

Numbers of Lessons

One hundred years ago, W.H. Griffith Thomas gave energy to the early, growing evangelical movement in England, North America and around the world. Author of 26 books and a vibrant teacher what it meant to surrender to God, Thomas offered this about faith.

“Faith rests on God, receives from God, relies on God, realizes God, rejoices in God, and reproduces God’s life and character.”ⁱ

Today, we come to the end of a summer of Sundays spent in an unfamiliar Old Testament book. Quite frankly, we have barely lifted the lid on this treasure-chest. Like all the other 38 Old Testament books, *Numbers* is a deep spring gushing with surprising truths. Some of those truths are delightful; others are difficult. All of them are important ...so I hope today will not be your last visit to these sacred pages.

This morning, I’d like to offer 7 life-defining lessons from this book about DILIGENT FAITH: lessons which in the hands of the Holy Spirit should renew our thinking, shape our living, and bring God glory. Paul reminded the earliest Christians

“These things happened to Israel as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed, lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:11-12).

The truth is that we live in a unique era in history. We have greater revelation, and greater opportunity to walk by faith, to uniquely demonstrate we too belong to the One True God. Like these O.T. sojourners,

***We belong to a God who loves to be trusted.
He eagerly rewards those who
diligently pursue Him by faith (Hebrews 11:6)***

What does that mean? Diligent faith lessons?

#1 UNIQUENESS – diligent faith embraces UNIQUENESS

The name of the Lord is all over my life. (Numbers 6)

Numbers 6: 22-27 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying,

Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

“So shall *they* put My Name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

What does that mean? (vs. 27)...that when Aaron and his sons stood before hundreds of thousands of Israelites to bless them...that they “put My Name upon the people of Israel”? Well, of course, you already know what that means. When you don your

- *Cyclone or Hawkeye gear*
- *Ames High or Gilbert High or Nevada High gear*
- *“C” for Chicago Bears, KC arrow for the Chiefs, purple & yellow Viking, the Packer green and gold*
- *a shirt with your company’s logo...*

When you don a name, you are saying something. This is my team. My loyalties are here, win or lose, in success and in failure. I support this name, I belong to this name. This is – in part – who I am.

Now multiply that idea by 10,000! When God put His name on Israel, it meant everything to Him...and quite frankly, it was to mean everything to them. It was to be right at the heart of their faith.

Exodus 6:2 God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the LORD. ³I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them. ⁴I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. ⁵Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. ⁶Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and **I will bring you out** from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and **I will deliver you** from slavery to them, and I **will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. ⁷**I will take you to be my people**, and **I will be your God**, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians..

Today, at the heart of our faith is the reality that I am a person with a name placed on me. It is a name above every name. I am a **CHRISTian**.ⁱⁱ I have been brought out from under the burdens of enslaving sin. I too have been redeemed. I too have been captured by Christ; He is my God, and He is bringing me day by day to a future kingdom and an eternity in heaven He has promised. The Holy Spirit in me is the guarantee of my future inheritance (cf. Eph 1:13-14).

Faith embraces the unique name of the Lord Jesus Christ on my life. There isn’t a moment in my life nor a place I go where I don’t represent Him. It is the most important reality of my life; diligent faith does not lose sight of this.

#2 PRESENCE: diligent faith follows God’s PRESENCE

The Lord’s presence sets the course of my life. (Numbers 9)

Numbers 9:15 On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. ¹⁶ So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. ¹⁷ And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped. ¹⁸ At the command of the LORD the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the LORD they camped.

Numbers 14:13 But Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians ...they have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people. For you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.

To the Christians living in the capital city of the Roman Empire, Paul said this: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God (these) are sons of God” (Romans 8:14). We are uniquely identified with the Lord’s name; we are daily led by (*guided by, directed by, prompted by...our daily encounters are orchestrated by*) the Lord’s Spirit. Diligent faith embraces the name, looks for the Lord’s leading.

