

God Is a God of Order

Numbers 1:17–21, 44–54

The Bible begins with the words: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” These are words which every Christian—and every Christian child—should read, and ponder and memorize. They show that the world into which we were born is not random—not haphazard, not accidental. Rather, it was brought into being according to the eternal purpose and plan of Almighty God. On the first day of creation the earth was “without form and void.” Into this watery mass of undifferentiated matter God brought order. The world which he created was perfect. All systems worked together in perfect harmony. On the sixth day, “God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” So right from the beginning the Bible reveals that God is a God of order. Truly, “the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handywork.”¹

We see this lesson repeated in Numbers 1. As I mentioned last week, the Hebrew title for the book, *בְּמִדְבָּר* (“In the Wilderness”), is an apt description of the book. Chapter 1 records how God commanded Moses: “Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above—all who are able to go to war in Israel.” Israel had recently been delivered from Egyptian enslavement. Slavery by its very nature is dehumanizing. A free people have God-given rights: the right of free association, the right to speak freely, the right to keep the fruit of their labor. But slaves are denied all these natural rights: freedom of association, freedom to use their time and expend their labor as they so choose, freedom to speak their minds. They do not own their own bodies. They are forced to serve their masters and do their bidding. They are forced to labor for another’s benefit. The Israelites in Egypt did not own their own labor. They were not allowed to rest one day in seven to worship God. They were a subjugated people. Now, by the power of God alone, Israel is delivered from enslavement. God himself had revealed his holy law to them over Mount Sinai. They had heard God’s declaration: “I am the LORD *thy* God.” This declaration is liberating: “You, my covenant people, are *mine*. You are *my* property. To be slaves of God Almighty is the only true freedom. To be slaves of anyone else is the yoke of bondage. As the Psalmist put it, “O LORD, truly I am *Your* servant; I am *Your* servant, the son of *Your* maidservant; You have *loosed my bonds*” (Ps. 116:16). To be the LORD’s servant is to know true freedom.

¹ Ps. 19:1

This hit me hard as I sang Psalm 90 in preparation for singing it as our opening Psalm this morning. I had already chosen this hymn. The Psalm ends with the words, “For all the years we *evil* knew, now make us glad, our joy renew. Show to your servants, Lord, your deeds; your glorious power show their seed. May God’s good favor on us rest; may all the work we do be blest. *Prosper the works of our own hands*; yes, Lord our God, establish them.”² Israel in slavery had known years of evil. Now, delivered from under the domination of Pharaoh, they were taught to pray, “Now make us glad, our joy renew . . . prosper the works of our own hands.” And so it is with us. In the gospel we understand that “if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Worldlings think that God’s law is constraining—that if they obey God, they will never experience happiness—but they are wrong. Only in Christ is a person “free indeed.”³ Have you experienced true freedom in Christ? If you have never submitted your life to Christ, you are actually the devil’s slave. You may think that you have cast off the constraints of God’s law—that you are free to live your life anyway you want, but that is not true. Paul explains that the children of darkness are actually caught in “the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26). The only one who can deliver a person out of the snare of the devil is the Lord Jesus Christ, who bound Satan at his coming, outwitted him at his temptation, and destroyed him by his death and resurrection.

So God comes to his people in the book of Numbers and says, “Take a census.” As we saw last week, numbering—counting—is a mark of ownership. A man doesn’t have a right to count somebody else’s property. In the book of Numbers, God didn’t direct a general census of everybody in the whole world. Rather, it was a numbering of a specific people—the covenant people. Israel’s being counted was a mark of God’s ownership. To be God’s property was a mark of belonging to the covenant people. Out of all the nations of earth, God chose Israel to be his own peculiar people. It was not because Israel was inherently deserving: “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but *because the LORD loves you*” (Deut. 7:7–8). God chose Israel only by grace—not by merit. Nobody merits salvation. Salvation is entirely by grace. Ultimately God’s choice is not based on *race*; it is by *grace*. As Paul makes clear in Galatians 3, “Only those who are of *faith* are sons of Abraham . . . those who are of *faith* are blessed with believing Abraham . . . if you are *Christ’s*, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” Those who believe the gospel and put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are part of the covenant people.

² Ps. 90A, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, stanzas 6–7, versified OPC/URCNA, <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/psalms/lord-you-have-been-our-dwelling-place/>

³ John 8:36

Note well that the census God ordered in our chapter this morning was not just a simple numbering of the people. Israel was to be numbered “by their families . . . by their father’s houses . . . every male individually, from twenty years old and above . . . all who are able to go to war.”

