

Covenant Promises
Numbers 1:1-19, 44-54

Why in the world should we bother trying to read all these unpronounceable names? And why is there so much repetition in verses 20 through 43? Instead of going through the same verbiage explaining the number of men in every single tribe, wouldn't a table have been much more efficient? Or why not just skip to the summary found in verses 44 through 46, as we just did?

No, it's no wonder that so many of us impatient Americans who start off the year with the sincerest of intentions to read through the Bible give up when we get to the book of Numbers. But instead of skipping ahead to the narrative portions of the book that begin in chapter 10, let's slow down and spend a few moments here. After all, since paper was so expensive in the Ancient Near East, there had to have been a very good reason why God told Moses to include all these seemingly interminable tallies and lists.

And when you think about it, such a level of detail does serve to reinforce a very important truth: that this is a book of history, not merely a fable or myth. After all, how many of those "Once upon a time" stories we all heard as children come to a screeching halt in order to review some census data? No, these had to have been very real people who had really been brought out of slavery in Egypt, and who really were making preparations to enter the real land that God really had promised to give them.

And make no mistake, this list also underscores the idea that every one of God's people is important to Him. After all, God took the trouble to list the names of every single one of their leaders. And God made sure that every single tribe's enumeration was included, using basically the same wording time after time so that no one would feel more or less important than anyone else.

And the same thing continues to be true for us today. For we serve a real God, Who is still really active in the real world. And this God continues to reach out to real people – and not just during revivals such as the one we may very well be seeing in the extended worship services that have been taking place this week at Asbury University near Lexington, Kentucky, and have now spread to Samford University in Alabama, Cedarville University in Ohio, and Lee University in Tennessee. No, because of God's great love even for undeserving sinners like us, God continues to draw people to Himself every day, softening hard hearts, opening blind eyes and deaf ears, convincing us of His truth and revealing His mercy through His amazing grace.

Oh, yes, God is still very much in the business of redeeming His people from the power of sin and death, healing our brokenness and straightening out our sin-twisted lives. But how can we be sure all this is true? After all, just because we read something in a book, even in a history book, doesn't mean it really happened, right?

Well, how could the real people in today's passage be sure that they would win the very real battles for which they were making very real preparations? For make no mistake: the numbering going on in chapter 1 was not so much a census as it was a muster roll. That's what God told Moses and Aaron to do: to make a careful count of all the men who were over twenty who were able to go out to war. So, how could they be sure that they would win the war they were preparing to fight?

Well, that's one reason why God wanted this very careful count of His soldiers to be taken and included in this history of His mighty acts. For it's not as if God needed such a count to be made for His

own information: after all, Jesus made it clear that the Father knows how many hairs are on each of our heads – or how few (Matthew 10:30). So, since God already knew how many adult Hebrew men there were, this count must have been taken for His people's benefit, to encourage them as they prepared themselves for battle.

But we mustn't confuse this exercise merely with the sort of thing that goes on in modern military parades, as generals mass and display their soldiers and weaponry in order to inspire courage in their friends and fearful awe in their foes. For while it is encouraging for God's people to gather, to recite our creeds so that we know we aren't alone in our beliefs, and to lift our voices together in prayer and praise, there's something much deeper, much more meaningful going on here.

For as each one of the great multitude of soldiers was carefully counted, God was actually displaying His own faithfulness. God was demonstrating that He had in fact already kept one of the covenant promises He had made hundreds of years earlier to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

For what had God told those patriarchs? In Genesis 12:2, God said to Abram, "I will make you a great nation." In Genesis 26:4, God told Isaac, "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven." And in Genesis 28:14, God told Jacob, "Your descendants shall also be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

And in today's passage, there they were, in flesh and blood, by the hundreds of thousands: the multitude that God had promised, and thus the proof that God keeps all of His promises. And remember, He had done so in the most unlikely ways. After all, Abraham and Sarah had to wait until they were well past child-bearing age to have the son God promised them. And Isaac and Rebekah had to wait 20 years after they were married before their twins were born. And God's people had spent hundreds of years in Egypt, where Pharaoh had done his best to kill all their male children. And yet, there they were, over six hundred thousand strong soldiers. Oh yes, God had kept His promises, no matter how hard they may have been to believe.

And it is God's faithfulness, not our own strength or ability, that continues to be the foundation of our faith. For what else did God tell Abraham? "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). And what else did God tell Jacob? "In your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 28:14). And because Christ is the seed, the descendant of Abraham (Galatians 3:16), all those who trust in Him the way Abraham trusted in God, all those who are joined to Him by faith receive the same promises God made to Abraham, regardless of our genealogy or heritage. As Paul explained to the Galatian Christians, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:29).

