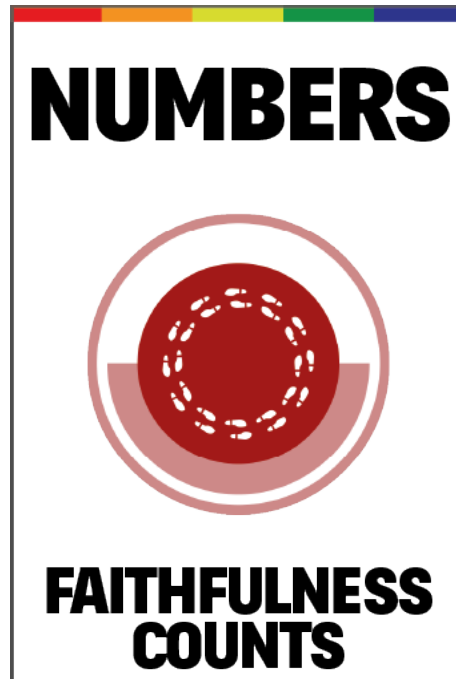




BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



Summary

This book develops the story of God establishing a people whose lives would reflect and amplify his character, ultimately pointing the world to a recognition of God.

In order to do this, God required people to stick faithfully to a distinctive way of life he would give them, moving as he guided them towards a promised land where they could settle.

But along the way, people would not always be faithful. This story shows how everyone messed up in some way and needed God's patience and redemption to continue in relationship with him.

Many of the details are odd, and there are lots of lists and stats you will want to skip over quickly. But it all adds up to a record of how God started to make the faith of a few into a movement which changed the world.

Bern Leckie

Monday May 11: Numbers 1-4

God's plan is huge and involves you

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Right now, this seems like a hard book to get excited about in the details. (Just wait though, there are some amazing story details coming later...) What strikes me most in this opening is the scale at which God had been working with Israel, followed by his involving design.

It all began with one man's obedient response to God, and it's grown to a national movement counting over 600,000 men of military service age, so probably millions in total.

I love that everyone has a role, and no-one is left out. The placement of tribal camps forming an order of battle reminds me of God's creation work in Genesis - structured, methodical, purposeful. I wondered why God needs help to count people - doesn't he already know? - but I think the point is that just as God involved Adam in his work, God is calling Moses and the leaders of families into his kingdom building project.

Central to this kingdom is the ability for people to meet with the King - God himself. There is a structure which enables them to do this at huge scale, and it relies on the faithfulness of a chosen people (the Levites) within their nation. Funny that, because the nation's historic role will be as a people chosen to enable the world to know God. They might not know it yet, but God is training them for this by example.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Many strange sounding rules emphasise God's specialness and show what holiness means. This was no mere survival camp. We know this because life is ordered around more than health and purity. God wants his people how to grow relationally, trust and rely on each other and know how to put things right when they go wrong. By living like this, God's people can make his values and long-term plan for humanity recognisable to others.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Too often I think about faith in God as mainly about me and people immediately around me. I know his kingdom is much, much bigger, but it's hard to see. Sometimes I might confuse it with generally being nice and doing our best, rather than something God is running.

So with this picture of God's people in mind, I'm going to remember that even while we are lockdown, God has ordered us. Each of us belongs and has a role – it's for us to discover and respect what this is. I want to spend more time helping people to find and use the gifts God has given them which reveal his character, personally and in things we must do together.

Who am I going to share this with?

We're due for a reunion chat about "The SHAPE of you" course soon, which went into these areas. I'll share with people who have done that course and others who might like to.

Tuesday May 12: Numbers 5-7

The value of faithfulness

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

There is strangeness and some stuff I want to question in today's passage. But I'm struck by the different ways in which God is emphasising the value of faithfulness with his people. This includes faithfulness to God and to each other.

Why is faithfulness to God so important? Here, God has arranged a nation to be literally, physically, centred around him. God's big plan is not just for some people to be close to him, but for all of his people faithfully to amplify the characteristics of God and relationship with him so that the whole world would know how to regain closeness to their creator.

