

OVERVIEW OF ALL PREACHING PASSAGES

Numbers 1:1–54

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Enumerating Israel reveals God's faithfulness and prepares the nation to worship him.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God knows and names his people and consecrates them for his service.

PREACHING IDEA

God knows every individual, and he redeems, gathers, and organizes people together into his covenant community for worship and service.

PREACHING POINTERS

Although to us the people in these tribes are nameless, faceless numbers, to God they were his special, chosen people. He knew everything about every one of them. Sheep may look generic to the passerby, but to the shepherd they are all known by name. God knows all that there is to know about each one of his children, and he loves them perfectly. This chapter shows us that God is fulfilling his covenant promises with Abraham. From one man—and he as good as dead—has come this enormous multitude.

God redeemed this people out of slavery in Egypt, and he formed them into his covenant community. When the Lord God redeems, he does not call his people to walk with him in isolation from others. On the contrary, God puts his beloved children into the church, where they exist together with other believers as part of one body. The body is properly ordered, since effective service and good health require it. The same is true of the church. God organizes his people so that they are prepared for the battles they will face and also for moving forward in their pilgrimage in this world. The new covenant community is organized for edification, service, worship, and spiritual warfare. We do not need uniformity in every detail, but we do need unity and organization in the body. We also need the Spirit of God: without the Spirit, no amount of organizing will be sufficient for what we are called to do. God knows every individual, and he redeems, gathers, and organizes people together into his covenant community for worship and service.

Numbers 2:1–34

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God provides specific direction for how the Israelites should encamp around his presence.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God is to be the center of his people's life.

PREACHING IDEA

Both individually and corporately, God is to be the absolute center of our lives.

PREACHING POINTERS

In incredible grace, the holy Creator God of the universe camps in a tent in the middle of the community of his people. He puts his royal presence in the center of his covenant community. The community's whole life was to be organized around him. Everything Israel did had YHWH as the literal center. This physical reality was an object lesson of basic, fundamental moral and spiritual principles. There were to be no competing gods in the camp; there were to be no gods before the Lord God. Only he could be the center of the people's existence.

Even when the people rebelled, God remained enthroned at the center of their camp. He could not be dislodged from his place in the universe, or uprooted from his place in the midst of his people. God remained there because he is holy, just, and good. In covenant grace, he redeemed his people and took them to himself. Human beings were designed and created to flourish only when they build their lives around God in all things. In sin, we try to put other things at the center of our lives and societies, but without God, there is no center that will hold. Unless we acknowledge his reign, we will be lost. It is a high and awesome thing to stand in this relation to a holy God, and it is only by his redeeming grace that we can joyfully live our lives fully for him. Through the work of the triune God, we can love and honor God, submitting to his place at the center of all things. Both individually and corporately, God is to be the absolute center of our lives.

Numbers 3:1–4:49

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God selected and commissioned the Levites to preserve the holiness of his sanctuary.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God's holiness establishes his authority over his people.

PREACHING IDEA

Through Christ the High Priest, there is now a holy priesthood of all believers.

PREACHING POINTERS

It was an unimaginable privilege for the tribes of Israel to have God dwell in the middle of their community. To know God this way was an awesome thing. But, as in other areas of Israel's religious life, there were spheres of holiness and unique roles accorded to those whom God sovereignly set aside for his purposes. God provided redemption through substitution, and in doing so he freed up the Levites to discharge special responsibilities in his service. As a subset of the Levites, the priests were allowed to minister in the tabernacle itself. Although every Israelite could walk with the Lord, only the priests and Levites could minister in the sacred precincts.

One of the significant—and beautiful—developments from the old covenant to the new covenant is that now the priests of the covenant are not a subset of the covenant community.

Overview of All Preaching Passages

In the church, the priesthood is coextensive with the covenant membership. In other words, there really is a priesthood of all believers. Gone are the days of setting out the bread of the presence or keeping the lamp burning, but there are still holy tasks to be performed by the people of God. Every believer is a priest, and every believer is to worship God and serve him with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength. We bring different sacrifices in this era: we bring the sacrifice of praise. Every believer is a holy priest, serving a holy God in the age of new covenant fulfillment in Jesus Christ, through the power of God's Spirit. The church can rejoice that through Christ the High Priest, there is now a holy priesthood of all believers.

Numbers 5:1–10

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Living with a holy God requires a commitment to be separate from both physical and moral imperfections.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God provides the means through which his people can dwell in his holiness.

PREACHING IDEA

We are sanctified in Christ, so act like it!

