

ONE

NUMBERS 1-4; 9:1-14

Order in the Camp

The code name for the enterprise was "Operation Overlord." The more popular name was "D-Day"—June 6, 1943, when the combined Allied forces landed on "Omaha Beach" and signaled the beginning of the end of the war in Europe. It was the largest assembly of military personnel and materiel in the history of warfare. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison wrote, "The Allied forces of soldiers, sailors, aviators and supporting services amounted to 2.8 million men in England."¹

Moses was about to launch his own "Operation Overlord," and his greatest desire was that Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts, truly be Lord over the whole enterprise. More than 2 million Jews were anticipating entering Canaan, conquering the inhabitants, claiming the land, and enjoying their promised inheritance. But before all of this could happen, Moses had to organize this assembly of former slaves who had been enjoying their freedom for only a year. It wasn't an easy task.

His preparation for conquest involved four stages: celebrating the Passover (9:1-14), numbering the soldiers (chap. 1), organizing the tribes (chap. 2), and assigning the priestly duties (chaps. 3-4).

BE COUNTED

1. Celebrating the Passover (Num. 9:1-14)

The events recorded in Num. 1-6 were preceded by those described in 7:1-9:15. We are now in the second year of Israel's national history (1:1; 9:1). The tabernacle was erected on the first day of the first month (Ex. 40:2,17). The twelve tribal leaders began to bring their gifts on that day (Num. 7:1), a procedure that lasted twelve days (v. 78). On the thirteenth day, the Levites were consecrated (Num. 8), and on the fourteenth day, the Jews celebrated Passover (9:1-14).

The second Passover (Num. 9:1-5). It was only fitting that the Israelites began their second year of freedom by commemorating the awesome night when God delivered them from Egyptian bondage, "A night of solemn observance to the Lord" (Ex. 12:42, NKJV). In looking back, the people would appreciate what God had done for them, and they could teach their children the significance of Israel's "independence day" (Ex. 12:26-28; 13:8-16). Unless parents remind their children of what the Lord has done, it won't be long before the next generation will drift from the faith (Deut. 6:1-9; see 2 Tim. 2:2).

According to Exodus 12, each family had to slay a lamb, roast it, and eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (see Num. 9:11). The bread contained no yeast for two reasons, one practical and the other symbolic. The practical reason was that the Jews had to be ready to leave Egypt at any time, so they couldn't wait for the dough to rise. The symbolic reason involves the fact that, to a Jew, leaven represents evil; and the Jews were to be a pure people. All yeast had to be removed from their houses before Passover and be kept out during the week that followed. (See 1 Cor. 5:1-8; Matt. 16:6, 12; Gal. 5:9.) The bitter herbs reminded the Jews of their cruel bondage when they were slaves in Egypt.

For Christians today, Passover speaks of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; Isa. 53:7; 1 Peter 1:19; Rev. 5:6). Those who trust Him are redeemed from sin (1 Peter 1:18; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12) and may claim their spiritual inheritance in Christ (Eph. 1:3).

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During the last Passover feast with His disciples, Jesus inaugurated what we call The Lord's Supper (Eucharist, Communion) to encourage His people to remember Him. This supper reminds us that Christ gave His body and shed His blood for our redemption (Matt. 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20) and that He will one day come again to receive us (1 Cor. 11:23-34; 1 Thes. 4:13-18).

An *emergency situation* (Num. 9:6-12). Anyone who was defiled had to be put out of the camp, because defilement has a way of spreading (5:1-2). This meant that these men were forbidden to participate in Passover. This new situation demanded new wisdom, so Moses turned to the Lord for help (James 1:5). Since it was the Lord's Passover, only the Lord could change the rules.

God's reply was gracious: anyone who was defiled or absent from home during Passover the first month could celebrate the feast on the fourteenth day of the second month, but they had to be careful to follow the same divine instructions given in Exodus 12. God wasn't establishing a different Passover; He was only permitting His original Passover to be celebrated at a different time. None of the meat should be treated as common food ("left-overs"), and the lamb's bones must not be broken (see John 19:31-37).

