

# Old Testament Survey - Part 18

by Dick Woodward

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*The sermon explores the Book of Numbers as a historical narrative that allegorically represents the journey of salvation and the importance of faith and obedience in entering the abundant life God offers.*

**Duration:** 27:31

**Scripture:** Ephesians 2:10

**Topics:** "Old Testament", "Spiritual Journey"

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## Description

The sermon delves into the allegorical significance of the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, highlighting the historical narrative of the Hebrew people's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. It emphasizes the importance of not only being saved from sin but also living abundantly in God's purpose. The sermon draws parallels between the Hebrew people's wilderness wandering and the spiritual journey of believers today, urging listeners to seek and fulfill God's unique plan for their lives.

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## Transcript

And now as we continue our survey of the Old Testament, having been through the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus, we come to the book of Numbers. As we come to the book of Numbers, we pick up the historical narrative that we had in the book of Exodus, and historical narrative begins in the book of Genesis, continues through about two-thirds of Exodus, and then when you get to the specifications for the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness and the book of Leviticus, you lose the thread of the narrative, but when you come back to the book of Numbers, you pick up the narrative again. The book of Numbers tells us about a forty-year period in the history of the Hebrew people that really need not have happened.

There is an allegory of salvation we've mentioned several times that begins in Genesis and runs through these history books. Remember, it goes something like this. In the book of Genesis, you find the origins of our salvation.

The origin of the fall of man is found in the character of man, according to Genesis 3, which describes the character of man like it was and like it is. We're also told in the book of Genesis that our salvation finds its origins in the character of God, like it was and like it is. So the book of Genesis, which suggests beginnings, like the word genetics, is telling us about the beginnings or the source of our salvation.

And then the book of Exodus illustrates our salvation by telling us that salvation is like the deliverance the children of Israel experienced from the bondage and slavery of Egypt. Just as they were delivered from the slavery they were experiencing there in Egypt, it's possible for you and me to be delivered from the slavery of sin. Most of us don't do what we want to do.

We do what we have to do, what we need to do, and so we're not free. Very few people are really free. And so Jesus says, if you continuously sin, you're the servant of sin.

But he says that salvation can make you free, and when it makes you free, it'll make you free indeed. Well, that's pictured for us allegorically, back during the book of Exodus, when the people of God were delivered from the slavery they were experiencing in Egypt. Now, the plan was, of course, that when they were delivered from Egypt, they were to go into the land of Canaan.

God told Abraham and Isaac and Jacob that he had prepared this special land for them. We call it the Promised Land. It was a land flowing with milk and honey.

It was a land that was very fruitful and fertile. It was the Promised Land, and they were to enter that land. And allegorically, again, when we have been delivered from our slavery of sin or bondage of sin, that's not an end in itself.

That's a means to an end. We're delivered from sin, but we're saved for salvation, which expresses itself in what Jesus called life more abundantly. I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly.

That's our Promised Land, allegorically speaking. We're supposed to enter into the Promised Land of abundant life or abundant Christian living. Now, the book of Numbers tells us about a parenthesis between their deliverance from Egypt and their entrance into the Promised Land of Canaan.

They didn't go directly from Egypt into Canaan. The book of Numbers tells us they went around in circles in the wilderness for 40 years. Now, sad to say, that is an allegory of many professing Christians or many people who are in our churches today.

They have been delivered from the penalty and power of their sin because they do, in fact, believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, as we saw it pictured in the book of Exodus and in the book of Leviticus. But they haven't seemed to discover this abundant living. They don't have abundant life.

They're depressed and bored and dissatisfied and unfulfilled. They haven't entered the Promised Land, allegorically, of abundant Christian living. Instead, they're going around in circles, circles of unbelief, circles of disillusionment, circles of confusion.

Now, allegorically, I believe, the book of Numbers, as the historical narrative of the Hebrew people has continued, illustrates that sort of thing for us. And we wish it were not true, but it is true all too often that our experience of salvation parallels this historical allegory of salvation that we have in the history of the Hebrew people in these first books of the Bible. Now, as we come to the book of Numbers, and as we put the book of Numbers in perspective for you, I would like, again, to recall some of the rules for Bible study that we shared with you in our introduction to this survey of the Old Testament.