PREACHING POINTERS

God organized his people, established his presence in the middle of the community, and set aside the Levites for special service. However, whether or not someone was a priest or Levite, every member of the community was to be holy and clean. These ten verses establish the principles of being holy in God's presence and faithful toward our neighbor. The physical reality in 5:1–4 points to the spiritual principle of holy moral purity. Those who are unclean cannot remain in the camp of his people. When people sin against each other, justice must be done. In some cases, what is required is not only confession and forgiveness, but also restitution. These verses teach us that we must be holy toward God, and that there are both divine and civil consequences for sin.

In the covenant community, we have responsibilities to both God and our fellow covenant members. Only through the blood of Jesus Christ can we be purified and made clean, and only through his righteousness can we be numbered among his people. Having been redeemed, we must take care not to sin against those who bear his image. When we do, we must make restitution. This is a warning to help keep us from sinning in the first place. Ultimately, the law is fulfilled by Christ, and Paul tells us that love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8–10). If we loved God and our neighbor perfectly, we would never sin against them. God reminds us that we are sanctified in Christ, and then tells us to act like it!

Numbers 5:11–31

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God alone is a suitable judge of cases of suspected adultery.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Marital fidelity among God's people reflects his holiness.

PREACHING IDEA

God designs, creates, sustains, and protects covenant relationships.

PREACHING POINTERS

If we do not understand the divine design and sacredness of the marriage covenant, we will not be able to grasp the significance of this passage. Marriage was created by God, and he alone has the right to set its covenant parameters. Idolatry is often depicted as spiritual adultery, and that analogy helps us understand the significance of both. It is a terrible thing for the people of God to pursue other gods, and since Christ is the bridegroom of the church, it is unthinkable that his bride would engage in illicit relations with others. God is faithful to the covenant, and God's people are called to be faithful in their covenants, too.

This text must be handled with sensitivity and tact. There is a lot of pain in marriages. Some have been divorced, and others are working through confessed adultery. Some people are married to irrationally jealous spouses and face false accusations. In this passage, a guilty spouse is cursed, but an innocent one is exonerated. Nevertheless, in either case, there is no doubt that by the time things had reached the stage of this trial, the damage in the home was already incalculable. Look to Christ for forgiveness and reconciliation, and thank God that he is perfectly faithful to his covenant promises. Given the theological and practical ramifications of marriage dynamics, we need to remember that God designs, creates, sustains, and protects covenant relationships.

Numbers 6:1–21

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Nazirite vow permitted any Israelite to mark a period of special devotion to God.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God provides the means for all of his people to express the fullness of their dedication.

PREACHING IDEA

When you dedicate yourself to God, actions speak louder than words.

PREACHING POINTERS

Only a fraction of the Israelites could serve the Lord as priests or Levites, but any Israelite could dedicate themselves to the Lord in a special way by taking the Nazirite vow. A Nazirite had to give up some of the normal pleasures of life, as well as voluntarily place themselves under certain restrictions. People were not forced to make this vow, but if they did, it was binding. Actions speak louder than words, and what counted in God's sight was not a person saying they would uphold a vow, but rather the follow-through and fulfillment of the vow that had been made.

It may sound to us like the restrictions in the Nazirite vow were quite limiting, but what was given up was more than compensated for by the opportunity to live in self-conscious awareness

Overview of All Preaching Passages

of being specially dedicated to the Lord. The joy and Spirit of the Lord amply repaid the faithful Nazirite. In the new covenant era, we do not have Nazirites, but every follower of Christ has made an even more serious, binding commitment when they put their faith in Jesus. Jesus does not call us to give up grapes, haircuts, and funerals: he calls us to pick up our cross, die to self daily, and follow him. To the world, this looks like a terrible sacrifice, but the ones who love Jesus wouldn't take the entire world in exchange for the riches they have in him. These things are matters of eternal significance, and God holds us accountable for every word we utter, so remember that when you dedicate yourself to God, actions speak louder than words.

Numbers 6:22–27

EXEGETICAL IDEA

God desires to bless and preserve the Israelites.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

Pronouncing God's blessing shapes the identity of God's people.

PREACHING IDEA

In Scripture, there is a beautiful spiral between God's benediction and our response in doxology.

PREACHING POINTERS

This benedictory blessing is a gem that has biblical, theological, and literary beauty. It is crafted to be beautiful, and the blessing it conveys is life-giving. To bask in the glowing, holy, and gracious countenance of the Lord, and to feel his love and grace, is an experience that is too definite for words; it is literally inexpressible. For God's representative to stand before the people and pronounce this blessing is a wonder of God's grace and mercy. He truly, truly loves his people.