Two warnings (Num. 9:13-14)- This special consideration on the part of the Lord might lead some of the Israelites to start tampering with the divinely ordained Passover instructions, so God told Moses to warn them that the original rules were still in force, both for the first month and the second. Any Jews who were qualified to celebrate Passover the first month but didn't do so, hoping to do it more conveniently the second month, would be disciplined by God. What is meant by "cut off" isn't explained here; it might mean exclusion from the camp, or it could mean death. Just as Passover was a serious matter to the Jews, so the Lord's Supper must be taken seriously by Christians (1 Cor. 11:28-30).

The second warning had to do with resident aliens in the

camp, people who were not born under the Abrahamic Covenant and had not received the sign of circumcision. They might think that the second-month Passover was not as restricted as the first-month observance, but they would be wrong. Gentiles would have to become Jewish proselytes if they wanted to observe Passover with the Jews (Ex. 12:19, 43).

A great tragedy. This was the last Passover the Jews celebrated until Joshua led them into the Promised Land years nearly forty years later (Josh. 5:10). Because of their unbelief and rebellion at Kadesh-Bamea (Num. 13-14), the people twenty years and older were rejected by the Lord and died during Israel's wilderness march. When Joshua led the new generation into Canaan, the males received the sign of the covenant and God restored His people into His good favor (Josh. 5:2-9). It was a new beginning for Israel in their new land.

2. Numbering the soldiers (Num. 1:1-54)

The second month of the second year, thirteen months after the Exodus, Israel had to start preparing for battle. If Genesis is the book of beginnings and Exodus the book of redemption, then Numbers is the book of warfare. The Jews were in enemy territory, marching toward the land God would help them conquer, and they had to organize for confrontation and conflict. The phrase "able to go forth to war" is used fourteen times in this chapter. If God were to number the believers in the church today according to their ability to wage spiritual warfare, we wonder how big the army would be.

The order given (Num. 1:1-3). Over 150 times in the Book of Numbers, it's recorded that God spoke to Moses and gave him instructions to share with the people. In fact, Numbers opens with God speaking to His servant, and it closes with a reminder that God had spoken to Israel through Moses (36:13). One of the Hebrew names for this book is "And He spoke," taken from Numbers 1:1.² Apart from the revelation of God's will, Israel would not have known what to do or where to camp. "You led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Ps.

77:20, NKJV).

God's command was that Moses, Aaron, and the tribal leaders take a census of the men who were available to serve in the army. Israel's army wasn't made up of volunteers, for each able-bodied man, twenty years of age or older, was expected to take his place and serve the Lord and the people.³

Some people are disturbed by the emphasis on warfare in certain parts of the Bible, and a few denominations have even removed from their hymnals militant songs like "Onward, Christian Soldiers." But their fears and criticisms are unfounded. "The Lord is a man of war" (Ex. 15:3) when it comes to punishing sin and removing evil. The nations that Israel destroyed in Canaan were living in abominable moral filth and sinning against a flood of light, and the Lord had been long-suffering with them (Gen. 15:13-16; Rom. 1:18ff). Would anybody today criticize a surgeon for removing a cancerous life-threatening tumor from a patient's body? Yet that's what God did for society when He used Israel to judge the degenerate nations in Canaan.

Furthermore, the military image is used frequently in the New Testament, even by Jesus (Matt. 16:18) and especially by Paul (Rom. 8:31; Eph. 6:10-18; 2 Cor. 10:3-5; 1 Cor. 9:7; 2 Tim. 2:1-4). The Christian life is a battleground, not a playground, and there's an enemy to fight and territory to gain for the Lord. God declared war on Satan long ago (Gen. 3:15) and there can be no neutrality in this spiritual conflict, for Jesus said, "He that is not with Me is against Me" (Matt. 12:30).

