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The Book of Numbers*

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Introduction

People on the Move: The Book of Numbers

In the book of Exodus, the Lord describes the birth of a nation. Exodus and Leviticus explain the rules and laws for this nation. The book of Numbers is the topic for our quarter. It helps us understand this nation in a new way. This book is about God's people on the move.

But God's people are not just moving anywhere. They are to go and take over the land promised to them. This land is not promised because of the people's holiness nor because of their goodness. The land is to be theirs because of God's promise to their father, Abraham, hundreds of years earlier: " 'I will give you all of the land that you see. I will give it to you and your children after you forever. I will make your children like the dust of the earth. Can dust be counted? If it can, then your children can be counted. Go. Walk through the land. See how long it is. I am giving it to you' " (Genesis 13:15–17, NIV).

Along with this promise, we learn something else about this nation. This nation is an army, a powerful army of God. It is an army that cannot be defeated by its enemies because the Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, is with them.

And because of God, they were not only an army. They were a holy army and were expected to act like one too.

Sadly that is not exactly what really happened. This powerful and conquering army was very close to the Promised Land but was defeated, not by the Canaanites but from the inside. Satan knew that if the people obeyed the Lord, trusted in God, lived by faith, and obeyed His commandments, he would be helpless against them. What he could do to defeat them was to use them against themselves.

And it worked. No wonder Ellen G. White warns about it: "We have far more to fear from the inside than from the outside. The handicaps to strength and success come more from the church itself than from the world."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, page 122.

So, it should be clear we are a people on the move. We are a people trying to reach the Promised Land. We are a people called out by God. So we can learn from the book of Numbers. We can learn from how God organized the camp and gave duties to the priests and the Levites. We can learn from the special celebrations and ceremonies of the sanctuary service.¹ We can learn from the people's cries about returning to Egypt, which they called "a land that floweth

1. sanctuary service—the offering of animal blood as a payment for sin. The animal blood was offered in place of the sinner's blood. This service represented Jesus' dying on the cross for our sins. After Jesus died, this law was not needed.

with milk and honey” (Numbers 16:13, KJV). We can learn from Miriam’s leprosy, from the 12 spies, from Caleb’s faith, from Moses’ work for his people, from Korah’s rebellion, and even from Balaam’s stubborn donkey.

And we are supposed to learn too. “Those things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who are living at the time God’s work is being completed. So be careful. When you think you are standing firm, you might fall. You are tempted in the same way all other human beings are. God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted any more than you can take. But when you are tempted, God will give you a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:11–13, NIV). These words hold a warning and a promise too.

True, there may be disappointments, delays, and judgments in the book of Numbers. But the most important lesson it teaches is that God will fulfill (keep) His promises. Whether He will fulfill them through us, despite us, or without us is another question. But they will be fulfilled. And that is for sure!

With the Cross and the new covenant in mind, the book of Numbers shows that God already has made His choice about us. The only question left is, What will our choice be about God?

From 1981 to 1990, Frank Holbrook, who recently passed away, was an associate director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, in Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A.