It's very important that we know how to approach the scripture, and I feel that one of the primary purposes of this course of study is to give you an approach to the scripture. Now, as you approach the book of Numbers, let's recall some of these rules for approaching the scripture. First of all, in John 17, verse 17, I

believe Jesus told us how to approach the scripture with these simple words, Thy word is truth.

That's a beautiful statement that could open up the scripture to us and show us something about how to approach the scripture. Thy word is truth. You see, if you can catch the vision of what Jesus was saying, then you should approach the scripture looking for truth.

When you approach the scripture, you shouldn't be preoccupied with the literary form in which that truth is being presented. So often when people come to the scripture, their primary concern is, what is it? What is the literary form of this book, of the scripture that I'm approaching? What is it? As we've said so many times, your approach to the scripture should be with questions like these. What does it say? And what does it mean? And what does that mean to me? In other words, I'm not coming to the scripture debating its literary form.

I'm coming to the scripture looking for the truth it teaches, regardless of what the literary form might be. That can open up the scripture to you, I believe, if you can catch the vision of that. Another rule for approaching the scripture is in John chapter 7, verse 17, where Jesus again said, in discussing our approach to the scripture, if when you come to the scripture looking for truth, if you are willing to do that truth, if you are willing to appropriate or apply that truth, in the doing of the truth will come the knowing.

If you will do it, then you will know it. If you do what it says, you'll know that it's the word of God, that that truth came from God, that that was a truth that came from God showing you how to live. So when you put these two references in John together, they give you an approach to scripture.

Come looking for truth, and make up your mind before you come looking for truth, that when God shows you what the truth is, you're going to apply it to your life. Now, the psalmist said, the sum of thy word is truth. In Psalm 119, verse 160, the psalmist said, the sum of thy word is truth.

And I think that gives us an insight into how to approach the scripture. Come looking for the big truth. Come looking for the essential truth.

Don't get sidetracked with peripheral matters, with minutia, with little things. Come looking for the big truth, and come willing to obey that big truth when God shows it to you. Another important principle of approach, especially in this part of the Bible, is remember, all these things happen to them.

These are not fables. These things happen to them, and they happen to them for examples and warnings for you and me. So in the historical narrative, look for examples and warnings, and then remember that historical happenings can have allegorical significance without taking anything away from their historicity.

That's based upon a verse in Galatians 4, verse 24, where Paul refers to Abraham having two sons, and he says, this is an allegory. That's obviously history, but it's also obviously allegory because Paul says it is. Now, I shared those rules with you again because as we come to the book of Numbers, I believe it's important that we come to the book of Numbers looking for truth.

And as we come to this awesome book of Numbers, looking for truth, we should make up our minds as we come that we're going to apply that truth to our lives. Now, as we come to this particular book, which is historical narrative all the way through, it's important that we should look for the big truth, and we should look for that truth in the form of examples and warnings, and then we should realize that this book is a beautiful allegory in addition to being history. In the book of Numbers, in this perspective, come looking for truth that is allegorical.

Now again, I would like to remind you of the definition of an allegory. An allegory is the description of one thing under the image of another, or an allegory is a story in which people, things, and happenings have another meaning, often morally instructive. Now with that definition of an allegory, come to the book of Numbers looking for truth that is allegorical, and I believe you'll find it, much of it, in the book of Numbers.

Now also in the book of Numbers, come to the book of Numbers looking for truth that is arresting. I believe as you approach the book of Numbers, the way we've asked you to approach it, look for truth that is not only allegorical but arresting. Frankly, I believe the book of Numbers is the most awesome book in the Bible.

I will often say as we survey the books of the Bible, this is the greatest book in the Bible. This is my favorite book, or this is my favorite character. I tend to say that a lot.

It seems as if my favorite book is the one we happen to be studying at the moment, but I can't say that about the book of Numbers. Frankly, it's not my favorite book, and it's not the book I'd rather teach than any other book, because it's an awesome book. And the message of the book of Numbers, when you come looking for this truth, and you're willing to apply it to your life, it's a very awesome truth.

