His robe filled the temple (v. 1b). Angels sang His praises so loudly that the foundations quaked (v. 4).

What words did Isaiah utter in response (v. 5)?

God's holy presence makes the true state of our souls crystal clear. Next to Him, even what we may see as our "smallest" sins are devastatingly dirty.

What's so startling about this scene is that when God called out to Moses from the bush, He summoned him with a "repetition of endearment." In Moses' culture, saying someone's name twice indicated affection and friendship.³ The Lord beckoned Moses to come close, but not too close. We will see this theme repeated in God's interaction with His people and how He instructed them to arrange their camp.

IN THE WILDERNESS OF SINAI ... (NUM. 1:1).

We find Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai. The Lord delivered them from slavery in Egypt and was leading them to the land He promised to Abraham and his descendants. The Hebrew word for *wilderness* is also interpreted as *desert*.⁴ Instead of sand dunes and cacti, this kind is rocky with grazable grasses and small bushes. It's not a wholly hospitable land, but it's also not completely barren.

Remember how I told you that I love maps? I am welcoming you into my love by including one in the back of this study. When it's applicable, I will have you locate landmarks and trace Israel's route (as best we can) through the wilderness. Let's get started!

We will just get acquainted with the area this time. Locate the major regions and highlight or underline the following on page 224:

- Egypt
- Canaan
- Midian
- Mount Sinai (circle)
- Sinai
- Moab
- Edom

We see the wilderness theme repeated throughout Scripture. Often, the Lord leads His people into desolate places to invite them into a more intimate relationship with Him.

Look up these examples:

PERSON/ SCRIPTURE PASSAGE	SITUATION LEADING THIS PERSON INTO THE WILDERNESS	WHAT HAPPENED TO THIS PERSON IN THE WILDERNESS	HOW THIS PERSON LEFT THE WILDERNESS/ WHAT HAPPENED NEXT IN THIS PERSON'S LIFE
Hagar (Gen. 16:1-14)	Being mistreated by Sarai and Abram		
David (1 Sam. 21-23)			Eventually became king of Israel and a man after God's own heart.
Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-8)		God provided rest and sustenance for Elijah.	
Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11)			Jesus began His earthly ministry.

Can you think of any other examples of God using the wilderness to grow His people?

No matter how we get there, the wilderness is an opportunity to face our idols—the things or people we look to in place of God—confess our idolatry, cry out for God's rescue, repent from idolatry, receive His forgiveness, and walk humbly with Him.

When has God used the wilderness to teach you about Him?

IN THE TENT OF MEETING ... (NUM. 1:1).

The tent of meeting is also called the tabernacle. Moses received instruction from the Lord to take contributions from all the tribes of Israel to construct a sanctuary to be used to worship the Living God.

According to Exodus 25:8, why did the Lord want Moses to do this?

God's desire from the very beginning has been to dwell among His people. He walked in the garden with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8). He gave directions to Moses to build a tabernacle where He would dwell in their midst (Ex. 25:8). He sent His Son, Jesus, to dwell among humanity (John 1:14). After Jesus' death and resurrection, He promised the Holy Spirit as our Helper (John 16:7) who would dwell within us (1 Cor. 6:19). At the end of all things, in the new heaven and new earth, God's dwelling place will be with man (Rev. 21:3).

What do these verses reveal about God's heart toward His people?

Read below what the writer of Revelation (John) heard a loud voice saying in Revelation 21:3. Underline each time it says, "with man/them."

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He
will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and
God himself will be with them as their God."*

The tent of meeting is a shadow of God's ultimate goal for His people: that He would be with them as their God.

In the wilderness of Sinai, the presence of God is symbolized in two different forms. Look up Exodus 40:38 and record the two visual signals God gave to show His people He was in their midst.

In Exodus 40:34-35 was Moses able to enter the tabernacle? Why or why not?

In Leviticus 1:1 how did the Lord speak to Moses? (Hints: a preposition and a location!)

In light of those two texts, what is noteworthy about Numbers 1:1?

The fact that God spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting means that the Levitical law worked. Before the Israelites received instructions for how to approach God, the Lord spoke to Moses from the tent of meeting, not within it. But at the beginning of Numbers, God demonstrated how His plan to draw His people into a relationship with Him was possible.