The leaders appointed (Num. 1:4-16). Moses and Aaron were assisted in the census by the appointed leader of each tribe. These tribal leaders are also named in chapters 2; 7; and 10. It wasn't difficult to make the count because the nation was organized by households, families (clans), and tribes (Josh. 7:14), and there were rulers for each unit of ten, one hundred, and one thousand Israelites (Ex. 18:21). Note that Nahshon (Num. 1:7) was in the family tree of David (Ruth 4:20-22) and therefore an ancestor of Christ (Matt. 1:4). Note also that each person had to prove his lineage (Num. 1:18) so that no unqualified outsider

entered the army of the Lord.

The numbers recorded (Num. 1:17-26). The numbers are rounded off to the nearest hundred, except the report from Gad, which is rounded off to fifty (vv. 24-25). The total number of warriors from age twenty and upward was 603,550 (v. 46). Except for Joshua and Caleb, all these men died during Israel's years of wandering in the wilderness. The second census totaled 601,730 men (26:51), an army that entered the land and claimed the inheritance.

The Levites exempted (Num. 1:47-54). The three sons of Levi were Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (Gen. 46:11); Moses and Aaron were descendants of Kohath (Num. 3:14-24) and Aaron was the first high priest. Only the sons of Aaron were allowed to minister at the altar (vv. 1-4) and the Levites assisted the priests in their ministry. Supervised by the high priest, the Levites dismantled the tabernacle when the camp relocated, carried the various tabernacle parts, furnishings, and vessels during the march, and then erected the tabernacle at the new location.

The Levites camped around the tabernacle, which stood in the center of the camp, with Kohath on the south, Merari on the north, and Gershon on the west. Moses and Aaron camped on the east, at the gate of the tabernacle. In this way, the Levites protected the tabernacle from intruders and, being next to the tabernacle, would see when the cloud signaled that the camp was going to move.

Because of their important ministry as assistants to the priests, the Levites were exempted from military duty. The tabernacle was the most important structure in the entire camp, and only the priests and Levites could attend to it. Therefore, they weren't counted in the military census. Worship and warfare may seem unrelated, but in God's economy, they go together. One of the major themes of the Book of Revelation is God's warfare against evil on earth and His receiving worship in heaven. Unless the people of God are right with the Lord in their worship, they can't face their enemies and defeat them in warfare. "Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their

hand" (Ps. 149:6).

3. Organizing the tribes (Num. 2:1-34)

When the motions of the pillar of cloud over the tabernacle announced that the camp would move, it would have been difficult if not impossible to break camp and start the march quickly and efficiently without some kind of order in the camp. "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40) is an admonition for God's people in every age, "for God is not the author of confusion" (v. 33).

We've already seen that Moses and Aaron, with the priests and Levites, camped immediately around the tabernacle. Each of the twelve tribes was assigned a specific place to camp, also with reference to the tabernacle; for God dwelt at the heart of the camp, and each tribe's location was determined by the Lord.

Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, all descendants of Leah, camped to the east, with a total of 186,400 men. Since the entrance to the tabernacle was there, it was important to have the largest number of soldiers protecting it. Reuben, Simeon, and Gad camped south of the tabernacle with 151,450 men. Ephraim and Manasseh, the descendants of Joseph, encamped west of the tabernacle, along with Benjamin, a total of 108,100 men. Thus, all the descendants of Rachel camped together. On the north side of the tabernacle were Dan, Asher, and Naphtali, with 157,600 men.

Whenever the camp moved, the ark of the covenant went before, carried by the priests. Then the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun marched next, followed by the Gershonites and Merarites carrying the tabernacle proper (frames, curtains, coverings). Next came Reuben, Simeon, and Gad, followed by the Kohathites carrying the tabernacle furnishings. Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin were next, while Dan, Asher, and Naphtali brought up the rear. The largest number of soldiers (186,400) led the way and the next largest (157,600) were the rear guard.