Now you'll find this awesome truth if you look for the truth in the book of Numbers that's allegorical and arresting. For instance, the book of Numbers gets its name from the fact that the people were numbered twice. There was a census taken in the first three chapters of the book of Numbers, and another census taken in chapter 26.

Now in between these two censuses, you have an arresting fact. You have the death of a generation between that first census in the book of Numbers and that second census in the book of Numbers. When the first census was taken, there were 625,550,000 men.

In addition, there would be women and children, so this would be somewhere between 2 and 3 million people, but just the men above the age of 20 years were counted, and there were 625,550 of them. Now it's kind of arresting that they only counted those above the age of 20 years. What is the age of accountability? I don't know where we get the idea that it's 12, because Jesus went to the temple when he was 12.

That's the only time 12 is mentioned in the Bible. The age of 12 was never mentioned in the Bible in connection with accountability, but this age, above the age of 20 years, is mentioned many times in the scripture. I've listed about 13 times in your notes where this age is listed in connection with the concept of accountability.

Only those above the age of 20 years were counted, and there were 625,550 of them, including 22,000 priests. Now when that second census was taken, there were 624,730 men over the age of 20, including 23,000 Levites. Now here's the arresting truth.

When that second census was taken, all of the people who were counted in the first sentence, 38 years, earlier, were dead, except Caleb and Joshua. All those men above the age of 20 years, and their wives, if they had wives, were dead when that second census was taken. That's a very arresting truth that you have in the book of Numbers.

If you look in the book of Numbers into the reason for their death and the manner of their death, then you have a truth that's not only allegorical and arresting, but you have a truth that's awesome. Now as we

continue in the book of Numbers to look at the truth that is arresting, I suppose the most arresting chapter in the book is chapter 14. When you come to the 14th chapter of Numbers, these people have been wandering in the wilderness, and time and time again God has tried to prove to them that he's with them.

He's performed miracles for them. He's tried to give them a foundation for their faith. He's tried to give them the faith to believe that they can cross the River Jordan and invade the land of Canaan.

You may wonder, why didn't they go from Goshen, there in Egypt, right into the land of Canaan? If you look at this on a map, and we have a little map here with us, you'll see that they came out of Egypt, they came out of Goshen here, and they crossed the Red Sea at this point. You may wonder, why didn't they go right over here to Jericho, where the Philistines and other hostile peoples occupied this territory, so they couldn't go right through there, we're told. So they go down here and cross the Red Sea at this point.

This is where they crossed the Red Sea. Then they went down to Mount Sinai, then to Canaan, and then they just went around in circles. They went around in circles for 38 years, 40 years altogether, and finally in the book of Acts where they go up here and cross the Jordan and invade the land of Canaan.

You may ask the question, well, why didn't they just go from here to here? It says in the opening chapter of Deuteronomy it would have taken them 11 days. Why didn't they just do that? Well, it wasn't just a simple matter of marching from one point to the other. The land of Canaan was occupied by very hostile people.

It was almost like our invading the beaches in Normandy back there in the last days of World War II. It took a lot of courage to do that, and it took a lot of courage for these people to invade the land of Canaan. They had to invade that land, and this is why they didn't do it.

They didn't have the faith to do it. Ten times, God says, he performed spectacular miracles for them, and he tried to give them a foundation for their faith, so they would have enough faith to go over there and invade the land of Canaan, but they wouldn't do it. And on many occasions, they sinned so grievously that Moses would be the priest and the prophet.

He would go up on Mount Sinai as their priest, and he would intercede for them with God. He'd say, God, please forgive them. Please forgive them.

And Moses was such a very special man that ten times God forgave him. Over and over again this happens, but they reach a point there in chapter 14 where you have, I think, one of the most awesome chapters in the Bible. Moses is on Mount Sinai again, and he says, Oh, please show the great power of your patience by forgiving our sins and showing us your love.