Without faithfulness to God and each other, this plan doesn't work. Haven't we seen modern nations make the same mistakes? Any society can believe itself to be founded on Christianity, but if the way it treats refugees, the vulnerable and the poor doesn't faithfully reflect Jesus' love, faith and self-sacrifice, how can it faithfully bring glory to God?

I like the different ways people could choose to demonstrate faithfulness and a growing commitment to relationship with God in this passage. Beyond the basics of physical purity, I'm intrigued by the Nazirite commitment which, for an adult, could be chosen for a time. Later, at God's instruction, John the Baptist would be dedicated as a Nazirite before he was born. His special dedication to God meant that he could be used to point the way to Jesus.

I'm not so sure why men and women needed to be treated differently regarding faithfulness in marriage, and the test for women suspected of unfaithfulness seems barbaric. Can we trust that God was faithful to every woman unfairly accused? This probably seems like a big leap of faith in the 21st century. Trust in God's faithfulness has to be a foundation for us too.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is loving and faithful, and calls people to love and faithfulness to show this, not just to him and each other, but to the world. God enables us to be loving and incredibly generous when we respond faithfully to his guidance and recognise his provision of everything.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I recognise from my reactions to some details of this passage that I'm actually asking the questions – is God faithful? Is God just? I'm doing that based on the idea that I know best! I need to grow my trust in God and remember how his faithfulness has looked different in other cultures. I recommit that God can change my mind to be more faithful to his values.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I'm following Jesus with in our (currently online) house group. We want to know how God is guiding us, and faithfulness in how we sense and share thoughts on this is vital!

Thursday May 14: Numbers 8-10

Getting ready to move

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

We've already looked at how faithfulness and purity were needed for God's people to know God's character along with his physical presence in their midst. It was really important for them to know how to recognise God's direction when settled, because when God moved and directed them, they would need to know where to go!

I love the symbols and bright, clear physical helps God gave to his people to lead them on the move. Lamps – can you see the light? Trumpets – can you hear the sound? Let's go then! A cloud which looked like fire at night would guide them. If people would follow and stick together with faithfulness, God would be able to take Israel anywhere.

I really love that God also guides his people through stories and shared memories of his power and faithfulness. In this passage, the Passover was just starting to become established as way to preserve connection with the experience of God freeing his people from slavery in Egypt.

The Passover was all about God getting his people ready to move. They were to make a painful sacrifice of a perfect and beloved lamb, and they would enjoy a feast worth settling down for, but eat it dressed as ready to dash.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

I think this sums up the tension we also experience between settling and moving as God's kingdom gets established in our time. God's love and faithfulness are things we can settle into. But God can lead us to change in so many other ways. God has promised us a future without sin and suffering, and we are not there yet. There is travel ahead! But God can guide us when remember him, look and listen for him, and are faithful in response to him.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I need to remember that God has not just called me to settle and watch while he moves and does amazing things through other people. God has called each of us to be ready to move and holy - set apart and useful for his purposes. As I ask, "What do you want me to do, then?" I'm reminded of the process Paul writes in [Romans 12](#): "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice... be transformed by the renewing of your mind... then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is." I'm not going to offer God a slice of me and my time, I'm going to recommit the whole, which I recognise God already owns.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I pray and share discipleship with.

Friday May 15: Numbers 11-13

What makes a good leader when people doubt?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Well, it was such a good plan. If God's people could trust him and faithfully respond to his presence and movement, he could guide them anywhere. So what went wrong?

I recognise, but don't like, the reality of feeling hard pressed by physical circumstances enough to question everything. A bright future sounds nice, but what about now?

There's a difference between seeking God, as Moses kept doing, and deciding that God must be inadequate, and life would be better without him. I'm disturbed by the fiery judgements, but I love God's answer to the request for meat – "you will eat it... until it comes out of your nostrils"!

I also love how much God was able to lead his people practically through Moses in his faithfulness and humility. He didn't just set out a good vision but intervened and spoke up to God on their behalf. Israel had complaints but a better life thanks to Moses and God.