At the end of the previous book, Exodus, Moses, as Israel's representative, could not even enter God's presence in the tent. The Book of Leviticus opens by reminding us of this fundamental problem. It says, "the Lord called to Moses from the tent." So the question is, "How can Israel, in their sin and selfishness, be reconciled to this holy God?" That's what this book [Leviticus] is all about—how God is graciously providing a way for sinful, corrupt people to live in His holy presence. . . . Look at the first sentence of the next book of the Bible, Numbers. It begins, "The LORD spoke to Moses in the tent." So we can see that Moses is now able to enter God's presence on behalf of Israel. The Book of Leviticus—it worked! So despite Israel's failure, God has provided a way for their sin to be covered so that God can live with sinful people in peace.⁵

What does God's pattern of dwelling with His people reveal about His character?

What does His plan to dwell with you reveal about His thoughts toward you?

THE PEOPLE

Read Numbers 1:2-34.

According to Numbers 1:3, what requirements did the men have to meet in order to be included on Aaron's list?

This wasn't a general census. It was for military purposes. God was preparing His people to enter into the promised land by force.

List the tribes in the order they appear in Numbers 1:4-15. I've filled in a few for you. (Hint: "from" precedes each tribe.)

1. Reuben

2.

3.

4.

5.

6. Joseph/Ephraim

7. Joseph/Manasseh

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

We should note a couple of items in this list. The first is that Joseph shared a place with Ephraim and Manasseh. What's going on there? At the end of his life, Israel adopted Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh. He told Joseph they would be his sons like Reuben and Simeon were (Gen. 48:5). If you take a look back at the family tree in Day One's personal study (p. 15), you'll find a name is missing.

Who is missing from the list?

How does Numbers 1:47-49 account for this?

What were the Levites appointed to take care of (vv. 50-53)?

We find a significant sentence is at the end of chapter 1. Record Numbers 1:54 below.

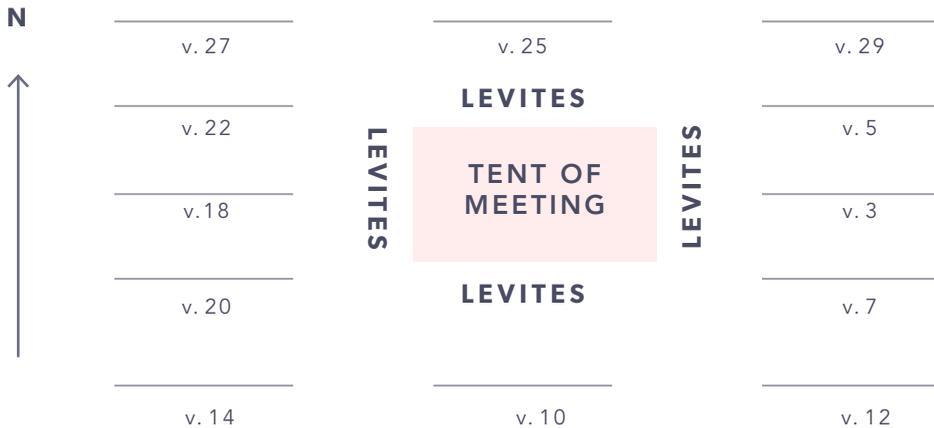
You'll see in the rest of our study that this wasn't always the case. So let's put this in the praise column for Israel. The Israelites trusted God and obeyed Him—this time.

THE PLACE

Read Numbers 2.

In Numbers 2 we read that the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron about the arrangement of camp. He was very specific in His organization of the tribes and the tabernacle. He even instructed the Israelites to camp "facing the tent of meeting on every side" (v. 2).

Using Numbers 2:1-31 as a reference, label the diagram of camp below.



We will get more specific tomorrow on the placement of the Levites, but for now, take a look at Israel's camp.

What do you think the arrangement of the tribes around the tabernacle implied?

Every tribe had a place in the camp. At its center was the presence of God—the tabernacle. Since each tent faced the tabernacle, God's people awoke and retired with the reality of the presence of God in their midst. Life is best lived with God in His proper place in our lives. As the planets revolve around the sun, and not vice versa, so our lives are made to revolve around the Lord. When we get this out of order, all manner of chaos ensues.

How have you seen this to be true in your own life? What happens when your life revolves around something (or someone) other than God?

If you were to draw a diagram of your life (and if you were gut-level honest), what would it look like? Who or what is at the center?

The diagram is a grid of horizontal lines. There are five rows and three columns of lines. In the center of the grid, there is a light red square. The square is positioned between the second and fourth rows and between the second and third columns of lines.