#3 HOLINESS – diligent faith grows in God’s HOLINESS

Our Father-God longs for holiness in His children – Numbers 15:40

The Holiness of God is revealingly stamped all over the pages of the book of *Numbers*. The truth is that when we give serious thought to God’s holiness, we are stunned by it, even shocked by it. In his classic *The Knowledge of the Holy* A.W.Tozer insightfully writes:

Holy is the way God is. To be holy, he does not conform to a standard. He is that standard. He is absolutely holy with an infinite, incomprehensible fullness of purity that is incapable of being other than it is. Because God is holy, His attributes are holy; that is, whatever we think of belonging to God must be thought of as holy.

God is holy and He has made holiness the moral condition necessary to the health of His universe. Whatever is holy is healthy; evil is a moral sickness that must end ultimately in death.

Whatever is contrary to holiness is necessarily under His eternal displeasure.

To preserve His creation God must destroy whatever would destroy it.

This is why

- several times, Israel was threatened with extinction by God for her apostasy, spared only by the desperate intercession of Moses for them (Exodus 32, Numbers 11, 14:11ff.)
- all the older generation of Israel (save Joshua, Caleb), including Aaron, Miriam and Moses were sentenced to die in the wilderness for their unholy unbelief
- plague and fire brought an end to the lives of thousands, sometimes in spectacular fashion (Ex. 32, Lev. 10, Numbers 11:1, 14:37, 16:31-34, 46-49, 21:6, 25:9)
- the priests/Levites were to slay anyone who encroached upon the Tabernacle without proper preparation (Numbers 3:10,38, 25:7-8, Ex. 32:26-28)
- the Lord’s vengeance was executed upon the nation of the Midianites (Numbers 31:1-54) who beguiled the Israelites into unholy idol worship (Cf. Numbers 25).

Wenham: *The same principles (re: holiness) governed judgment within Israel and among the nations. All perish for their sins, but for the grace of God. But Israel was punished first, [and] then it was the turn of the surrounding peoples.ⁱⁱⁱ*

If we read the Old Testament for no other purpose, it should be to realign our understanding – my faith is grounded in a Holy God who calls me to “Be holy as I am holy” (cf. 1 Peter 1:16, cf. 4:17).

#4 TRUST – diligent faith trusts despite the odds

God is always greater than the odds His children face.

If you remember no other story from *Numbers*, remember that fateful moment at a place called Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13-14). Remember how the spies returned saying, “Wow – the land God

has promised is everything He said. *It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit!*

But 10 of them also said, “There is no way we can go in. Not even God can keep this promise. God is not greater than those odds.”

- ✓ Remember Joshua and Caleb rending their garments.
- ✓ Remember them begging the people to not shrink in doubt, to not turn back.
- ✓ Remember that in fear all the people were willing to do was to pick up stones to shut Joshua and Caleb up (Num. 14:10)
- ✓ Remember the question the Lord asks of Moses: *How long will this people despise me?* (Num. 14:11)

When we don’t believe God, when we don’t trust Him, we despise Him. And the consequences and confusion of doubt inevitably follow. Which means...

#5 FORFEITURE: diligent faith fears FORFEITURE Refusing faith means forfeiting reward

You’ll remember that Moses pled for the life of the nation.

Numbers 14:17 And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, ¹⁸ ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.’ ¹⁹ Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.”

²⁰ Then the LORD said, “I have pardoned, according to your word. ²¹ But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, ²² none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, ²³ shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it.

There is an important truth in these verses – truth that is just as true today for us who are God’s children and God’s people. God will forgive any sin we choose to commit in our lives. For the Christian, the eternal penalty of any sin has already been covered by the blood of Christ. We can’t sin our way out of God’s family. But chosen sin—failing to trust him and obey His directions—has its consequences. We can lose the fullness of life God wants to give us. Even God’s children can settle for wandering around in frustrating places, rather than experiencing the blessing of obeying God. For the Christian, it is TRUST or FORFEITURE.

#6 RECOVERY: diligent faith learns from failure Past failures need not limit future victories in the Lord.

In Numbers 33, the new generation of Israel stands before Moses. Unlike their parents and grandparents, they are ready to go into God’s promised land. And from the Lord, they here this:

Numbers 33:50 And the LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, ⁵¹ “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, ⁵² then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from

before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places. ⁵³ And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it. ⁵⁴ You shall inherit the land by lot according to your clans. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance. Wherever the lot falls for anyone, that shall be his. According to the tribes of your fathers you shall inherit. ⁵⁵ But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. ⁵⁶ And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.”