Throughout Scripture, there are numerous ways that God blesses his people, and numerous ways that his people respond by blessing his name in praise. God pronounces his benediction on his people, and his people break into doxology, worshipping him and extoling all that he is and all that he has done. The more God blesses his people, the more they are drawn into praise. This spiral is beautiful, as benediction leads to doxology, and doxology leads to the outpouring of even greater blessing. It is impossible to be blessed more richly than God's children are blessed in Jesus Christ, and so every believer ought to live a life of praise, thanksgiving, and rejoicing in the Lord. The greater our blessings, the greater our praise ought to be. In Scripture, there is a beautiful spiral between God's benediction and our response in doxology.

Numbers 7:1–89

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Israel obeyed God's command to bring gifts to mark the dedication of the tabernacle.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God's people should be generous in their gifts to him.

PREACHING IDEA

In Christ, the gifts we bring are not identical, but every believer should have a heart for giving.

PREACHING POINTERS

It is easy for contemporary Christians to miss how much disunity and tribal tension often existed among the tribes of Israel. However, this text gives a welcome example of tribal unity. Each tribe of Israel contributed its share, and its shares in the dedication of the tabernacle were identical. This is more than pedantic record-keeping; it is a witness to the inclusion of all of God's people on equal terms. No tribe owned the ministry, neither was any tribe excluded. The repetition of the gifts, reported in their identical details, ensured that no tribe could claim a greater stake than another. It was a testimony to the unity of the covenant community as it prepared to head for the Promised Land. This was what God desired of his people.

In the new covenant assembly, there is unity but also diversity. At this time, we do not all bring the same gifts when we come into the Lord's holy presence. We are all members of one body, but we are different parts of it and each is to function in their own role, using the special gifts that God has given them. Yet, there is another fundamental unity: every believer is to give God their entire heart through Jesus Christ their Lord. No believer is to hold back or give God less than their best. The gifts in our hands are diverse, but every believer should rejoice in giving to the Lord and working to edify his saints. In Christ, the gifts we bring are not identical, but every believer should have a heart for giving.

Numbers 8:1–26

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Setting up the lampstand and dedicating the Levites reflects the holiness of God's presence.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God's holy presence is worthy of reverence by his chosen and holy people

PREACHING IDEA

Come into the light! Be washed, be consecrated, and serve the Lord with reverent awe.

PREACHING POINTERS

Part of the symbolism found in the tabernacle depicts the shining of God's light upon his people, which illustrates the grace of the benediction in Numbers 6:24–26. When the priest blesses the people, it is only because God has already sovereignly determined to make his face shine upon them. No priest or prophet must cajole a reluctant God to bless his people. God is a God of light and life, not darkness and death.

When God's light shines upon his people, they must be purified and cleansed. Having been made holy, they are consecrated to the service of the Lord. In Numbers 7, Israel brought offerings for the tabernacle, but God selects the Levites to be offerings in themselves. When the light dawns, we are called into life, love, and holy service. This chapter is filled with sacred,

symbolic details. In God's plan of redemption, it is his Son the Lord Jesus Christ who is the light of the world. It is also the Son who provides the blood needed for washing, purification, and atonement. Levites had to retire, but the Son lives forever and so his priestly office never ends. Hebrews reveals in exquisite detail how the old covenant forms were fulfilled by the new covenant mediator. There were lessons in this text for Israel in their own day, but the fullness and richness are only seen in Jesus Christ. So, since God's light is shining in Jesus, come into the light! Be washed, be consecrated, and serve the Lord with reverent awe.

Numbers 9:1–14

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Everyone who is part of the community of Israel must celebrate the Passover.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The people of God should commemorate God's gracious acts of deliverance.

PREACHING IDEA

Our purpose in the present requires us to remember our origins and look toward our future hope.

PREACHING POINTERS

Without question, the Passover is one of the most important and well-known events in the Bible. Its significance as a redemptive event is paradigmatic. As with its greater fulfillment in the cross of Christ, numerous lines of biblical-theological importance run up to it, intersect within it, and flow out from it. God called Israel to continually look back on the covenant with Abraham and to continue to look back in awe at his mighty work of redemption on that first Passover night in Egypt. Christ is the fulfillment of everything Passover represented: he is the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, and it is his blood that shields his people from the angel of death. Jesus frees us from slavery to Satan, the world, and sin; Jesus redeems us into eternal life.

