

The Church's Marching Orders

Numbers 2

When hearing the public reading of a text like the one just read in your hearing, some people's eyes glaze over. They wonder: *Why all that painstaking detail? Why all that repetition? What's the use of a text like this?*

Fair questions, but remember, this is God's Word. This did not originate in the will of man but in the mind of God. God is infinitely wise. Wisdom originates with him. After considering God's glorious plan of salvation at great length—the theme of the book of Romans—Paul can do nothing else but praise God's glorious wisdom. He does that with a doxology—a poetic expression of praise to God: “To *God only wise* be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.” “God only wise!” Jude ends his epistle much the same way: “*to the only wise God our Savior* be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.” Again, “God only wise!” God is the only wise God. He alone is wise. Man is to seek the wisdom that comes from him—even in Numbers 2! Let us not forget: Numbers 2 expresses the *wisdom* of God. That may not be immediately evident to a speed-reader, but it is true. Numbers 2 reflects the glorious wisdom of our great God. Take a look at it with me.

Numbers 2 builds on the census Moses was commanded to take in Numbers 1. Remember, this was a census of the fighting men—all who were able to go to war in Israel, tribe by tribe. In chapter 2, the order of the tribes is different than in chapter 1. Here God reveals the position—the place, relative to the tabernacle—where each tribe was to camp. The tabernacle—surrounded by the Levites, whose job was to carry it and all its furnishings—was in the center. That is important, and we will develop it in a moment. Three tribes (Judah, Issachar and Zebulun) were to camp on the east side of the tabernacle; three tribes (Simeon, Gad and Reuben) were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle; three tribes (Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin) on the west side of the tabernacle; and three tribes (Dan, Asher and Naphtali) on the north side of the tabernacle.

Notice, then: the entire population of Israel—the elderly, the women and children, and the fighting men—were to camp around the tabernacle. Note well—the *tabernacle*, containing the ark of the covenant and its mercy seat, the throne of God Almighty—was at the center of Israel as it camped. The people, and especially the Levites, were to protect the tabernacle, but ironically the presence of God in the midst of the people was their protection. As long as the people were obedient and loyal to God, he would protect them. But if they forsook God and began to worship the idols of the heathen, God would remove his hand of protection.

The tabernacle represented the presence of the God among his people. This is what set Israel apart from all other nations on the face of the earth: *God dwelt* in the midst of them. No other nation could say this. God dwelt among Israel, not

because the people were innately worthy—they were not! They, like all other peoples in the world, were sinners—fallen sons and daughters of Adam. God chose Israel, even though they were the smallest and least deserving of all the peoples on the face of the earth. They were chosen *by God* to salvation. This is the lesson of Exodus 19, where God says, “I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people.” Israel was *God’s chosen people*.

In the New Testament this is true of the *new* Israel, the church. Those who are of faith—those whose faith and trust and loyalty and commitment are with the true God—are the *true* sons and daughters of Abraham. As I showed last week, the apostle Paul makes this crystal clear in his letter to the Galatians: “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.” This hit me last night as Norma read to me the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Zacchaeus is a Hebrew name (זַכַּי), meaning *pure*.¹ But Zacchaeus was *not* pure. He was a sinner—a tax collector with a reputation for false dealing. When Jesus went to have lunch at the home of Zacchaeus, the townspeople murmured, saying, “He has gone to be a guest with a man that is a sinner.” But Zacchaeus had a Spirit-wrought change of heart. He stood up and announced to his dinner guests: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.” He called Jesus Lord! He acknowledged him before men. And he promised to make restitution for all his thefts and lying. But notice Jesus’ response: “This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham.” “He also is a son of Abraham!” There’s a certain irony here. Zacchaeus was a Jew, though his fellow Jews thought him to be a turncoat, because he worked for the Romans. He had a Hebrew name. But now, by faith, he is acknowledged by our Lord as a true “son of Abraham.” There is no benefit to Jewish ancestry apart from faith in Christ. But if you acknowledge Christ as Lord, then you, like Zacchaeus of old, become a *true* son of Abraham. Abraham “believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6, cf. Rom. 4:3). Two thousand years later, Zacchaeus believed, and though a Jew by birth, he, too, became a son of Abraham. He repented of his sin, confessed Christ, and died and went to heaven, where he, with the saints of every age, even now sings the praises of the Lamb of God, sent to die for our sins.