How do you recover from past failures of doubt and sin? How could this new generation experience the full blessing of God? The Lord’s word could not be more clear. ***Diligent faith learns from past failures by eliminating what can compromise.*** You can experience all that God has for you when you drive out what can compromise. Making peace with the wrong things in your life will hamstring your walk with God and the blessing of God day after day after day. Don Carson:

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord.

- *We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance*
- *We drift toward disobedience and call it freedom*
- *We drift toward superstition and call it faith*
- *We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation*
- *We slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we’ve escaped legalism*
- *We slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.^{iv}*

I hope you will keep reading into the wonderful book of Deuteronomy. You will hear Moses say to this new generation, “You have a new opportunity. You buried your parents and grandparents in the desert, but their failures do not need to be your future. Completely eliminate what compromises!”

Deut. 4:39 know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. ⁴⁰ Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time.”

A faith which pursues God uniquely embraces His name. It seeks direction each day from the Lord’s presence. It longs for a greater personal holiness. It trusts God’s promises against the odds. It understands the danger of forfeiture, and so eliminates what can compromise God’s blessing.

#7 GOSPEL – diligent faith always looks for Christ!

In *Numbers*, over and over again, God made clear His provisions of grace

- In the sacrifices for sin, we see the final sacrifice of Christ for us (Hebrews 10:12-14)
- In the unblemished male lamb whose blood was shed to cover sin, we see the unblemished Lamb of God whose shed blood takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 1 Peter 1:19)
- On the day of Atonement, the High Priest in the Holy of Holies with blood, we see God’s final High Priest, Jesus, bringing His blood into the very presence of God once and for all (Hebrews 9:14, 24-28).
- In the priests who served in the tabernacle and interceded for Israel, we see the intercessory work of Christ for us (Hebrews 4:14-16).
- In the manna bread which came down from heaven and gave life, we see the Bread of Life (Jesus) who came down from heaven to give us life (John 6:32-40)

- In the Rock which gave Israel water, we see the provision of living water in our Rock who is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4, cf John 4, John 7:37-39).
- In the bronze serpent that was lifted up on the pole to be seen by faith to give life, we see the lifting up of Christ on the cross to be seen by faith to give life (Numbers 23, John 3:14-15)
- In the leadership and intercessory prayer life of Moses for God's people – a man who was faithful over God's house as a servant, we see the leadership and intercessory work of Christ Jesus for us – the God-man who is also faithful over God's house as a son (Hebrews 3:5-6)

As Jesus explained to the two disciples on the roadway to Emmaus, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). And later to the disciples, “Everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44), opening their minds to understand the Scriptures.

CONCLUSION

Diligent faith that pursues God

- *Embraces the uniqueness of having God's name all over your life*
- *Recognizes and follows God's very present leading*
- *Grows my life in holiness*
- *Trusts God despite the odds, in the face of tough circumstances*
- *Fears forfeiture*
- *Learns and recovers from failure*
- *Looks for Christ and the good news of God's forgiving grace*

A young Chinese student was traveling from China to the United States to study at one of the universities. A fellow passenger noticed him reading his Bible, and engaged the Chinese student in conversation. The passenger spoke disparagingly of the Bible, his goal obviously to rattle the faith of the student. But then, somewhat embarrassed, added, “I would not like to disturb your faith in Christ, however.”

The young student smiled and replied, kindly, “Sir, if you could disturb my faith in Christ, He would not be a big enough Savior for me!”^v [Our diligent faith is on a big enough Savior!]

UNIQUENESS

PRESENCE

HOLINESS

TRUST

FORFEITURE

RECOVERY

CHRIST...which of these lessons resonate most with you?

“Lord God, empower us that our faith be diligent, not mediocre. Empower us to seek you, for your great reward is always your response.”

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ⁱ Roy B. Zuck, *The Speaker's Quote Book* (Kregel, 1997), 144.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Acts 11:26, 26:28, 1 Peter 4:16

ⁱⁱⁱ Gordon Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVPress, 1981), 235.

^{iv} D.A. Carson, *For the Love of God* (Crossway, 1999).

^v J. Stewart Holden in R. Kent Hughes *1001 Great Stories and Quotes* (Tyndale, 1988), 156.