Father, thank You that You desire to dwell among Your people. Thank You for making that possible through Your Son, Jesus. Thank You that those who were far off may be brought near. Forgive us for putting ourselves, things, or people in Your rightful place. We invite You, God, to take Your place at the very center of our hearts. Amen.

DAY THREE

THE SONS OF LEVI

Pause. Breathe. Pray.

Read Numbers 3:1-39.

In chapter 3 the Lord turned His attention to the tribe of Levi. We saw in yesterday's personal study that they were excluded from the military census. The Levites were set apart and given special duties concerning the tabernacle and the people of Israel. But why the tribe of Levi? The answer to this question leads us to the first (of many) odd and violent stories in our study.

Exodus 32 describes the people of Israel as restless. Moses had been on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God, but it took quite a bit longer than the Israelites anticipated. For forty days and forty nights, Moses was a no-show. At some point during this waiting, someone had the bright idea to ask Aaron (Moses' brother) to make gods for them. Aaron went with the crowd and took all their gold and fashioned a golden calf out of it. (In Aaron's version of the story, he took their gold, threw it in the fire, and out came this calf! Hmm—sounds a lot like a story my kids would tell.)

The Lord told Moses what happened and threatened to consume the people and start from scratch. Moses pleaded with the Lord to remember His covenant with Abraham and preserve the people, and the Lord relented. However, when Moses saw the debauchery with his own eyes, the mercy he previously had toward the people evaporated. He was so overwhelmed with anger that He threw down the tablets containing the Law, and they broke.

Read Exodus 32:26 and answer the following:

What question did Moses ask the people?

Who responded?

Moses then gave some pretty drastic instructions. Write down his words found in Exodus 32:27.

According to verse 28, who obeyed Moses' violent command?

What did Moses say to the sons of Levi in response (v. 29)?

The sons of Levi followed his orders. Moses said of them, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day" (v. 29).

Did Moses forget commandment number six—"You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13)? Surely not! So what could be going on here? We can tell from verses 30-33 that Levi's sons were not randomly killing people. Instead, they were carrying out the punishment for those who sinned against the Lord. The severity of the crime is reflected in the severity of the consequences. The people had sinned against a holy God. They had forsaken their Maker for what their hands had made.

It can be hard to reconcile what seems to be the harsh nature of God seen here with Jesus, who is called the Image of the Invisible God (Col. 1:15)—who laid down His life for His friends (John 15:13). But there is not a discrepancy like we might think at first glance. Jesus went on in John 15 to outline who His friends are—those who keep His commandments. He even said harder things than that.

Turn to the following texts and write the verses in the space provided:

MATTHEW 10:37

LUKE 14:26

Isn't *hate* a rather bold word? What Jesus was saying here is that your love and devotion to Him must be so beyond the natural love you have for your family that it could almost be seen as hate in comparison. Before you give up hope (or throw this Bible study book against a wall), turn to 1 John 4:10 and write it below.

1 JOHN 4:10

Look up *propitiation* in a dictionary and write the definition here:

God knew we could not regain our favor or goodwill on our own. As we will clearly see in the Book of Numbers, humans are unable to keep the Law, so God made a way for us through His Son.

Philippians 2:8 says, ". . . he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." The bloodbath at Calvary displayed the depth of our sin and the depths to which God would go to save us and make good on His promise to Abraham that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed.

We will need to hold the tension that the God of the Old Testament is indeed the God of the New. He hasn't and won't change. God is love. Because He loves us, He will not put up with lesser loves or gods in our hearts. Jesus gave His all so that He would have our all.

The Levites proved they were willing to obey God even at a personal cost. Because of this, God gave them the privilege and duty to take care of and guard the tabernacle and its furnishings.

THE SONS OF AARON

Remember, what was Moses' relationship to Aaron?

According to Exodus 6:25-26, what tribe were Moses and Aaron from?

Aaron was Moses' brother and a Levite. God appointed Aaron and his sons to be priests, the most holy of the families of Levi. They were set apart to minister before the Lord in the Holy Place inside the tabernacle, making sacrifices and offerings according to the Law.

Refer to Numbers 3:2-4 and list Aaron's sons. Note anything exceptional about them.

1.

2.

3.

4.