When Christ came down from heaven, the Jews rejected him, and thus forfeited the promise. “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many

¹ Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon (Logos Bible Software), זַכַּי

as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”²

The church is the new Israel, and the promises to Israel are ours by faith. Writing under divine inspiration Peter writes: “you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.” We heard a great sermon on this text at presbytery yesterday, delivered by a gifted young man who stood for his licensure exams: Michael Emmanuel. He pointed out that this promise begins with the word “you” (second person *plural*). Here is a promise to believing Israel that is now ours in the believing church. Israel, except for a small believing remnant, rejected God’s Messiah—God’s Christ—but we who receive him by faith are that chosen generation, that royal priesthood, that holy nation, God’s own special people. This is our status; this is what distinguishes us from the world. It is not a matter of pride, not a matter of our own deserving. It is wholly by grace, received by faith. We who belong to Christ, trusting in him alone for our salvation, are the special people of God. And as long as we continue in faith, that special status is ours. But our duty is to *continue* in the faith. Without faith it is *impossible* to please him. It is by faith that we stand.

So our chapter, Numbers 2, reveals the position around the tabernacle where each tribe was to camp. God didn’t just say: “Hey, guys, figure this out for yourselves.” The place where each tribe was to camp was divinely revealed. Nobody could say, “Hey, I want to camp over there next to my friends.” As we saw last week, God is a God of order. Each tribe was told exactly where they were to camp.

But it was not an order of *camping* only. It was also an order of *marching*. Note the end of verse 9. After revealing that Judah, Issachar and Zebulun were to camp on the east side of the tabernacle, God says, “All who were numbered according to their armies of the forces with Judah . . . these shall break camp first.” Again, in reference to the three tribes that were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle, God says, “they shall be the second to break camp” (v. 16). With regard to the three tribes on the west side we read, “they shall be the third to break camp” (v. 24). And with regard to the three tribes on the north side of the tabernacle we read, “they shall break camp last, with their standards” (v. 31).

So notice, the six tribes to the east and to the south were to go in front—probably a million and a half people. The six tribes to the west and north were to

² John 1:11–12

go in back—again, probably a million and a half people. But what was between them, in the center? The tribe of Levi carrying the tabernacle and its furnishings. Note well: it was *God himself*, represented by the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat—his royal throne on earth under the old covenant, protected by the prayers and labors of the Levites—that traveled in the midst of his people. God himself was in the midst of his people as they marched through the desert!

Remember what happened when Moses was up on the mountain communing with God, and the people began to worship the golden calf? God's wrath was poured out upon the people, and he threatened to send them on to Canaan without going with them. Moses intercedes with God on behalf of his people and God relents. He says, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Moses replies: "If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth" (Ex. 33:14ff.).

But make no mistake: that same promise continues with the church now, under the new covenant! Jesus says: "I, *I am with you always*, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matt. 28:20). As the church goes out, fulfilling its missionary mandate, carrying the gospel to the world, we have the promise of *God's presence with us*. God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins and rose again the third day, is in the midst of his church, through his Spirit, as we march forward, taking his gospel to the nations! The church is the company of his people, establishing Christ's kingdom—the personal reign of King Jesus—among all the nations of earth. No other people can claim the personal presence of God among us—only the church. What we have in Numbers 2 (as I express in the title of this sermon) is the *church's* marching orders. Since the coming of Christ we do not take the tabernacle with us, with its ark of the covenant and mercy seat. The tabernacle is fulfilled in Christ, who "tabernacled" with us: "The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us" (John 1:14, literal translation). Christ is the true tabernacle and dwelling place of God. The only way to be saved is to come to God through Christ, the mediator between God and man. In the words of our own Kevin Carey in his devotional today, "life is in the Son. Not near Him, not around Him, not associated with Him, but *in* Him." Apart from him is death, but in him is life. If you acknowledge that you are a sinner with no hope of heaven in yourself and your own merits, if you look to Christ in faith, he will save you. If you reject him, you are lost—under his wrath—forever. If you are painfully aware of your sins and your lostness, then call upon Christ to save you. His promise remains: "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13). Believe in Christ and call upon him with his people.

So remember that Numbers 2 gives God's instructions for how his people of old were to march through the desert on their way to conquer Canaan. What we have here is the order in which the tribes were to set forward when the pillar of cloud indicated it was time to march. They were encamped around the tabernacle. To camp is to live in a temporary outdoor shelter. Where they were staying was temporary. They had to be ready to move—to march—when the Spirit of God gave the command to set forth.

But this is not simply an intriguing fact in the ancient history of the Jews. Even now, God wants us to follow his directions for the church. Church order is not incidental but essential.

The Bible sets forth how the church is to be ordered. It is to have ministers, ruling elders and deacons. They are to be ordained according to God's instructions. They are to be men of wisdom and good character, committed to Christ. They are to be students of the Scriptures. They are to be apt to teach, instructing God's people both by godly character and wise words.