Our political leaders today seem to have to pass a popular test of charisma and strength before people believe in them. How has that been working out for us? Moses was flawed, but I love that his faithfulness to God was usually bigger than his desire for popularity. As a result, his people could gain a vision of the better life God wanted for them. Moving faithfully into this new life would be another challenge, but we'll get to that shortly...

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God has huge patience, but he is not passive forever. He feeds and disciplines his people. He knows our fears and wants us to be reassured. This is not just with encouraging words, but in practical ways - seeing the future he has promised and tasting its fruit. However, he lets us decide whether to believe in his promises enough to face discomfort, challenge and even physical opposition to the changes God wants to implement as his Kingdom is established.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I am blessed in life, and I must not let discomfort lead to doubt and disrespect for God in these times of challenge and change. Moses is the role model - open with God not just to converse but to believe that God could do surprising things to bring his promises to fruition. I know I need to be less convinced in my own mind that I can get my head around God's plans, and more ready to follow where God leads to unexpected places in surprising ways.

Who am I going to share this with?

Practical change, and good bases for making decisions, are things that concern our school governing board a lot right now. I'm going to keep looking for opportunities to be led by God and encourage others to see what God wants for us in the weeks ahead.

Monday May 18: Numbers 14-16

Are you ready for a new life?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

There's a lot not to like today. The grumbling people are unable to represent God faithfully. I find it interesting that God does not blame Moses for this. His leadership was never about getting people to do what he wanted, but to point to God. So God recognised that the problem was in people turning away from him, even treating him "with contempt."

So it was up to God to respond, and it's severe: to ban Israel from promised land. Their descendants would have it, but not for 40 years. The people who didn't like this new command and said "Now we are ready to go up to the land the Lord promised" received a severe beating back.

The point is that God was not calling people to make their own kingdom, something nice inspired by their religion. God was building his Kingdom. If people would not recognise God as King, trusting and following him, they were not going to be part of that Kingdom.

Korah's rebellion was interesting because I like their idea that "the whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them." What was wrong with that? It sounds great but it's not for us to control. Korah was overlooking God's unique role and placing himself in it. Just because Korah thought people should be holy (and God did plan to make this possible through Jesus), his sincere belief that he was holy did not make him so. God chooses who he uses. If we take that role for ourselves, we're trying to build our own kingdom, and this is rebellion against God. The response this time: spectacular death.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is serious about building a real, recognisable, good Kingdom where people can understand what life can be like when he is King. His Kingdom building project outlasts each rebellious human generation. God does not depend on us - we depend on him, so he supports people with survival materials (food, shelter, rest...) and powerful, meaningful symbols to remind us of what a good, holy, God-centred life is like. Tassels on garments was a good example here. Communion is an example of one Jesus provided for us. God knows that we need help in order to follow him and share this way of life with others.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

As our search for "the new normal" in life continues, I want to renew my commitment to seeking God's Kingdom first. It's tempting to elevate ourselves, but I choose to worship him.

Who am I going to share this with?

Some of the people I know who discuss their ideas of the perfect "new normal" online now.

Tuesday May 19: Numbers 17-20

Always credit your sources

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

I love God's sign given through the budding, blossoming staff of God's ability to bring life and fruitfulness to his people, as well as making his will known on matters of leadership.

The priests had such an important role in Israel, specialising in closeness to God, fully relying on him and receiving offerings to God for food while not growing it for themselves. No wonder some people wanted this life and even argued it should be for everyone. God would indeed fill many more people with his Spirit and, in Jesus, we would all be called "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession..." (1 Peter 2:9)

But first, for this to be meaningful, God needed to demonstrate through a few chosen priests the specialness of life close to him. They didn't just need to obey special rules but remember that all of their power, responsibility and materials came from and belonged to God.

Unfortunately, this was Moses' tragic failing when the people cried for water. Wasn't it a miracle when he and Aaron used the staff God gave them and water came out? Not according to God. It seems that Moses and Aaron neglected to do the most important part of their role and point people to God at this critical time. God provided water, but when Moses and Aaron said "Must WE bring you water out of this rock?" they took the credit.