We find the story of Nadab and Abihu's demise in Leviticus 10:1-3. It's not entirely clear what was "unauthorized" about the fire they offered, but it's safe to assume it was not according to God's Law. Again, we see how serious the Lord is about obedience, especially when it comes to approaching a holy God.

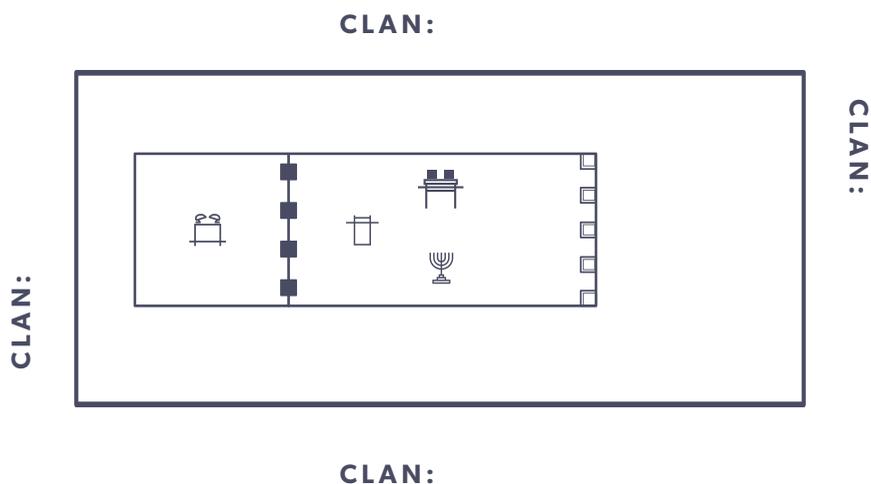
DUTIES OF THE LEVITES

Read Numbers 3:40-51.

Aaron and his sons were tasked with the important (and dangerous) job of guarding the tabernacle itself and packing up the furnishings and items inside according to the Lord's specific directions. The rest of the Levites were given two jobs: (1) Guard the tabernacle from intruders and (2) take care of and transport the tabernacle and its furnishings. God gave specific tasks to

specific clans. And, just as He designated places around the tabernacle for the other tribes, He gave these clans similar instructions.

Refer to Numbers 3:21-39 to complete the diagram below.



Numbers 3 and 4 record two censuses of the Levites.

Census One:

- recorded in Numbers 3:15-39;
- counted every male one month and older;
- the total number was twenty-two thousand.

The purpose of this census was for the redemption of the firstborn from among the other tribes. When Israel was delivered out of slavery, the last plague to befall Egypt before Israel’s flight was the death of every firstborn male—human and cattle. God gave instructions to His people that would protect them from this plague. In Exodus 13:2 God told Moses: “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

In Numbers the “male Levites took the place of the firstborn males of the other tribes in order to serve the Lord, so the first census ensured that the number of the former matched the number of the latter.”⁶

Read Numbers 4.

Census Two:

- **What were the age requirements for the men listed in the second census (vv. 3,23,30,35,39,43,47)?**

- **What was the total number (v. 48)?**

List the work each clan was required to do.

Kohathites (v. 15):

Gershonites (vv. 25-26):

Merarites (vv. 31-32):

Each clan's responsibility had a theme. The Kohathites guarded and carried the items within the tabernacle; the Gershonites guarded and carried what made up the outside of the tabernacle, and the Merarites guarded and carried the structural components of the tabernacle. Since these items were quite heavy, able-bodied men were needed to carry them, thus the age requirement of thirty to fifty years.

In Numbers 4:17-20 God warned His people to take His holiness seriously. Although the Kohathites were tasked to carry the holy things, they were not priests and thus were not allowed to look upon them "even for a moment, lest they die" (v. 20).

God didn't wish for these men to die. That's why He strongly charged Moses and Aaron to not let the Kohathites go near the most holy things before they were properly wrapped.

We can't let the severe consequences of approaching a holy God in haste obscure God's goal. He is the Lord who desires to dwell among His people. In order for Him to do so, He must establish boundaries and processes for His

sin-sick children to draw near to Him. For the children of Israel in Numbers, it was living according to the Law with its offerings and sacrifices that ultimately point to the perfect life, offering, and sacrifice of Jesus. As believers in Christ, we get to approach the throne of grace with confidence because Jesus has gone before us (Heb. 4:16). Jesus is our High Priest (like Aaron, but so much better!) who enters in on our behalf so we might draw near to God and He to us.