In order to live well in the present, we need to be able to simultaneously look back and look ahead. Human meaning, purpose, and dignity require meaningful origins, and they also require a significant, future *telos* (i.e., an ultimate goal, purpose, or end). As Christians, our orientation in life comes from being created in the image of God, being redeemed by Christ (in fulfillment of Passover), and looking forward to eternal, eschatological glory in the new heaven and new earth. Our purpose in the present requires us to remember our origins and look toward our future hope.

Numbers 9:15–10:10

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The Israelites were to obey God's instructions as they went where he directed.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The people of God must follow where God leads.

PREACHING IDEA

The call of discipleship has always been, “Come, follow me.”

PREACHING POINTERS

After redeeming his people at the first Passover, God led them out of Egypt, across the Sea, and into the desert. This unit shows us that after God redeems his people, he continues to act as their Sovereign Lord, King, and Guide. God does not redeem his people and then let them go off merrily in all directions. He is not a liberator who lets people out of jail and then watches them disappear into the night. God is the covenant Lord of his people, and he redeems them so that they can follow him in holy obedience. He is our Redeemer, but he is also our Master.

There is never a time in Scripture when God is pleased with those who refuse to obey him or follow his law. The importance of following God’s decrees is an extremely important theme all through the Bible. Time after time, human characters are challenged to follow God by faith, and the consequences of both obedience and disobedience are clearly revealed. The incarnate Son of God called his disciples to leave everything and follow him. In the gospel, the call for discipleship still goes out, and everyone with ears to hear is to leave their sin and follow Jesus. This passage in Numbers help us see how gracious God is to lead us and guide us, but it also reminds us that he is the holy God, and he rules with infinite authority. Its central theme resonates with the rest of Scripture, where the call of discipleship is always, “Come, follow me.”

Numbers 10:11–36

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Israel’s journey to the Promised Land begins with obedience to God’s commands and evidence of God’s presence.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God rewards his obedient people with signs of his presence.

PREACHING IDEA

Obey and be led, or disobey and be scattered.

PREACHING POINTERS

The themes of chapters 9 and 10 continue to build. God redeems his people and then, as their sovereign Lord, he commands them to be obedient to his holy law and follow him wherever he takes them. As we see in this passage, God leading his people is compatible with gifted, knowledgeable human beings helping out along the way. Yet the accent is on the covenant God who has full authority over the movements and direction of his people.

It was an incredible blessing to be led by YHWH. Having been redeemed from bondage, having experienced Sinai, and having lived through numerous manifestations of God's power and holy love, it is hard to believe that any would be so hard-hearted as to not joyfully follow God. Security and peace rested upon those who followed him, but those who persisted in rebellion were scattered. God led his people, scattering their enemies before them. Then God set up camp with his people again, dwelling in the middle of their community. There is no greater safety than the safety found in following God in obedience and faith. Since this safety is available, make sure you are numbered among those who obey and are led, rather than those who disobey and are scattered.

Numbers 11:1–35

EXEGETICAL IDEA

Israel's failure to be satisfied with God's provision brings judgment that is only removed by God's mercy.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The failure to appreciate God's provision reflects a selfish and distorted view of reality that damages our relationship with God.

PREACHING IDEA

Internal grace, not external law, is what makes the heart thankful to God.

PREACHING POINTERS

Those who are familiar with the Pentateuch cannot help but notice parallels between this chapter and Exodus 16, even though the events are not identical. Far from simply being a recast of an old event, Numbers 11 has its own color and nuance. Tragically, it also occurs after the exodus, after Sinai, after the tabernacle was constructed, and after God's glory took up residence in the middle of their camp. Now, they are led forward by the glory cloud. Immediately—as their first recorded act after breaking camp from the base of Sinai—the people grumble and complain against God. After all that they have witnessed and experienced, they continue to repeat their patterns of sin. Greater light, and even the awesome power of Sinai that stands behind the law, does not remove the heart of stone.

At first, this passage leaves the reader utterly discouraged. There are also eerie parallels in our own lives, with how slow we are to learn our lessons and how frequently we fall into the same patterns of sin. Nevertheless, this passage cries out for a greater reality, where we will be moved to obey God's law from the inside out. We need the law written not on tablets of stone, but on the tablets of our heart. Gloriously, in the new covenant, this is exactly what the Spirit does. In Christ, we are given a new heart, and the will and word of the Lord are internalized. Standing under the law will never move us to obey from our heart, but the marvelous, matchless grace of God in Jesus Christ changes our heart and reorients it. The new covenant reality to come is glimpsed in the elders who are filled with the Spirit. This text clearly shows us that internal grace, not external law, is what makes the heart thankful to God.