God is a God of order, who brings order out of chaos. Israel was numbered in the manner that God had directed. This was a blessing experienced by no other people. They had been dirt-poor slaves in Egypt with no future. Now they are numbered as the people of God. They have a national identity. They have a future!

Verse 19 records that “As the LORD commanded Moses, so he numbered them in the Wilderness of Sinai (בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי)—there’s that phrase once again: “In the wilderness.” Being in the wilderness was not a trivial detail. God brought Israel out into the wilderness to constitute them as his people. If you belong to Christ, your present circumstances have meaning. Whatever trial or evil or unpleasantness you are experiencing in this vale of tears is ultimately for God’s glory and your good. God is using it to sanctify you and ultimately to form you into the image of Christ. God has a plan for you. You have a future!

Last week I mentioned that the author of Numbers writes with great care and precision; he doesn’t waste words. I acknowledged that there was repetition in this chapter, but that it was for a purpose. Notice, beginning with verse 20, and all the even-numbered verses that follow, that there is a pattern and a rhythm: 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42—twelve times in all: Reuben, Simeon, Gad, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Manasseh, Benjamin, Dan, Asher, Naphtali. All the tribes were treated in the same way. All were counted the same way. No tribe received preferential treatment. All were recorded in Holy Scripture as being part of the covenant people. All would receive their inheritance in the Land—an earthly inheritance that represents the saints’ inheritance in heaven.

This section is meticulously detailed, with each tribe listed along with the number of its fighting men. That number documented the relative strength and power of the tribe. The grand total is given in verse 46: 603,550. This is the number of Israel’s fighting men, ages 20 and above, able to go forth to war. It did not include the very elderly who could no go out to battle. If all the fighting men had a wife and a couple kids, the total number of the children of Israel was 2.5 million, and probably more, since they did not practice birth control. Children were regarded as the “heritage of the LORD”⁴—not just more mouths to feed. They were producers, not net consumers.

Let me be clear. The biblical worldview values children and renounces covetousness and selfishness. God did not put us here on earth to enjoy the good life and live unto ourselves. We are commissioned to “fight the good fight of

⁴ Ps. 127:3

faith.”⁵ As the hymnwriter observed, “Like a mighty army, moves the church of God.”⁶ We go forth with Christ, “conquering, and to conquer.”⁷ All of us have a part to play in the Great Commission, making disciples, telling other people about Christ: We are all sinners. We fall short of God’s standard of the absolute perfection required to enter heaven. But what we fail to do, God himself has done for us in the Person of his Son. The Lord Jesus is the Savior who went to the cross to die for our sins. If we look to him in faith we are saved by his blood. We will live eternally with him in heaven. Amen!

So here, if you will, is the number of the children of Israel whom God safely brought through the Sinai desert on their way to Canaan. Just think of the logistics of bringing two-and-a-half or three million people of every age from newborn to elderly through the desert. God fed them with the bread of heaven. He gave them water to drink. He gave them quails for protein. Their shoes and clothes did not wear out. He protected them from enemies who wanted to destroy them. Just as his bringing them through the Red Sea was a miracle, so his providing for them and protecting them for forty years through the desert was a miracle. And he who provided for his people in the desert is able to provide for his people in the present day. “My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”⁸ He is able! Whatever your need, he promises to supply it. Not necessarily your wants, but your needs. Your Savior knows your needs. He doesn’t need you to inform him of your needs, but he wants you to pray, coming to him as a faithful Father who genuinely cares for his children. So do not worry or fret but come to him in faith. As a father pities his children, so the Lord of heaven pities you. He knows your frame, he remembers that you are dust. He will never overlook you or lose track of you.

God is a God of order. He doesn’t start a project and then give up. He finishes what he starts. He who has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Christ.⁹ He has a perfect plan for you, and he won’t suddenly pull the plug. If he can bring three million Israelites through the desert—none of them ever missing a meal or getting lost along the way—then he can take care of you. You are secure in his capable hands! Let’s take a look at some of the particulars of the divine ordering that we see in this chapter. First,

1. He orders families.

Notice the repeated phrase “their genealogies by their families, by their fathers’ house.” God is interested in families. “He maketh the barren woman to keep house,

⁵ 1 Tim. 6:12

⁶ From the hymn “Onward, Christian Soldiers”