We also can't forget the camping and traveling arrangements were temporary. God was taking His children somewhere. Before they arrived, He was preparing them to live in the land He provided. The wilderness was not haphazard nor wasted. God had delivered His children out of Egypt, but it was time to deliver Egypt out of them.

If you're in a wilderness season (or have experienced one), does (or did) it feel haphazard? Why or why not? Reflect on a wilderness season in your own life. Did it feel wasted at the time?

How do you want to respond to God's invitation to draw near to Him? Do you have confidence to do so after? Why or why not?

Father, thank You that You never waste a season. Jesus, thank You for making a way for us to draw near to the Father. Holy Spirit, help us to respond to Your tender conviction of sin and assure us of our acceptance through Jesus' blood. Amen.

DAY FOUR

CLEANSING THE CAMP

Pause. Breathe. Pray.

Read Numbers 5.

Today's text isn't likely to be the most popular for devotional reading, but my prayer is that you would see God's consistent character and be comforted that He never changes. He is consistently holy and compassionate, just and merciful. When everything else seems to change, He alone remains.

UNCLEAN

Look at Numbers 5:1-4 and answer the following questions:

What three groups of people were to be put out of camp?

According to verse 3, why were they put out of camp?

God was preparing His people to march into the promised land. The only real shot they had was to enter with the Lord in their midst. Without Him, it couldn't happen. Because God is holy, in order for Him to remain in their midst, they had to be consecrated.

Look up *consecrate* in a dictionary. Write the definition that best fits below:

Write out Leviticus 20:7-8.

The Lord is serious about holiness and thus “clean-ness.” He told His children what was clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable among His people. Sometimes a person is unclean due to personal sin (e.g. sexual immorality, idolatry, and murder), but other times, it’s something over which they have little control. This was the case with the three groups of people listed at the beginning of chapter 5.

Their uncleanness was communicable and posed a threat to the sanctity of the camp. If the camp was defiled, there was a greater risk the tabernacle would be defiled as well.

In the New Testament, we see God is still serious about holiness. The apostle Peter urged Christians to “be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15b-16). In Revelation 21 we see that the new Jerusalem (where God dwells with His people) will have no place for death or anything unclean.

The *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* states:

But if the New Testament upholds the moral side of these uncleanness regulations, it abolished the symbolic physical distinctions. Our Lord healed lepers and the woman with a flow of blood, and raised the dead through touch (Lk. 17:12ff.; 8:40ff.). In these ways he declared that those conditions which for centuries had separated even the elect people of God from God no longer mattered. God has himself drawn nigh. The kingdom of heaven is now open to all who repent and believe the gospel.⁷

While these regulations were appropriate for God’s people in Numbers, they are no longer relevant for those who trust in Christ. Jesus has made us clean through His blood. It is His touch that makes us clean.

RESTITUTION

Numbers 5:5-10 addresses moral “uncleanness,” focusing on a man or woman who had sinned against another (most likely they had stolen or damaged someone else’s property).⁸ Notice, though, that the Lord referred to their sin as “breaking faith with the LORD” (v. 5). Our sin against one another is ultimately sin against God.

Turn to Matthew 22:34-40 and answer the following questions:

Who asked Jesus a question?

What is the first and greatest commandment?

What is the second that is like the first?

The lawyer in Matthew 22 was not legal counsel in a court of federal or state law; he was an expert in the Law of God. He knew all the commandments and the requirements for offerings, sacrifices, feasts, and fasts. Because we know this, it is safe to assume he wasn't asking Jesus the question to get information. He was testing Jesus. True to form, Jesus was undeterred. He answered clearly, acknowledging that loving the Lord your God is connected with loving your neighbor and reiterating that sinning against one's neighbor is breaking faith with the Lord.

The Lord knew that sinning against a brother or sister would be a reality of life, and He made a way for His people to make things right. In Numbers God provided a way through confession, restitution, and the offering of a ram. In the New Testament and for us, Jesus became our *propitiation* (there's that word again!).

Compare Matthew 5:23-26 and Matthew 6:14-15.

What did Jesus instruct us to do when we sin against someone? When someone sins against us?

Whether we mean to or not, we will hurt others, and we will be hurt by others. When we do, we have the choice to confess our wrong or to justify and shift blame. Will we extend forgiveness, or will we dwell on the hurt and demand revenge? As Christians, we know we cannot live this life perfectly; thus, we are free to admit our sins and receive forgiveness. And since we have been

so freely forgiven by God, we can forgive others. Forgiveness is not an easy process. It doesn't always mean restoration of a relationship, but it does mean freedom for the forgiver.