Forgive us, even though you have said that you don't let sin go unpunished, and that you punish the father's fault and the children's of the third and fourth generation. Oh, I plead with you, pardon the sins of this people because of your magnificent, steadfast love, just as you have forgiven them all the time since we left Egypt until now. Now, here is where it gets awesome.

The Lord said, All right, I will pardon them as you have requested, but I vow by my own name that just as it is true that all the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, so it is true that not one of the men who has seen my glory and the miracles I did in Egypt and in the wilderness and ten times refused to trust me and obey me shall ever see the land I promised to this people's ancestors. You will die in this wilderness. Not a single one of you, twenty years old and older, who has complained against me shall enter the promised land.

Only Calum and Joshua are permitted to enter it. You said your children would become slaves of the people of that land. Well, instead I will bring them safely into that land, and they shall inherit what you have despised.

But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and you will wander in this desert for forty years. In this way you will pay for your faithlessness. Until the last of you lies dead in the desert, I will teach you what it means to reject me.

Every one of you shall die here in this wilderness. What sorrow there was throughout the camp when Moses reported God's words to the people. They were up early the next morning and started toward the promised land.

Here we are, they said. We realize we have sinned, but now we are ready to go on into the land the Lord has promised for us. But Moses said, it is too late.

Now you are disobeying the Lord's orders to return to the wilderness. Don't go ahead with your plan, or you will be crushed by your enemies, for the Lord is not with you. Another verse added there says, You have departed from the Lord, and now the Lord has departed from you.

This, I think, is perhaps the most awesome chapter in the Bible in many ways, because it's telling us something about our relationship with God. I want to emphasize this very, very much. This is not referring allegorically, in my opinion, to their salvation.

The allegorical application to their salvation has to do with Moses pleading for their forgiveness and God saying, I'll forgive them, Moses, no question about that. I'll forgive them. That's salvation.

But there's more to the Christian life, as we call it, the life of faith, the spiritual life, than just our salvation. There is also this thing of glorifying God by serving God and entering into everything that he's got for us. This is what's being pictured here.

The Bible says that there are purposes for our salvation. The Apostle Paul puts it this way. He says that we're saved by grace through faith, and we're not saved by good works, but we're saved unto good works which God before ordained that we should walk in them.

He says we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God planned beforehand that we would perform. In other words, there's a purpose for your salvation and mine, and God wants us to enter into that purpose of our salvation. That's pictured here by the promised land.

God is very, very patient, almost infinitely patient. God has so much grace. But I believe the 14th chapter of Numbers, and this is at the heart of the book, is telling us that there is such a thing as a level of decision that we reach, and that level of decision is where we decide after much grace and much patience that we either are or we are not going to do the will of God for our life.

I'm fascinated with airplanes because I'm a mechanical idiot. I'm fascinated with how they fly, especially a big 747. I can't get over how that big thing lifts up off the runway.

One day I had a counseling appointment with a pilot who flew 747s, and I was fascinated with the conversation we were having, and he was telling me something about these big planes and what it was really like to fly one of these things. I'll never forget he told me about landing a 747. He said, when you're

coming in to land one of those big planes, you reach a point where you have to commit yourself to the landing.

He said they call it the LD, or the level of decision. Once you have reached that point, you cannot abort the landing, you can't be waved off, you're going to have to land even if you crash. But you've got to commit yourself to that landing.

I think Numbers 14 is telling us that in our relationship with God, and again let me emphasize, I don't believe this has to do with salvation because that's based on faith, not works or service. But this has to do with finding God's will for your life, the purpose for which he made you and the purpose for which he saved you. I believe you reach a point with God where God may prove himself to you ten times.

He may try ten times to get you to see his will and encourage you to do his will. But I believe this awesome chapter says you can reach a point with God where God says, alright, I've had it. In Romans 1, it uses an expression three times, it says, God gave them up.

Now it doesn't mean that God gave up on man, God never gives up on man, but he does give up man to what man wants. He made us creatures of choice and he will not coerce our wills. It's a very sacred thing with God that we are creatures of choice.

