

God Calculates  
Numbers 13 & 14 (selected verses); 33:50–56  
Sunday, October 10, 2021

I love *lists*. This started when I was in college, and I was overwhelmed by the amount of reading I had to do. As an English major, I was taking five English classes at once, reading at least five different novels at the same time. And so what I found I had to do was make a list: read 20 pages of *this* and *this* on Monday, 20 pages of *that* on Tuesday, write two pages of *this* paper on Wednesday, two more on Thursday, and so on throughout the week, so that I didn't have to try to do it all at once. It helped me make sure I had enough time to do everything I needed to do.

That has carried through into ministry, where every week I make a list of everything I know I need to do that week. But I also love *grocery* lists, so that we can make sure we get everything we need to get without forgetting anything. When we go on a big trip with three kids, there is a lot of *stuff* that's coming with us. Jen and I have made *packing* lists, so that we don't forget even the smallest things that we need. I used to love listening to Casey Kasem's Top 40 on the radio every Sunday morning on the drive to church with my family, waiting to hear which song was #1 that week. I love those lists online like, "Every episode of this TV show that you love ranked in order from worst to best," or, "This actor's top ten best movies," because inevitably I will look at those lists and come across a movie or a TV episode that I had forgotten about and think, "Oh, I should go back and watch that!"

I have a spreadsheet listing every hymn that we sang over the past year and a half of virtual worship services, arranged both alphabetically by title *and* by number in the hymnal, so that I could easily reference *what* we sang, *when* we sang it, because there were times when that was really helpful. I have a spreadsheet listing every sermon I have ever preached over the past 20 years, the title, the scripture reading, the date, and some kind of brief description or note about it.

I keep a daily prayer list in a little notebook, so that I can remember everyone that I want to pray for, and when I'm praying, I just work my way down that list, and no one is forgotten. If I am having trouble sleeping because my mind is racing about *whatever*, I will make a list of three things that are *good* in my life, and if the worries or anxiety start creeping in, I will say, "No, you have *this, this, and this.*" Just keep reminding myself of that list, and I fall asleep in no time.

Lists *work* for me. They help keep me organized. They keep me from forgetting things that I need to remember. They help me make sure that everything is taken care of and provided for. The book of Numbers is a lot like that. The verses that we read today give you an idea of the overall *story* of Numbers, what it's *about*, but actually *reading* the book of Numbers from beginning to end is a more like reading an exhaustive list. Because verses like *this* are actually more indicative of the nature of this book:

"The descendants of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, individually, every male from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: those enrolled of the tribe of Reuben were forty-six thousand five hundred. The descendants of Simeon, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, those of them that were numbered, according to the number of names, individually, every male from twenty years old and upward, everyone able to go to war: those enrolled of the tribe of Simeon were fifty-nine thousand three hundred." And it goes on like that for each of the twelve tribes of Israel, listing how many men in each tribe are able to fight in battle.

Then there are lists telling how many of those men are camping on the north side, the south side, the east side, and the west side. There are very detailed lists of the boundaries of the land and

which territories belong to which tribes. Lists of the descendants of each tribe: “The sons of Judah: Er and Onan; Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan. The descendants of Judah by their clans were: of Shelah, the clan of the Shelanites; of Perez, the clan of the Perezites; of Zerah, the clan of the Zerahites. The descendants of Perez were: of Hezron, the clan of the Hezronites; of Hamul, the clan of the Hamulites. These are the clans of Judah: the number of those enrolled was seventy-six thousand five hundred.” The book of Numbers is list after list after list, mostly just counting the number of people in each tribe (there are two different *censuses* taken in this book). That is probably the reason that most of us don’t spend a whole lot of time reading the book of Numbers. It’s not exactly riveting reading.

Back around the year 200 AD, there was a theologian and leader in the church named Origen who said of the book of Numbers, “When the Gospels or the Apostle or the Psalms are read, another person joyfully receives them, gladly embraces them...But if the book of Numbers is read to him, and especially those passages we have now in hand, he will judge that there is nothing helpful, nothing as a remedy for his weakness or a benefit for the salvation of his soul. He will constantly spit them out as heavy and burdensome food.” But then he went on to preach a series of 28 sermons *on the book of Numbers* to show that it is actually, he said, “filled with insight, wisdom, and spiritual sustenance for anyone with a hunger for God’s guidance through the wilderness of life.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a *reason* for these lists. And like the other books of the Torah that we have been looking at over the past few weeks, we can start to *understand* that reason when we look at *when* it was written.

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers: Interpretation Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (2012 paperback edition), pg. 1.