For me, forgiveness for someone who had hurt me was a longer process than I thought it would be. First, I didn't realize I harbored unforgiveness toward that person. It only became evident when I found bitterness leaking into my thoughts and comments about that person. My gut reaction was to justify my feelings—after all, I was legitimately hurt. However, the Lord would not let up with His gentle reminder, *Lauren, you need to deal with this. Forgive that person.* I started out listing the ways I felt wronged to the Lord. Then, I asked Him to forgive me for holding on to bitterness. I surrendered any right I thought I had to “punish” that person. I put it in the Lord's hands alone.

Finally, I got to the place where I spoke the words, “I forgive _____ for _____.” Then, I asked the Lord to help me live the forgiveness I had spoken. I prayed the Lord would bless him/her and specifically listed out ways He might do this. Now, I didn't magically feel affection or tenderness toward that person (but anything is possible with God!), nor did I stop feeling a little stab of pain when his/her name was mentioned or when I saw him/her. But the pain has lessened as I have reminded myself that I have laid my hurt down and picked up the forgiveness Jesus offers me and the one who wounded me. That is where I have found freedom.

Do you have something for which you need to ask forgiveness from someone? Will you have the courage to put feet to that? Make a plan to do so.

Do you need to forgive someone? If so, who and for what?

If there's someone you need to forgive, be encouraged that this may be a long process, but the first step is acknowledging the unforgiveness and confessing it as sin to the Lord. From there, trust the Lord, ask Him to help you turn from your bitterness and forgive like He has. Walk in the forgiveness you've received from God and ask Him to help you extend it to others.

THE ORDEAL OF JEALOUSY

Read Numbers 5:11-31.

Now we come to another strange text. I know y'all are chomping at the bit to talk about the spirit of jealousy, drinking dusty water, thighs falling away, and bellies swelling. Before we start, let's chat about Western minds. (I'm not referring to cowboy hats and horses, but minds shaped by the Enlightenment.) Western minds like dealing with facts and reality. We're not much for imagination (unless it's for innovation). Eastern minds (the perspective from which the biblical writers viewed the world) value imagery and ritual.⁹ We see that value in this section.

What were the circumstances that called for this "test" (vv. 11-15)?

What offering was required of her (v. 15)?

According to Leviticus 2:1-2, of what did the grain offering usually comprise? What's different in Numbers 5?

What was the woman given to drink? What would be its effect (vv. 16-22)?

This ceremony was a sad occasion. At best, it showed that a spirit of jealousy had come over a man; he didn't trust his wife. Trust lost is a painful thing. At worst, it proved the breaking of the covenant between a man and a woman and caused suffering for both. The usual grain offering included oil and frankincense which symbolized joy and the Spirit of God. Both of these were missing from this particular offering. Unbinding the woman's hair was considered shameful.¹⁰ There she was, naked, in a sense, before the Lord. The holy water mixed with dust from the floor of the tabernacle would have been

disastrous to drink if she were guilty. Because of her uncleanness, she could have died taking in the holy water. And if she didn't die, she would become barren. Her sin would be manifest, and her life would be forever changed.

The ancient Near East was an especially cruel place and time to be a woman. Women had little protection. The strong overpowered the weak. While there are a few exceptions of physically stout women, for the most part, men are physically stronger. And at this point in history, men had all the cultural power as well. It would not have been out of the ordinary for a man to simply act on a suspicion and cast his wife aside. Not so for the people of Israel. The Lord set them apart by requiring this strange-to-us test. If the woman was innocent, the Lord provided an opportunity for her to be vindicated. If she was guilty, the consequences upheld God's high standard for marriage.

Marriage was (and still is) a picture of God's love for His people. To break faith in marriage is to break faith with God. Time and again, Old Testament prophets used the language of marriage to describe Israel's rebellion and idolatry. They were adulterers and harlots who chose another lover over their husband. The uncleanness of adultery could not be tolerated within the camp.

For believers today, we see that God is still serious about marriage and preserving its purity. Jesus took it a step further in Matthew 5 by saying that even lusting in one's heart is the same as committing adultery (v. 28). But He also makes a way for the adulterer who is repentant.

Turn to 1 John 1:9 and write it here.