And so even though he'll do everything he can, he may lean on us like an elephant to get us to see his will and do it. He'll reach a point where he'll say, alright, have it your way. If that's what you want, you can have it.

I'll find somebody else to do my work. And mark this, he always will. In the book of Esther, when Esther was petitioned to be the savior of the people, you know, the Jewish people were going to be wiped out there in media Persia.

And they went to Esther, she had become the queen of Persia, just like Joseph was in Egypt, and Daniel was in Babylon, and Moses was in the palace of the Egyptian Pharaoh. God placed his people like this. And Esther was placed in the palace of the Persian Emperor.

And when the Jews were all going to be killed, they went to Esther and said, oh, Esther, go in and intercede for us with the Emperor. Now, if you went into the presence of a Persian Emperor uninvited, if he didn't hold out a scepter to you, they took your head off, because you came into his presence uninvited. And Esther reminded them of that, and she said, he hasn't asked for me for two months.

And her uncle said to her, he was a godly man, he said, Esther, if you don't deliver God's people, God will deliver his people some other way. Deliverance will come from some other quarter. No question about that.

But it just may be that for such a time as this, you are come to the kingdom. That's why God put you there. And Esther is such an example.

She says, tell all the Jews to pray and fast for three days. I'm going to go into the presence of the Emperor, and if I perish, I perish. She laid her life on the line, and the deliverance of the people of God came through her.

Now, I believe the truth you get from that is, if you don't do God's will, God's not going to be the loser. God doesn't need you. He'll get his work done through somebody else.

He'll do it from somebody else. If you want to know how indispensable you are, they say you should stick your fist in a bucket of water and take it out again and see how much of a hole is left, and you'll see how indispensable you are. Don't get the idea, what's God going to do if I don't do his will? God will get his work done.

He doesn't need you. God doesn't need anybody. The loss is yours, and the loss will come eventually if you reach the point that we might call the level of decision where it becomes clear to God you're never going to do his will, and he'll turn away from you.

And then you have this sad, sad scripture. It's some of the saddest scripture in the Bible. It says the people strap on their weapons the next morning when Moses tells them what God has said.

They said, now we're ready to go, and they hear these awesome words, it's too late now. Take your weapons off. You departed from God, now God has departed from you.

I think that's very awesome, and I believe that is the awesome message of the book of Numbers. You see, these people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. How long have you been wandering in the wilderness? How long ago was it when salvation came into your experience? How long ago was it when God delivered you from your spiritual Egypt? And how long ago was it when God began to show you your promised land? How long has God been trying to show you his will for your life? The Apostle Paul calls it the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

There is such a thing, I believe, for every one of us. When we were created, each one of us, God threw the pattern away. Nobody's like you, and you're not like anybody else, and that's the way it's supposed to be.

God not only made you unique, he has a unique plan for your life. I believe God wants to do something through you that's unique and special, no matter who you are or what your gift pattern is. When he saves you, in this life at least, that's a purpose of his salvation.

Salvation has to do with the next dimension, he saves you for that, and that's very important, but there's a present dimension to the purpose of your salvation. God saves you because he has certain works he wants you to perform. Think of the Apostle Paul.

God looks down upon him and he sees him, he's the great Christ-hater, he's like the Eichmann of that period, the Adolf Eichmann. He doesn't actually put the Christians to death, but he gathers them up for deportation and execution, and he sees to it that they are arrested and put to death. His name strikes terror into the hearts of believers, and God looks down on that man and he says, I've got plans for him, so he saves him on the road to Damascus, and he goes to the old man that he wants to get to baptize Saul, and the old man objects that this man is an enemy of the church, and God says, no, and he opens up his plan for this man, he said, he's going to bear my name before kings and before Gentiles and before the Jews.

God has a great plan for him, he had it all along. No wonder Paul is so strong on proving by experience the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. See, that's the message of the book of Numbers.

As you come to the book of Numbers, look for this truth, it's allegorical, it's arresting, it's awesome, it can be an awakening truth, it's meant to be. As you come to the 14th chapter of the book of Numbers, see pictured there that level of decision where each of us decides that we either are or we're not going to do the will of God for our lives.

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