The book of Numbers was pieced together over the course of several hundred years, reaching its final form in the 500s BC, around the end of Israel's exile in Babylon. Biblical scholar Dennis Olson says that "Numbers was the product of the Jewish community's struggle to understand the pain and punishment of exile and its implications for Israel's relationship to God, Israel's definition as a people, and Israel's posture toward the promised land, which had been *lost* but was now about to be *regained*."<sup>2</sup> So exile was ending, and the people of Israel were about to return home.

So the first purpose of these lists had to do with their identity as a people. After spending decades to centuries in exile, the people who were preparing to return to Israel were not the same people who had left there. Generations had passed. These were people who had never *lived* in Israel. They had only lived in Babylon. As far as *they* knew, *Babylon* was their home. So these lists served to document and remind them of their heritage. It's almost like a genealogy – "Here are your people. These are your tribes. This is which land belongs to your tribe." It's about preserving *identity* for a people in exile; reminding them *who they are* and *where they come from*. That's the first purpose of these lists.

But the *other* purpose of these lists is found, not in the lists themselves, but in the *story* of the book of Numbers. Numbers is broken up into sections of census and story. First there is a census as the people of Israel leave slavery in Egypt; an accounting of all those who have made it to the mountain where God gave the law to Moses. That census is followed by a story of the people of Israel sending spies into the land of Canaan (this is the story that \_\_\_\_\_ read). The spies come back and say, "It's a good land, but there are people living there who are big and strong, and I'm not sure we can handle them." So the Israelites get scared and say, "We should

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pg. 3.

just go back to Egypt!” God gets upset because the people don’t trust him, so God says, “Because you didn’t trust me, *you* will not enter the promised land. I’m going to make you go back out and wander the wilderness for 40 more years. Your *children* will enter the land.” So they are right on the verge of entering the promised land, but God turns them around and makes them wait another 40 years because they did not trust God.

Forty years pass, and there is *another* census taken, another whole listing of all the people and the tribes in the second half of the book of Numbers. Then, as they come back to the edge of the promised land, God says the part that *I* read, “You’re going to cross over into this land and drive out the inhabitants and take possession of it and dwell in it, and this is what it’s going to look like.” And the book ends as they are just about to go in and take possession of the land, but they haven’t yet. It’s kind of open-ended. God has said, “Here’s what you’re going to do,” and we know they didn’t do it the *first* time. Are they going to do it *this* time?

So this is a story about a people who have never lived in Israel going “home” to the land that had been promised to their ancestors. And it is being *written* to an exiled people who have never lived in Israel but are about to go home to the land of their ancestors. The reason that the people didn’t get to enter into the land in the first half of Numbers was because they didn’t trust that God had provided them with everything they needed to go in and drive out the current inhabitants. And *that* is the purpose of the lists.

God was saying, “Here is a detailed accounting of all the people you have. You have *more than enough* to go in there and take this land.” But the people were scared and didn’t trust that. Their failure to enter the land wasn’t because of lack of preparation. We have all these lists showing that God has prepared and provided *everything*. It was because they didn’t *trust* that. So then

after 40 years of wandering, in the second half of Numbers, God says again, “Here is a detailed accounting of all the people you have. You have more than enough. Now trust me and go in there to take this land.” The lists are a way of showing that God has provided everything they need to live in the land. They are an invitation to trust that God provides.

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The exiled people that Numbers is being written to are being invited to trust, as *they* prepare to enter the land that God promised to their ancestors, that God has already provided them with everything they need to do that. And as *we* hear this story, *we* are invited to trust in that same providence today. The word *providence* comes from the Latin word *pro*, which means *before*, and *video*, which means *God sees*. So providence has to do with *God seeing beforehand*. God sees what we need before we need it, and God provides. It’s like Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount when he is teaching his disciples to pray, “God knows what you need before you ask.” And later Jesus says that the hairs on your head are counted and numbered; God knows how many hairs are on your head. This shows that God cares about you enough to know what you *need*, and God will *provide* it.

What Numbers shows us, and what Christ promises us, is that God *calculates*. Calculate doesn’t just mean that you add up numbers. God is not just *enumerating*, making lists for the sake of making lists. To *calculate* also means *to estimate* or *determine*, to *think ahead* or *plan*. If we say that someone is a *calculating* person, we mean that they are making some kind of plan ahead of time; they are figuring out what is going to happen down the road. When we say that *God* calculates, we mean that God takes an accounting of what you *have* and plans for what you *need*. God calculates ahead of time exactly what we need to live and invites us to trust that God will provide.

As Christ says, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you – you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

God knows what you need, and God has *already provided us* with everything we need to live and do God’s will, in our individual lives and in our life together as Christ’s church. We are called to live in ways that trust in God’s ability to provide, so that we can do – without anxiety or fear – what God is calling us to do. Amen.