Is there something for you to confess? Something hidden? Sin against a brother or sister? Unforgiveness? Unfaithfulness? Use this time and space to confess and receive God's forgiveness and cleansing. If appropriate, find someone you trust to share this with who can help you walk in the light.

DAY FIVE

A VOW + A BLESSING

Pause. Breathe. Pray.

Read Numbers 6.

Who could make a Nazirite vow?

What was the purpose of the Nazirite vow?

In the table below, list what the Nazirite was separated from and to:

SEPARATED FROM	SEPARATED TO

The Nazirite vow was a serious promise and dedication to God that any layperson, male or female, could make. Most vows only lasted for a specific amount of time, but Scripture has examples of those whose vows lasted a lifetime. For instance, Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist were lifelong Nazirites.

It makes sense that the guidelines for this vow are listed immediately after the cleansing of the camp. The Nazirite vow is a radical picture of Israel's consecration and dedication to the Lord. Those taking the vow were to be

separated from wine, wine vinegar, strong drink, and pretty much anything to do with grapes. They were to let their hair grow as a sign of their dedication. The *ESV Study Bible's* notes on Numbers 6:7 highlight the connection between the Nazirite's uncut hair and Israel's calling.

The word here translated "separation" (Hb. *nezer*) is also used of the high priest's crown (Lev. 8:9). Both the priestly crown and the Nazirite's uncut hair reminded other people of their dedication to God's service. In this way the dedication of the Nazirites was a challenge to every Israelite to follow the Lord wholeheartedly.¹¹

They also could not be near death, including the death of a relative or even someone who happened to drop dead next to them. If the latter occurred, they had to shave their hair, make a sin offering, and start the vow all over. Here again, we see God's utter displeasure and incompatibility with death.

Since we believe Jesus is fully God, and in light of His relationship with death, how incredible is it that Jesus endured the most violent, humiliating, and unclean death on the cross?

Vows like the Nazirite vows are no longer necessary for the Christian, but we can still see vestiges of the practice today. Nuns and monks take vows to the Lord to dedicate their entire lives of service to Him. Their devotion is inspiring. Even the apostle Paul commended a set apart lifestyle (1 Cor. 7:1-7). Though not all are called to live set apart in these ways, all of Christ's followers are called to live with integrity.

What "set apart" choice do Matthew 5:37 and James 5:12 ask us to make?

How well do you let your yes be yes and your no be no?

How could you grow in this?

Sometimes our yeses and noes lie outside of our control. Other times, we fail to keep our promises. In that case, we can acknowledge and ask forgiveness for our failures. In both cases, we can rest in the integrity and faithfulness of God.

THE PRIESTLY BLESSING

This section of laws and cleansing requirements closes with a poem of benediction. If you've spent any time in church, it is likely you have heard the Aaronic blessing.

Write the blessing found in Numbers 6:24-26 below.

Circle "the LORD" each time it occurs.

Underline the verbs (what "the LORD" will do for and toward Israel).

This blessing is probably one of the oldest poems in Scripture. The repetition of "the LORD" at the beginning of each line emphasizes the only possible source and sustenance for such blessing. In the Old Testament, *bless* has a very specific meaning. The Lord "blesses people by giving them children, property, land, good health, and his presence (Gen. 17:16; 22:17f; Lev. 26:3-13; Deut. 28:2-14)." The Lord "keeps" His people by guarding and protecting them. For God to "shine his face" on them is to liken Him to the favor and grace sunshine brings. A shining face is a smiling face. Lifting up His countenance means to take notice of a person and treat them specially. The peace that is mentioned here is the Hebrew word *shalom*. It isn't just peace in wartime, but wholeness and well-being. It is the "sum total of all God's good gifts to his people."¹²

List some of the blessings God has given you.

Read Psalms 67 and 121 and note the echoes of the Aaronic blessing. Write down ideas that are repeated.

This blessing is still appropriate for God's people to speak over one another. I have an exercise for you to practice.

If you are in a group Bible study, take a moment when you gather to speak this blessing over one another. If you are alone, find someone to speak it over and have them speak it over you.

What parts of the blessing were easy for you to receive? What parts were hard?

To close, read Ephesians 2:14-22 and ask the Lord to help you receive His blessing.

Only through Jesus are we able to truly have peace with God and others. He gives peace, made peace through His sacrifice on the cross, and continues to be our Peace.

Write a prayer of response to His blessing and peace.