The twelve tribes had to be careful not to camp too close to the tabernacle, for that area was reserved for the priests and

Levites (Num. 2:2). To venture too near to the sacred tent could mean death (1:51). Also, each tribe was to display its standard and each family its banner (v. 52; 2:2). Nowhere in Scripture are we told the colors of these tribal banners or the emblems that were on them, and it's useless to conjecture. Jewish tradition suggests that the colors were those of the twelve gems in the high priest's breastplate (Ex. 28:15-29), but we can't be certain what some of those colors were. Jewish tradition also states that four of the tribal emblems came from Ezekiel 1:10 (and see Rev. 4:7) and assigned the lion to Judah (Gen. 49:9), the ox to Ephraim, the man to Reuben, and the eagle to Dan. But this is nowhere affirmed in Scripture.

With the pillar of cloud hovering over the center of the camp by day and ablaze with fire at night, and the tents of the various tribes arranged in their assigned places, the camp of Israel must have been an awesome sight. When the Prophet Balaam looked at the camp from the mountain heights, he said, "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters" (Num. 24:5-6, NIV).

In God's plan, Israel and the church are two different peoples (1 Cor. 10:32), but you can't help but see Israel's camp as an illustration of what God's church ought to be in this world: a pilgrim people following the Lord, with His glory at the heart of everything and His presence leading the way. Israel was one people, united in the Lord and to each other. Yet each separate company was recognized by God, displayed its own unique banner, occupied its own special place, and marched at the Lord's command.

4. Assigning the duties (Num. 3:1-4:49)

These two chapters are devoted to the Levites, the men who served the Lord by assisting the priests in their ministry at the tabernacle. Moses records two numberings of the Levites, those one month old and older and those twenty years old and older, as well as the duties assigned to them. The Levites had no inheritance in the Promised Land but lived from a tithe of the gifts that

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the people brought to the Lord (18:20-24).

The priests (Num. 3:1-4). The priests were the descendants of Aaron, the first high priest, who had four sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar (Ex. 6:23). Nadab and Abihu brought unauthorized worship into the sanctuary and were killed by the Lord (Lev. 10).⁴ Eleazar was chief over the Levites (Num. 3:32) and eventually replaced his father as high priest (20:22-29). Ithamar had received the offerings for the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 38:21) and was in charge of the Gershonites and Merarites (Num. 4:28, 33). It was no insignificant thing to be one of God's priests, for the priests were God's anointed servants, especially consecrated for His glory (Ex. 28-29).

The gift of the Levites (Num. 3:5-1). God looked on Israel as His firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). He had spared Israel's firstborn at Passover but had slain the firstborn sons of Egypt (11:1-7; 12:29-30). For this reason, every firstborn male in Israel, whether human or animal, belonged to the Lord and had to be redeemed by a sacrifice (13:1-2, 11-13; 22:29-30; 34:19-20; Luke 2:7, 22-23).

The entire nation of Israel was to be a "kingdom of priests" before God (Ex. 19:5-6), and He appointed a special priesthood to help His people obey His law and bear witness of His goodness. The Levites were God's gift to the priests, substitutes for the redeemed firstborn sons of Israel who already belonged to God. The Levites did for the Lord and the priests the service that the firstborn sons would have done, for the Levites ministered in their place.

The levitical census and duties (Num. 3:14-4:49). Two different censuses were taken of the Levites. Moses first counted every male, one month old and older, to make sure there were enough Levites to substitute for all the firstborn in Israel. There were 7,500 Gershonites (3:22), 8,600 Kohathites (v. 28), and 6,200 Merarites (vv. 33-34), a total of 22,000 Levites.⁵ When Moses numbered the firstborn males in Israel, he found 22,273 (vv. 40-43), so the extra 273 men had no Levites to represent them in the sanctuary. These 273 males were redeemed by paying five

shekels each, and the money was given to Aaron to be used for the service of the tabernacle.

The second census was of all the Levites, ages thirty to fifty, who were able to serve in the sanctuary (4:1-3, 21-23, 29-30); and the total was 8,580 (vv. 46-49). According to 8:24, the Levites began to serve at age twenty-five, so it's likely that the younger men went through a five-year training period to prepare them for their work. They had a great deal to learn about the sacrifices and the tabernacle service, and it was dangerous to make mistakes. Later, David lowered the starting age to twenty (1 Chron. 23:24-25).

