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Reformation  
& Revival



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**S**piritual Warfare as a subject for Christian reflection is not often associated with prolonged biblical exposition of any text, let alone a consideration of the book of Numbers. Rarer still is a discussion of spiritual warfare in connection with Numbers chapters one and twenty-six, the census passages. What passes for Christian teaching about confronting the forces of evil on the bookshelves most accessible to our fellow Christians and what the Bible actually teaches are often two entirely different things. When solid pastors fail to wrestle with the struggles of their congregations and declare the truth in liberating and practical ways, charlatans and novices rush in to fill the void with dangerous results. This reflection on the book of Numbers is an attempt to biblically ground our understanding of spiritual warfare in this reality: In the midst of spiritual warfare, God's covenant faithfulness is the source of our hope and strength.

Numbers begins abruptly with God speaking to Moses in the tabernacle commanding a census to be taken of the men over age twenty in each tribe who are able to go out to war. With a meticulous detail that numbs the Western mind, each family is called forth and the warriors numbered from every family except that of the Levites with amazing results: The warriors alone number 603,550.

The point of this exercise is a multifaceted confirmation of the Lord's covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 15, God walks through the severed bodies of the sacrificial animals to swear that if His promise to make Abraham the father of kings and a great nation goes unfulfilled, may the Lord Himself be severed as were these animals. Here on the plains of the wilderness, as the warriors step forward to be counted, God's faithfulness is triumphantly vindicated. Though Abraham saw the initial fulfillment of God's promise through the birth of Isaac, here God demonstrates that His promise to Abraham has been fulfilled thousands of times over in each tribe, not to mention the nation as a whole.

The results of this accounting underline the compounding effect of God's mercy as it ultimately triumphs over sin and evil in history. In Exodus 20:5-6 we read, "For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." We evangelicals are often so preoccupied with explaining why God would visit iniquity to the third or fourth generation, that we neglect the depth and breadth of God's saving love shown by His determination to make His grace three-hundred fold more prominent than His wrath! The numbering of Israel demonstrates that God's purposes in maximizing the impact of His salvation upon the world are well underway. In this way, the census passages are simply another piece of the overarching biblical theme of "Paradise Restored."

While the Old Testament seems to focus on the *corporate* destiny of Israel as opposed to discussing "individual salvation" per se, we see in this census part of the foundation for what later systematic theologians would call "the doctrines of grace" as they relate to individuals. By numbering the warriors by tribes and families in exhaustive fashion, the point is driven home to each participant and spectator that not only was God's promise meant to be the foundation of hope for the great Abraham alone, but, indeed, God's covenant promise is the foundation upon which every family, every individual, and every generation may take hope in the Lord for themselves. God's promise is not abstract or distant, limited to the theoretical realm or to be accessed only by some great saint like Moses; it was a promise actively at work in each family, transforming them into holy warriors of the covenant.

The "army of holy warriors" motif might be traced back as far as Genesis 3:24 where God sets the cherubim (plural) to guard the way back to Eden lest sinners enter and pollute the Garden. The cherubim sit atop the ark of the covenant in the

tabernacle because they flank the throne of heaven where the Lord is seated and speaks to man. The army of angelic watchers protect the covenant and enforce God's will and justice under its terms (Num. 7:89; cf. Ezek. 10, 11). The Most Holy Place of Solomon's temple included a curtain with cherubim depicted (2 Chron. 3:14) who perpetually stand guard lest God's Holy Sanctuary be violated. Psalm 68:17 notes that surrounding God at Sinai are His heavenly angelic hosts.

As God creates and finally numbers the army linked to His tabernacle and Holy Place, we see the partial fulfillment of what Jesus taught us to pray for: That God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. God's salvation takes men who once had to be expelled from His holy presence in Eden because of their transgressions and makes them into holy bands of warriors surrounding a new sanctuary—the tabernacle—like Eden, where God walks and speaks freely with men. This army will now mirror and fulfill the tasks that once only the angelic army of heaven could be counted on to faithfully perform after Adam fell. The bloody trek into the Promised Land for which they are preparing—far from being a secular undertaking concerned merely with the accumulation of earthly power—will be a picture of heaven and hell at war as their respective principles are brought to a head in the conflict between the redeemed servants of Jehovah and the still-enthralled hordes of Satan.

Even the numbers of the tribes themselves have important spiritual lessons. For example, the tribe of Dan has one of the largest battalions—62,700—and in this way reflects the amazing blessing of the Lord realized in their family. However, in the rest of Israelite history, they'll be known only for their inability to grasp the promise of God, for seeking devices to replace the blessing of God in their search for earthly blessing, and will ultimately be reckoned apostates. Their fate warns us against presuming too much upon the past blessing of God. Furthermore, it warns us against seeking a religion of convenience

when it seems God's promises are too hard to believe or grasp. In the final analysis, Dan's history tells us, a religion of convenience is a religion of disaster and damnation because we live in God's world where His will reigns.

