

# God-Centered People of God

*Scripture Readings: Numbers 2:1-4, 17, 32-34 (text); Ephesians 6:10-20*

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • June 9, 2019 • BSCC

**D**ear Congregation of Christ: Do you remember the 2006 movie entitled “300”? It was about the Battle of Thermopylae in Greece at the mountain pass of Thermopylae during the Persian Wars. The Greek forces, mostly Spartans led by Leonidas, were able to hold out against the Persians for two days. But a Greek traitor betrayed them by pointing a path around Thermopylae. The Greeks retreated, but Leonidas and his 300 men stayed behind to delay the 70,000 Persians, but they were defeated and killed.

How did Leonidas and his army fight? If you saw the movie, you would have seen the Spartans’ unique formation called the phalanx. The phalanx was first used by the ancient Sumerian army in the 25th century B.C., about the time of Abraham. It was adopted by the Greeks in the 7th century, notably by Alexander the Great in the 4th century B.C. A phalanx is a tactical formation consisting of a block of heavily armed infantry standing shoulder to shoulder in files eight to sixteen ranks deep and as many as 30-50 men in a row. In the first few rows were the best warriors equipped with eight-foot spears for thrusting and a two-foot sword. They had shields which overlapped each other, providing what looked like a wall from chin to knee. The phalanx marched in walking pace, and for the opposing army, a frightening solid block of warriors with spears pointing towards the enemy warriors on all sides. This formation also made it extremely difficult to penetrate.

A frequent theme in the Bible is the LORD as a Conquering Warrior going to war against his enemies. One of his titles in the Old Testament is “The LORD of Hosts” (The LORD of the Army). Even in the New Testament, the theme of Christian warfare is used often, like the text in Ephesian 6. Today, we continue with our series on the Book of Numbers.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Numbers is not a popular book mainly because it is full of names and numbers. Chapter 1 consists of a census of all of Israel’s males 20-60 years old, according to the 12 tribes. Chapter 2 details God’s instructions to Moses on how the camp of Israel is to be arranged, listing the different tribes, and how God’s people are to march towards the Promised Land. The arrangement of the tribes reminds us also of the Greek phalanx, as we will see in this study. So our theme today then is **GOD-CENTERED PEOPLE OF GOD** under two headings: first, **Counted by God**; and second, **Arranged by God**.

## **Counted by God**

As the Book of Numbers begins, God commands Moses to take a census of the Israelites after they were in Mount Sinai for a year. In ancient times, the twofold purpose of census is for (1) assessing military strength; and for (2) taxation. King David took a census during his reign, and incurred God’s wrath. Why? It was not commanded by God, and he only wanted to see how powerful his army was. During the time of the birth of Jesus, the emperor Augustus of Rome ordered all the empire to take a census for taxation purposes (Luke 2:1-2). Today, many nations

take a regular census, including America where it is taken every ten years, last one in 2010. These censuses are usually for allocation of congressional seats, taxation, funding of projects.

God ordered a census for two purposes. One is implied: to demonstrate God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise to Abraham of children as numerous as the stars in heaven and the sand on the seashore. The second is for military conscription of 20-60-year-old men (1:3). The total number of the men was about 600,000. So scholars estimate that this number project to about 1-2 million Israelites from Egypt. What are we to conclude in studying these verses?

*First, God was faithful to his promises.* What he promised to Abraham, he fulfilled: Israel became a great nation, bigger than all of the nations in Canaan. We can trust God's Word. With him, nothing is impossible. He creates life with his Word and with the Breath of his mouth. He can turn a stone into bread (Luke 4:3), and even create human life from a stone (Matt 3:9).

*Second, God chose them in love.* He made his covenant with them, and not with the Egyptians, Assyrians, or Babylonians. God chose Israel not because of their own goodness, might or number, but because of his Word he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

*Third, God protected and provided for his people.* For 400 years, God protected his people through severe hardship of slavery in Egypt. During their escape from Egypt, God provided gold, silver and other possessions for them to take to the Promised Land. God drowned Pharaoh's army pursuing them. In the wilderness, God cared for them, giving them food, shelter, clothing and protection from their enemies for 40 years.

*Fourth and last, the people were willing.* Our text implies that all the men were willing to be counted; none opposed the census. They were all willing to go to battle. But later, we learn that the people doubted God's Word that he would fight for them and give the land to them. And so they disobeyed his command to take the land. But when this census was taken, they were all prepared to willingly march against God's enemies.

So God is faithful in loving, protecting and providing for his chosen ones. When sufferings, pain and sorrow come, let us praise him for redeeming us from sin; for taking us away from God's wrathful judgment; and for giving us hope in the midst of this hopeless, sinful world.

Let us then be willing to "stand up and be counted" to do battle against this sinful world; and against trials and temptations that come our way in this wilderness pilgrimage.

## **Arranged by God**

As God's people prepared for war against his enemies, Israel needed to be organized. First was the census to gauge their strength. Second was their arrangement in camp and in their march towards the Promised Land.

Chapter 2 details how the camp was to be arranged and the order in which the tribes were to march. At the center of the camp was the tabernacle, where the Ark of the Covenant is in the Most Holy Place. The Ark of the Covenant is the place where God dwells with the people.