But the point for now is that the church today, like Israel of old, is duty-bound to follow all God's instructions. Those instructions are set forth in the Word of God, not the wisdom of man. The church has no authority to order itself apart from the Word. Every Christian should know his place in the church and be faithful and be content.

The world tempts us to take shortcuts, so as to be more efficient and effective. Shortcuts inevitably change the church's message. The church's message must be: follow God's way at any cost. God must be God. He is all-knowing. He is all wise. He is a faithful Father. His way is best.

Too many churches follow the wisdom of this world. Maybe they have good intentions. They want to reach people for Christ. They fear that some sections of the Bible, like the present chapter, are turnoffs, so they ignore them. They do not read them in the public worship of God. They do not preach from them. They want people to think that the Bible is hip, relevant, so they ignore the "dry," tedious passages and never teach them to their people. They think they have a better way of doing church than that revealed in the Bible. Putting time, resources and effort into doing things God's way is costly. There is no model for a more *efficient* church in the Bible. Obedience to God *is* costly.

As Israel marched through the desert, it was a living testimony to obedience to God. Man's wisdom would have dictated: Put your courageous fighting men up front. Don't take your women, children and elderly out to battle. That's insane! The enemy's superior forces will overwhelm you. You are sitting ducks for enemy snipers. It will never work.

But God's way is best. The church is living out the principle: "Our help is in the name of the LORD. He is our strength and shield." "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual, to the pulling down of strongholds."

The world needs to see a church that lives out its faith, that doesn't adopt humanistic methods to fight God's battles.

God does not need methodological help. We do not need to strategize and devise ways of helping God carry out his work. God's knowledge is complete and comprehensive. He knows every fact in the universe. He knows it because he made it. He knows perfectly the relative effectiveness of one method over another. We do not need to educate God. His wisdom is best—the wisdom that is from above. Why does the church not get this? *Doing God's work God's way* is not only the key to obedience. It is ultimately the key to victory.

As the book of Numbers was being written, wisdom might have dictated: Let's sit down and strategize and figure out the best way to get to Canaan. Should we send a small group of our strongest, best and brightest to go to Canaan and set up a small, exemplary working model to demonstrate to the rest of the tribes that this whole project is doable? Where in the history of the world has any nation taken its *whole population* to do battle against strong, intractable forces? The naysayers would have said that it would never work.

So they might say in our day, as well: you must have a children's church. You must isolate the children and give them age-appropriate teaching by those that have expertise in elementary education. The adults will get more out of the message in a quiet environment without the distractions of wiggly children. Pragmatists say that you will never be able to build a church if you include noisy, restless children.

But God's Word nowhere tells us to isolate children from God's worship. Man's wisdom might say: Hire childcare help and produce an adult, conference-like environment where truth can be learned more efficiently.

This is one of the problems with the book of Numbers—perhaps one of the reasons why it is not preached on more frequently. It seems so unworkable, so far removed from 21st century models of workability and efficiency. It seems so old-fashioned, so prone to failure. How can this ever work?

That is exactly the point.

The efficiency experts call us to follow the wisdom of this world; the Bible calls us to follow the wisdom of God. God has nowhere told us to follow the slick methods of efficiency experts. He calls us to do things *his* way and leave the results to him. He calls us to use the ordinary means of grace—the Word, the sacraments, prayer. That's it!

Where is the evidence that the slick, hip methods of the church growth experts produce disciples committed to doing things God's way? Twenty or thirty years ago, people were flocking to church-growth seminars to learn how to build

megachurches. The emphasis was on flashiness: coffee bars; children’s programs that could remove the distractions of little ones from the main service; appealing, winsome speakers that could attract and hold a crowd, worship bands that could hold people’s attention. Yet there is evidence that the megachurch movement is dying. Churches—even here in our city—are combining and rebranding. Where does the Bible instruct the church to have a brand? There should be no *brands* of church—only the church! The church should not be trying to replicate a certain kind of church—a Rick Warren church or a Willow Creek church, or some other kind of church. One of the unexpected aftereffects of the Covid hysteria has been the loss of so many church attenders. Some are pointing out that the megachurch model is dying. Numbers are declining. Many people who identify as Christians no longer associate with any church. Jonathan Cruse writes that the current situation “has been dubbed by some as ‘The Great Dechurching’ because about forty million Americans who at one time belonged to a church no longer do It would appear that formal and faithful commitment to a congregation just isn’t something we as a culture care about anymore.”³

Beware: the wisdom of this world is appealing, but what God requires is obedience to his Word. The wisdom of God is what brings his reward. Amen.

³ Jonathan Landry Cruse, “The Biblical Importance of Church Membership,” https://www.opc.org/nh.html?article_id=1220, citing Davis and Graham’s 2023 book of that title