The Gershonites (3:21-26; 4:21-28, 38-41) were numbered at 7,500, with 2,630 old enough to serve (4:40). They camped at the west end of the tabernacle, and had Eliasaph as their leader. Their responsibility was to transport the coverings, hangings, and framework of the tabernacle, and all the equipment that pertained to them; for this work they were given two carts and four oxen (7:7). Ithamar the priest supervised their work.

The Kohathites (3:27-32; 4:1-20, 34-37) numbered 8,600 men, of whom 2,750 were old enough to serve (4:36). They camped on the south side of the tabernacle and had Elizaphan as their leader. They were responsible for carrying the furniture in the sanctuary, and 4:1-20 explains the procedure. When the camp was about to move, Aaron and his sons would enter the holy place, take down the veil, and use it to cover the ark of the covenant. They would put over this a protective covering of skins and then a cloth of blue. They then put the wooden staves into the rings on the ark so that four of the men could carry it before the marching nation.

Once the ark was safely covered, the other pieces of furniture were covered in a similar manner. First they covered the table of showbread, then the lampstand and the golden altar of incense, and finally the altar of burnt offering. The various vessels and implements pertaining to each piece of furniture were also packed. Each of these sacred items was fitted for staves and the Kohathites carried the pieces of furniture on their shoulders.⁶ It was important that the furnishings be covered lest some inquisi-

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tive Levite look at them and incur the judgment of God (vv. 16-20). Aaron's son Eleazar was in charge of the work of the Kohathites (3:32), and it was also his task to carry the oil for the lampstand, the incense for the golden altar, the flour for the daily meal offering, and the holy anointing oil (4:16).

The Gershonites and Merarites had wagons for carrying their burdens, but the Kohathites had none (7:1-9). The sacred furniture of the tabernacle had to be borne on the shoulders of the sanctified servants of God. When David had the ark brought into Jerusalem, he didn't obey this rule, and it led to the death of Uzzah (2 Sam. 6). The Kohathites were burden-bearers, but their burdens were precious, very important to the people, and appointed by the Lord. Certainly they considered it a privilege to carry the sacred furnishings of the sanctuary on their shoulders through the wilderness.

The Merarites (Num. 3:33-37; 4:29-33, 42-45) numbered 6,200, of whom 3,200 were the proper age to serve (v. 44). They camped to the north of the tabernacle and had Zuriel as their leader. They had an especially difficult task because they carried the heavy boards of the tabernacle, as well as the bars, pillars, and silver sockets into which the pillars fit. No wonder Moses gave them four wagons and eight oxen to help them with their work (7:8). Aaron's son Ithamar supervised their ministry.

All this information about the ministry of the Levites reminds us that our God is concerned with details and wants His work to be done by the people He has chosen and in the way He has appointed. Nothing in the camp of Israel was left to chance or human contrivance. Each Levite and priest knew his responsibilities and was expected to "serve God with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28). Caring for the tabernacle was serious work, a matter of life and death.

The chapters also remind us that not everybody has the same burdens to bear. The Gershonites and Merarites could put their burdens on wagons, but the Kohathites had to carry their burdens on their shoulders. There are some burdens we can share (Gal. 6:2), but there are other burdens that only we can bear (v. 5).⁷

Finally, we must note that our God believes in organization, but the organization is a means to an end and not an end in itself. One of my coworkers at Moody Church liked to say, "Remember, the church is an organism, not an organization." But I would remind him that if an organism isn't organized, it will die! Yes, the church is a living spiritual organism, but it's also an organization. If an army isn't organized, it can't fight the enemy successfully; if a family isn't organized, it will experience nothing but chaos and confusion.

God was preparing His people to engage enemy nations and defeat them. It was important that the camp be orderly and the work of the tabernacle be organized. Otherwise, the worship would not please God and the warfare would lead to defeat.

We live in an age not unlike that described in the Book of Judges, when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Jud. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). But God's word to His people is just the opposite: "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Heb. 8:5, NKJV; see Ex. 25:40).

When God's work is done God's way, in obedience to God's truth, it will never lack God's blessing.