That seems really harsh to me, and I'm sure God judged what was really in their hearts rather than condemning them over getting a few words wrong, but it all goes to show the challenge for priests to be faithful to their purpose, keep trusting God and always point people towards him.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is loving and generous, answering prayer and providing for his people, but he needs us never to forget that he is Lord. It was people forgetting this which led to anxiety, rebellion and death in the first place. God is still building his Kingdom where death will be defeated, and our involvement in this requires us to remember that our life is in him, rather than fool ourselves that we command our own divine power.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This reminds me of when I made "Always credit your sources" my number one golden rule for work. Initially it was out of annoyance when people ripped off my stuff, but I grew to recognise what a huge difference it makes to credit others, including God. Do I still do this?

Who am I going to share this with?

People I work with, especially where creatives of all kinds (including God) don't get credit.

Thursday May 21: Numbers 21-24

Redemption and blessings go a long way

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

I love the pace of chapter 21. Bang! God helps Israel destroy their enemies. Ouch! Still moaning? God sends snakes. But then Boom! Repentance leads to redemption – the value of God's people expressed through a way back. Intriguingly, it's not with medicine or an image of healing, but an image of the very thing which hurt people.

This is powerful. It's not explained why God chose this symbol for redemption, but a few things strike me about it:

1. Snakes represent more than snakes in the Bible. Remember the garden of Eden?
2. God made and owns the snakes. So this is a sign that he can use them at will.
3. Any other symbol for healing might have left the impression that snakes are some special kind of baddies in the world which need something else to counteract them. God's choice of a snake symbol shows instead that they are not to be feared in themselves. God has the ultimate power. Want healing? Look at his snake.
4. Turning a dreadful, feared, cursed thing into a source of healing and blessing by God raising it up – remind you of anything later in Bible?
5. The Greeks used the symbol of a snake coiled around a rod to represent healing many years later and, through this, it is still used today. No-one seems sure why. But isn't it amazing how far good things from God can travel?

While God chose Israel as people to demonstrate life with him, the story of Balak and Balaam shows how far God's influence went beyond one nation. Even a pagan soothsayer could find God if he honestly looked. I love everything about the talking donkey (enjoy!), but most of all I love that God showed there were no limits on his ability to work in the world.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God can use anyone who will faithfully respond to him. His guidance leads to seeing aspects of the world which are normally hidden, and what he does through us can last forever.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This reminds me the power and often surprising nature of prophecy. I am so grateful that God uses us to speak and share words and symbols from him today. I want to do this more but also encourage others that God is choosing to use. It's not about me but him!

Who am I going to share this with?

People in our open house group and 'The SHAPE of you' course who are interested in prophecy.

Friday May 22: Numbers 25-28

Life God's way prevails

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Those forty years in the wilderness have flown by - we're about to come in to land at the promised land, but not without a substantial amount of turbulence. God's plan was to build a Kingdom starting with a faithful people, but men's desires led them to embrace other gods along with the local women. Aaron's grandson Phinehas' intervention was violent but purposeful and had the effect of turning away God's anger. I'm not sure as this is an example God calls us to follow literally, but I like that God responded to one person of faith when dealing with a very large-scale problem.

On this journey, there has been a lot of guidance becoming judgement, even death, but if you pick one detail out of chapter 26, look at the number of the men of Israel. It's almost the same as the number counted in chapter 2. Despite notable tragedies, life, God's way, prevails.

I love that Moses, as his personal story was coming to an end, sought God for the community's story to continue. God responded with a man filled with "the spirit of leadership." God knew that teaching was not enough to build a Kingdom. He gave people different, significant roles to work as a body for his glory and the benefit of Israel. Moses was now given the role of passing blessing and authority to Joshua. Leaders today don't always speak well of their successors or predecessors, but this points to God's people having a bigger purpose - they were all part of God's plan which was more important than anything they could do by themselves.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God wants a pure Kingdom but not an empty one. He disciplines people when we go wrong, but responds to even small expressions of faith, and lays down structures which help us grow relationship with him and promote ongoing good life.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm struck by Moses' submission to God's agenda and keenness to commission a new leader properly. I like to feel indispensable, but there are times when God may be calling me to drop things either to do new things, or simply to do less for a time. I will ask God to guide my heart on this so I can have an attitude like Moses' to change which works for God's Kingdom interests.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I work and do church activity with.