Yes, because God was faithful to send the Son of Abraham, the Son of David, the Son of God to save us, all who trust Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord can be sure that we are forgiven and freed from the power of sin and death. In fact, we can be sure that we are just as much a part of God's people as were those 603,550 warriors mustered at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

And because each one of those soldiers could see all around them the rest of the mighty host that God had promised to their ancestors, it was easier for them to believe that God would keep yet another one of His covenant promises: to lead them into the land He had told their ancestors that they would possess. Remember, God said to Abraham, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Genesis

12:7). And God said to Jacob, “The land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants” (Genesis 28:13).

And we can have the same kind of certainty, the same bright hope for tomorrow. For God hasn’t just promised that we, the descendants of Abraham through faith in Christ, will inherit part of what we now know as the Middle East. No, Jesus told us that He was going away from us so that He could prepare a place for us to live with Him forever. And John described that place in the Revelation, explaining that one day there will be a whole new heaven and a new earth. And John assured us that in that restored world God will dwell with all His people forever: “God Himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4).

That is the inheritance God has promised to all who trust in Christ. And because He has already kept His promise to send Jesus to die for us, we can be just as certain that we will inherit the new earth as God’s Old Testament people could be certain that they would inherit the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – someday.

But in order for those hundreds of thousands of soldiers to possess that promised land, they still had some fighting to do, didn’t they? Sure, during their time in Egypt they had grown into a mighty nation. But for hundreds of years, they had been nothing more than slaves, unskilled laborers. They had no military training, and none of them had ever been tested in battle. So, as Moses and Aaron lined them up in ranks, how could they be sure that any of them would be able to fight, let alone win the coming conflict with the unknown foes that would soon face them?

And all too often, we have similar doubts, don’t we? Sure, we know that God has been faithful to us in the past, giving us faith in Christ and making us part of His people. And sure, we know that Christ will come again someday to set all things right and to make all things new. But how do we face the challenges of today, all the death and sorrow and crying and pain that Jesus has yet to wipe away?

Well, as we have already seen, God’s Old Testament soldiers could draw strength from the fact that God had already kept His promise to make them as numerous as the stars of the sky or the sand on the seashore. And they could look forward to possessing the land that God had promised to give them in the future. But God also gave them something else to build their courage in the present, something they could see and touch and smell: the Tabernacle.

For remember, all the ceremonies conducted in and around that place of worship reminded them that God wasn’t just with them on the day He led them out of slavery in Egypt. And He wouldn’t just be with them once they reached the Promised Land. No, the Tabernacle and all its sacrifices and ceremonies were a reminder that God was with them right then and right there. And because the Tabernacle was portable, it assured them that God was with them wherever they went.

In fact, that Tabernacle was so important that God excused an entire tribe of Israel from military service just so that they could maintain it and guard it and carry out all those ceremonies. Yes, God knew that His people would need daily reminders of their need for confession and repentance, and equally regular reassurances of His grace and forgiveness. And the greater the challenges they would face, the greater their need for worship would be.

And isn’t the same thing true for us? No, we don’t have to conduct all those Old Testament ceremonies anymore. But that’s because the reality to which all of them pointed has already been

fulfilled. Because Jesus died on the cross, shedding the Blood of the Covenant for all His people throughout all space and time, we can look back with faith on His perfect sacrifice, trusting Him to forgive us and free us from the power of sin and death, even in the face of the trials and temptations we face today. And because Jesus rose from the dead, we can be sure that He will not only give us eternal life with Him forever on the great day that He comes again, but also give us abundant life, resurrection life here and now, each and every day.

And just as the Tabernacle was a daily reminder to God's Old Testament people that He was always with them, Jesus has promised to be with each and every one of His people, each and every day. For He has promised to fill all who trust in Him with His Holy Spirit, the One Who will convict the world of sin, the One Who will guide us into all truth, and the One Who will make it possible for us to accomplish all the works Christ has prepared for us to do.

So yes, we continue to face great challenges, just as God's Old Testament people did. And those challenges will continue to require great faith. But even in the face of our greatest difficulties, let us trust in the Father, knowing that He has kept His Word to send the Son of Abraham, the Son of David, the Son of God to us. Let us trust in Christ's promise to come again, to make us His own forever. And let us trust in the Holy Spirit to give us the faith, the strength, and the courage we need to live according to God's Word this day and every day. For we can be certain of the great truth that all these numbers so clearly demonstrate: our God is faithful to all His covenant promises.