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This week at Magdalen Road we started a new series in the book of Numbers. Why Numbers?! In large part because it's something of an unknown for many Christians - yet if "all scripture is God breathed and useful..." (2 Tim 3v16-17) it's something we need to get to grips with and work out how it's useful. Numbers is also a great book for us to get familiar with because there are very clear parallels with us as believers... hopefully that will become clear as we re-cap some of the Sunday morning sermon.

In an attempt to both bury down into the introduction in 1v1-2 (which as is often the case in the bible sets the agenda and tone for the book) and also from there to give an overview of the book we sought to shape the material around 2 headings...

### 1) A people who haven't arrived

As the book begins (in the Hebrew) mid-sentence, and so with the expectation that we'll look back to the previous verb, we started out by establishing that Numbers is part of a far-reaching wider story. It's the continuation of the outworking of God's promise to Abraham that he would be the Father of a great nation, with a land who would bless all nations. The 'time' and 'location' of the account is also clear as we're told when and where it happens in relation to their journey from Egypt.

We also did a bit of structural ground-work establishing the 2 main ways of dividing up the book are firstly through the alternate teaching / travel sections (see diagram below). Or else secondly by diving the book up at the 2 censuses (chapter 1 and chapter 25). It's clear there's a distinction between the two generations listed - the first is seen as generation of unbelief - not trusting in God's promises, not seeing through the eyes of faith, disobedient and ultimately facing death outside of the land. The second (as exemplified by Zelophehad's daughters (chapters 26 and 36) are, despite not being in the land, concerned about their inheritance.

The clear picture of the people - especially the first generation is of a people on a pilgrimage - they have not arrived. And so they are a people like us - they live in between salvation accomplished - God had rescued, freed and redeemed them but they had not experienced salvation accomplished - they were not yet in the land that he promised them.

In a parallel way we have been rescued, freed and redeemed at the cross - but we have not experienced salvation consummated with our arrival in Heaven. Like them we are a people on a journey, at times it can feel like we're going round in circles, like them we're a people who get it wrong and make mistakes - bit also like them we enjoy...

### 2) A God with us on the journey

One of the clear themes that runs through Numbers is the relationship that God has with his people. It's there in 1v1 as we see God speaking (in fact this idea is repeated over 150 times in over 20 ways throughout the book). It's seen in idea of the tabernacle / tent of meeting being at the heart of the book and indeed at the heart of the people spatially in their camp, but also socially and spiritually.

There's a challenging dynamic relationship with God seen and lived out - the people are to move when he tells them to where he tells them. He provides all that they need (if only they will obey him) whether food or water or protection.

And yet again it becomes clear that they struggle with this ongoing dynamic dependence and obedience. Just like us. We very easily forget to listen to God, but also and especially forget Him and who we are, or where we're going, or the story of which we are a part or that we're not our own. Because we forget these key foundational things often we can be driven to despair.

***Here are a few introductory questions to the Book of Numbers - as always feel free to adapt to your group as necessary***

Do you think the idea of a pilgrimage is a helpful metaphor for the Christian faith? Why/ Why not? Do you think of yourself as on a journey? Why / Why not?

Take time to unpack each bit of each of the phrases in 1v1-2.

Why is each one relevant?

How do they set the agenda for the book?

How do we see both the journeying nature of the book, but also the reality of God with them?

In the sermon we talked about the tendency to despair that might be ours - as we ask the questions - "am I just going round in circles in life?" and also "are my prayers bouncing off the ceiling?" How does Numbers help us in those moments? How does the bigger picture of our (and their) salvation help us in those moments?

Each take 1 or perhaps 2 things away to keep praying about and working through. Share and pray about these for each other.