Monday May 25: Numbers 29-32

Sharing our authority

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Overall, I'm struck by how much this reading showed the important of relationships, including the chapter on vows which intrigued me the most.

I looked over a few comments about this to get a feel for why women had a different status from men concerning vows. I found one commentator suggesting that it prevents women from forming binding contracts and so is the reason women have been held back in society for centuries. There is clearly an inequality issue, but it's not true that women could not trade (e.g. [Proverbs 31](#) on the wife of noble character who "sees that her trading is profitable.") We've also just read that women could take significant vows, such as the Nazirite holiness vow, and this chapter confirms that men and women are responsible for their promises to God. The only exceptions are children when parents intervene (some Jewish commentaries say this applied to boys as well as girls) and wives when husbands annul a vow as soon as they hear of it (otherwise, and by default, it stands).

But why have this check on vows at all? I think the key to understanding is that "these are the regulations... concerning relationships". Children and parents, husbands and wives were expected to work within relationship and enjoy a degree of protection in some cases.

Was this fair? Arguably not – it could be abused. But was this the final destination and definitive picture of life for God's people for eternity? No more than the rest of the law. If its purpose was to promote faithfulness to God and among people, it certainly had a role, showing men and women that life under authority (ultimately from God) applies to all. That was progress from "everyone does what they want." But the journey did not end there.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God establishes his Kingdom to promote good relationships between us as well as with him. Has faithful expression of life under God's authority progressed since Moses' time? I would say so! We don't expect to follow this law strictly any more than we expect the constant smell of burnt lamb. Jesus shows where the Kingdom is taking us. Faithfulness to him means blessing enemies, not taking an eye for an eye, for example. Jesus gave women the testimony that he had risen even though the law did not recognise women's testimony.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Am I expecting to make all my own decisions or do so in relationship? I believe the purpose of this law is to point people towards relationship rather than male dominance, so I will consider if there is anything significant that I haven't shared or checked with my wife!

Who am I going to share this with?

My wife Helen.

Tuesday May 26: Numbers 33-36

The glory of God's love, battles and... boundaries?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Firstly, if you have only read but not listened to this book so far, give yourself a treat today and enjoy David Suchet reading all those place names. Twice each! This story is clearly about the journey over time, not the most efficient way to get from A to B...

And what a journey! God has brought his people a long way from slavery to the beginnings of a new Kingdom centred around him, bound together by faithfulness. Can you imagine the number of times people got into the routine of watching for God to signal a move, packing up, moving together, unpacking, setting up and restarting a camp? Can you feel the yearning for a place to settle? At Severn, I know we know that feeling!

I notice how the Kingdom was always going to be a battle, displacing other kingdoms, and a work in progress, an illustration to guide the way to the future, not the end in itself. The world would come to know God through Jewish faithfulness expressed in leaders like David and his family, ultimately in Jesus.

But God chose not to tell the world to obey him before he had showed the world how faithful people could enjoy life in faithfulness and covenant agreement with him.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God loves his people and the rest of his creation. I notice in this section of Numbers especially the importance of boundaries in God's design for demonstrating life with him. This includes boundaries on what people were expected to do, eat and avoid, as well as places for them to live.

In ordering people like this, perhaps God was telling people to prefer faithfulness over complete freedom. Or it may be that God knows that without useful boundaries, we can end up hurting each other, straining to defend our spaces and struggling to find the freedom to be ourselves.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

During lockdown with less freedom to get around, I've ended up being given more work and responsibilities. Finding boundaries and limits on this turns out to be a necessary part in keeping me free from overwork and overstress! This comes at the same time that the big ideas about "new normal" life and how the Kingdom might come are really interesting to me and I could write about them all day. Instead of doing whatever I want, when I want here, I'm going to look increasingly for God's boundaries and guidance to be faithful in the relationships he has blessed me with. I want to grow in faithfulness and let God be seen.

Who am I going to share this with?

The people I live and work with.