⁷ Rev. 6:2

⁸ Phil. 4:19

⁹ Phil. 1:6

and to be a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the LORD” (Ps. 113:9). “God setteth the solitary in families” (Ps. 68:6). The biblical religion is centered on families. There are three divine institutions: the family, the church and the civil government. The family was ordained first. When God had created all things, all of the animals had their mate. “Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him”—a helper comparable to him, or fit for him. God performed the first surgical procedure: “and the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2). Human procreation was and remains God’s plan for mankind. It should never be promiscuous but always within the context of biblical marriage between a man and woman committed for life. Fornication and adultery are sin. Every child deserves to be born and reared in the context of a loving, committed family. Sadly, this doesn’t always happen, but God is a God of mercy and grace, and he is able to bring beauty out of ashes. For those who are single, he promises to be “a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows.”¹⁰ For those who have no human family, he gives the church, our spiritual family.

God did not simply order the numbering of discrete, unrelated individuals in the desert. The census he ordered was by families and by fathers’ houses. God is interested in families. He orders families. He has ordained the human family as the primary and fundamental institution of human society. The church ought to seek to disciple whole families, teaching each member his place and purpose. At the same time we ought to care for those who have no earthly family, gladly incorporating them into the family of God. Second,

2. He orders nations.

This is not the primary focus of this chapter, but it comes out in other places in the Bible. In Revelation 1:5 the Lord Jesus is called “the ruler of the kings of the earth.”¹¹ Psalm 2 asks, “Why do the heathen [גוֹיִם, *nations*] rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure. Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.” In Revelation we read, “The kingdoms of this world

¹⁰ Ps. 68:5

¹¹ NIV, ὁ ἄρχων τῶν βασιλέων τῆς γῆς (ἄρχων means *ruler, lord, prince*)

are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign forever and ever.”¹² God orders *nations*.

Thirdly,

3. He orders churches and their worship.

Note that the tribe of Levi is excluded from the numbering. Levi was not given an inheritance in Canaan. It was assigned the difficult work of carrying the Tabernacle and its furnishings through the desert and assisting the priests in offering the sacrifices of God’s worship. In verses 50 and following God specified: “You shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the Testimony, over all its furnishings, and over all things that belong to it; they shall carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings; they shall attend to it and camp around the tabernacle. And when the tabernacle is to go forward, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall set it up.”

The Tabernacle was the center of old covenant worship. It was the place of sacrifice. This is now fulfilled in Jesus, the true tabernacle. “The Word became flesh and dwelt [ἐσκήνωσεν—literally, *tabernacled*] among us” (John 1:14). The Old Testament sacrifices covered over but could not take away sin. Their purpose was to point to Christ, the Lamb of God who shed his blood for our sins. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission, but Christ shed his blood once for all “to *put away* sin” (Heb. 9:26). As Isaac Watts beautifully phrased it, “Not all the blood of beasts / on Jewish altars slain / could give the guilty conscience peace / or wash away the stain. But Christ, the heavenly Lamb, / takes all our sins away, / a sacrifice of nobler name / and richer blood than they.”

The Levites were assigned the task of caring for the tabernacle. During the wilderness wanderings we read that “the children of Israel shall pitch their tents, everyone by his own camp, everyone by his own standard, according to their armies; but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel; and the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony” (vv. 52–53).

God is a God of order. God orders churches and their worship. Churches are not to be ordered according to the wishes of men but according to the revealed will of God. The true church is not independent and self-governing. It is not ruled by any single individual. The true church ruled by a plurality of godly elders called by Christ and possessing the biblical requirements for church officers. It is under the oversight of presbyteries, which examine and ordain qualified ministers to teach God’s word with authority in the churches. God’s people are never left to the mercy of a single individual, no matter how godly or well-intended. God’s word specifically says, “Obey *them* that have the rule over you”¹³—never “Obey *him*

¹² Rev. 11:15

¹³ Heb. 13:17

that has sole rule over you.” In other words, church government must be *presbyterian*—rule by a plurality of godly elders. And the elements of worship must always and only be those which are taught in the Bible: prayer, the reading and preaching of the Holy Scriptures, the singing of the biblical Psalms and God-glorifying hymns, and the due administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper. Biblical worship glorifies God and edifies his people.

God is a God of order. He orders families. He orders nations. He orders churches. He establishes their worship. He wants us to live orderly lives, ordered by his Word, acknowledging his sovereignty and claim upon us, every moment of every day on this earth that he allots to us, to the glory of Christ.

Following Satan brings chaos. Following Christ gives order and purpose to life. Amen.