Surrounding the tabernacle are the Levites. They guarded the sanctuary from intrusions by unauthorized laypeople. Beyond the Levites the other tribes are encamped. The 12 tribes were divided into four groups of three. In premier position, east of the tabernacle camp, were Judah with Issachar and Zebulun (2:2–9). Next in rank came the tribes camping to the south of the tabernacle, Reuben with Gad and Simeon (vv. 10–16). After them on the west came Ephraim with Benjamin and Manasseh (vv. 18–24). Finally, on the northern side of the tabernacle camp were Dan with Asher and Naphtali (vv. 25–34).

The same sequence was to be maintained on the march. The Judah group headed the march, followed by the Reuben group. Then followed the Levites carrying the tabernacle. After them came the Ephraim group of tribes, and the Dan group brought up the rear (v 31). Each of the tribes has its own banner or ensign. All armies of the world have these.

This is nice and good information to know, but how does this relate to my Christian life?

*First*, if the life of Israelites in the wilderness is a constant physical warfare, the Christian's life in this world is a constant spiritual warfare. Paul writes that we are at war against spiritual forces of evil, not against the armies of the world (Eph 6: 12). This war is not like the medieval Crusades, or the Anabaptist rebellion, or the Spanish Inquisition. Ours is a constant warfare against the evil, sinful world full of temptations, trials, persecutions, and sorrows. This is why Christians are not only called prophets and priests to God, but also kings. The Heidelberg Catechism Q& A 32 says we are kings because we “fight against sin and the devil in this life.”

*Second*, notice that the tabernacle is in the center of the arrangement. When they camp, march, or assemble for worship, God is in the center. God must be in their center not only in their battles, but also of their life in the wilderness. His desire for us today is the same in two ways. First, God must be the center of our lives, our families, our careers, our goals. If the center of our lives is money, family and career, we will not be successful in our spiritual battles against sin, sufferings and temptations.

Second, God must also be the center of our worship. It is to be God-focused, not man-centered (Rev 19:10). It is to be Christ-centered, for he alone is the way, the truth and the life. It is not to be seeker-sensitive, that is, catered to the pleasures of unbelievers. It is to be Spirit-illuminated, because the Spirit will guide us into all God's truth (John 16:13). Finally, it is to be Word-regulated and Word-saturated, because God's Word is sufficient for all doctrine, worship and life (2 Tim 3:16). This is why we don't use innovations and gimmicks such as worldly music and instruments, drama, dancing, puppet shows, and personal testimonies in our worship. They are not in any way God-focused, Christ-centered, Spirit-illuminated, and Word-regulated and Word-saturated.

*The third way that the arrangement of the twelve tribes applies to us today* is that no one can come near the dwelling-place of God who is unclean; he will be destroyed, and judgment will come upon the people. This has implications in our worship. No one can come to the presence of God without forgiveness of sin that only Christ can give. The only acceptable worship of God is when we are

justified by faith alone in his Son alone. No worship is acceptable unless that worship is offered through the Jesus the Son of God.

*Fourth and last*, the worship of God can only be led by priests who were appointed and ordained by God for that purpose. Only priests can come inside the tabernacle and perform ceremonies and animal sacrifices. In the same way, in New Testament worship, only ministers who have been called and ordained by God to preach and administer the sacraments should lead worship services. The Great Commission involves preaching, baptizing, and teaching, tasks that were given to the Apostles then, and to pastors today.

**D**ear People of God, in the wilderness, before marching towards the Promised Land, God prepared Israel for battle. He counted them, then arranged them in an orderly, strategic manner in their camp and as they marched.

Your battles today are fought, not with physical swords and shields against physical enemies, but with the spiritual armor of God against evil spiritual forces. And the goal of your warfare is to be able to resist and stand firm against the evil one (Eph 6:13) who prowls around seeking to devour God's people with temptations (1 Pet 5:8). The weapons of our spiritual warfare are truth, righteousness, readiness, faith, salvation, and the Spirit of God.

In the New Testament, the square arrangement in Numbers 2 is found again in Revelation 21:16, where the heavenly city "*lies foursquare... Its length and width and height are equal.*" This heavenly city, the dwelling place of God's elect, has 12 gates and 12 foundations. On the 12 gates are inscribed the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. On the 12 foundations, the names of the 12 apostles (Rev 21:12-14). This city is made up of Jews, represented by the 12 tribes of Israel, and Gentiles, represented by the 12 Apostles. It is not earthly Jerusalem, but the heavenly city, which is the Church, whose designer and builder is God himself.

The Greek phalanx does not have a center, while the center of the camp of Israel in the wilderness is the tabernacle. So also in the heavenly city, God will be in the center, dwelling with his beloved, chosen (Rev 21:3). Since God and Christ will be its temple, there will be no physical temple there (Rev 21:22).

As God dwelt in the tabernacle in the wilderness with his people, so does Christ dwell in your hearts in your own wilderness pilgrimage. Jesus came down from heaven as the Word who became flesh to dwell with his people (John 1:14). This tabernacle in the wilderness is Christ himself. He indwells you now through his Spirit. This is why Jesus assures you, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you*" (Heb 13:5; Jos 1:5).