**Numbers Chapters 1-4**

The history of Israel as recorded in book of Numbers begins in the second month of the second year after they came out of Egypt. We just finished our study of Leviticus which covers probably only a month of history as they were camped at the base of Mt. Sinai. God’s purpose of setting forth all the Levitical laws was to prepare the Israelites spiritually before He sent them into Canaan. What is contained in Numbers appears more to prepare them physically to take their inheritance. Numbers covers nearly 39 years of history, much of which was devoted to wandering in the desert. Chapters 1-4 are concerned primarily with enumerating the Israelites by tribe. Chapters 7-9 cover the dedication of the tabernacle and Passover. Chapters 9-17 are mostly about their beginning their march followed by murmuring then outright rebellion and the rest of the chapter describes much of their conquests in the last year before they actually entered Canaan. It is interesting to note that the total number of fighting men counted at the beginning of the chapter was 603,350, the same number counted earlier in Exodus 38:26. When another census was taken years later in chapter 26, their numbers totaled 601,730.

In chapter 1 God instructs Moses to take a census of the entire community listing very man by name who was aged 20 or older and able to serve in the army. They were careful to note each man by clan and family so that their ancestry was clearly established. This would be important later as the territory of Canaan would be divided by tribes. The most prolific tribe was Judah which totaled 74,600 followed by Dan totaling 62,700. Ephraim and Manasseh combined totaled 72,700. I don’t see that the tribes appear in any particular order as compared to the sons of Jacob listed by their births in chapters 29-30 of Genesis or by Jacob’s blessing in Genesis chapter 49. In comparing their populations in chapter 26, while the total count was only down by about 1,600, the tribe of Simeon was reduced significantly while Manasseh and Benjamin had large increases. Simeon had been cursed by Jacob who said that he would divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel (Gen 49:5-7). This was because of the murder of many innocent Shechemites after the rape of Simeon’s sister (Gen. chapter 34). The tribe of Simeon was the smallest when they prepared to enter Canaan and was omitted from the blessing conferred on the tribes by Moses prior to his death (Deut. Chapter 33). In Numbers chapter 25 the story was told of Zimri of the tribe of Simeon who married a Midianite woman and appeared to have adopted the Midianite practice of idol worship. This incident led to the death of 24,000 Israelites, possibly many of the from the tribe of Simeon.

The families of the tribe of Levi were excluded from the census of the other tribes since they were the priesthood and apparently exempt from military service. The army would be assembled to protect the people from enemies. In addition to their duties of erecting and transporting the tabernacle, the Levites were responsible for protecting the tabernacle from the people (1:51-53).

In chapter 2 God gave Moses instruction regarding how the camp was to be arranged. There were 3 tribes on each side of the tabernacle with the Levites in the middle with their tents circling the tabernacle. God established the tribes that would camp together and which tribe would lead each of the 4 groups. Judah, the tribe from which Jesus was descended was listed first as leading the tribes of Issachar and Zebulon. The tribe of Reuben (1st born) was listed next as leading the tribes of Simeon and Gad (Gad later joined Reuben as on the Transjordanian tribes). Ephraim led the tribes of Manasseh and Benjamin, all 3 tribes representing the only sons of Rachel. Dan led the remaining tribes of Asher and Naphtali. It is estimated that the camp was 12 miles square and contained about 2.5 million men, women and children. Each of the 4 groups was represented by a banner. It is thought that those banners has images of a lion, a man, a calf and an eagle which correspond to the description of 4 creatures surrounding the throne in Revelation 4:7.

In chapters 3 & 4, the Levites are numbered and their tabernacle duties were apportioned among the Levite clans. The total number of Levite men was 22,000 and all males of 1 month or older were counted. They were divided into 3 groups responsible for the care and transporting of the tabernacle and its furnishings. God considered the Levites to be his possession as payment of the first born sons of Israel. Since the number of first born males in all the tribes exceeded 22,000 God required redemption money to be paid for the excess which was 273 (v. 46-51).

In chapter 4, The Kohathite, Gershonite and Merarite clans of the Levites were numbered again, this time only counting men between 30 and 50 who would be fit for tabernacle service. The specific duties of each clan were spelled out and there were 8,580 men in total. The Kohathites were the workers most at risk since they would have to handle the holy objects. God instructed Moses that Aaron and his sons would be responsible for covering all the holy objects so that the Kohathites would neither see nor touch them. Serving in the tabernacle did not make a Levite a priest. Only descendants of Aaron could serve as priests.