To emphasize that this army is spawned by redemption and the will of God instead of the will of man (John 1:13), the Levites remain unnumbered for war, and serve as a "ransom" for the rest of the nation's firstborn. This practice is linked to the death of the firstborn in Egypt where the firstborn were slain in judgment by God upon their hard heartedness. The message for Israel is loud and clear: They may be an army of holy warriors, but if they assume their victories come as a result of their own strength and wisdom, they will be chastised severely. Without the constant mercy of God they will fall victim to the same curse the Egyptians suffered. In human affairs, sheer power feeds arrogance. Only God's perpetual reminder of their need for redemption and their purpose as holy warriors could keep such a mighty band from becoming callous overlords with a mercenary, bloodthirsty spirit. Likewise in our conflicts, only God's Spirit allows our righteous indignation not to simply become "indignation" and obliterate mercy and compassion in a flurry of activity which confuses pursuing our self-will with somehow pursuing the will of the Father.

These powerful realities certainly do not mean that heaven on earth had been realized by any means any more than Christ's promise to "be with two or three who gather in My name" means that all sin and evil are permanently undone when He honors His promise and meets with us as we worship. Instead, these truths point to God's great accomplishments on Israel's behalf to equip them for their conquest of the Promised Land which involved great struggles of sin and faith and—had God abandoned them—be struggles ending in their violent deaths at the hands of Satan's entrenched peoples.

The obvious point of Numbers 1 is that the people have

been equipped for utter victory. That was an objective fact which the census made unmistakably clear. Unfortunately it was a fact that like the rest of the Gospel must ultimately be received by and with faith in the living God. Despite God's faithfulness, however, their faith was still immature and weak. It led ten of the twelve spies to come back and bear false witness against God and, in essence, say that all the spiritual blessings we cataloged so far were utter lies and pious frauds. The balance of the book of Numbers outlines the struggle between God and Israel as He purges unbelief from their midst when they test God's patience repeatedly.

The fact that such great rebellion follows immediately upon the steps of such enormous cause for worship and celebration highlights the perversity of our sin and unbelief. It is spiritually hazardous when we underestimate our propensity to sin. Equally dangerous is our potential to esteem our sin too greatly and thereby discount the power of God which transforms sinners into saints, first by the imputation of Christ's righteousness and then by the impartation of holiness as an outworking of the Holy Spirit. Failure to acknowledge God's ability to fulfill His promises in our lives keeps us from obtaining God's blessings, as would be Dan's fate. Perversely this underestimation of God's power allows us to position ourselves before a watching world as those who are Job-like in their "faithfulness" and "humility," instead of being wicked and slothful servants fit only to be cast into outer darkness (Matt. 25:26ff.).

Certainly we should not be idiotically triumphal or polyanna, admitting no darkness before dawn, but we should likewise never lose faith in God's fundamental commitment to His purposes being worked out in our lives. That is the message of the balance of the book of Numbers and chapter 26 in particular.

The census of Numbers 26 takes place after many trials, rebellions, and mishaps:

The complaining against God's provision and the plague ("fire") (Num. 11).

The rebellion of Aaron and Miriam, and God's punishment (Num. 12).

Ten spies contradict God (Num. 13) (why God does not use focus groups).

Israel joins in believing the lie and prays, "Would that we had died in Egypt," and will get their wish by dying in the wilderness instead (Num. 14).

Death of the evil spies (Num. 14).

Korah's rebellion and the people's murmuring—more plague and death (Num. 16).

More complaining (brazen serpent lifted up) (Num. 21).

Balaam attempts to curse the people (reverse God's promise of blessing) (Num. 22).

Israel's whoredom (Num. 25).

After all this trouble, what do we expect a census of these former "holy warriors" to be? Around 2000 at most? (With "holy warriors" like these, who needs pagans?)

Actually when we come to Numbers 26:51, we find that the count is astonishingly similar: 601,730 warriors! Each tribe still remained, though some had recently been decimated by God's chastisements. The point intended by the second census is that man's self-will and stubborn attempt (even by the "faithful," it seems) to oppose God are undermined by God's willingness to see His Will completed regardless of His servants' ineptness, foolishness, and selfishness.

One way Satan's propaganda war confuses us to the facts of God's working in history is that we are tempted to focus so much on the church's sins, we lose sight of the greatness of Christ's forgiveness and transforming power which far surpass the wickedness and enslaving power of our sin. Each of these incidents reveals God's *zeal* to prompt His true people to repentance. We see at work here God's demonstration of His Fatherhood. Had they been illegitimate children, He would not have bothered to chastise them! (Heb. 12:6). God is

powerful enough that when He loves us, even we cannot continue deluded in our rebellion. He is able to promote a "sorrow which leads to repentance unto salvation."

Satan would have us believe we are doomed to simply experience a hopeless neurotic depression that leads to death because it removes Jesus Christ as the One with the power to change us (2 Cor. 7:10). God's tangible action of restoring and maintaining Israel at fighting strength makes clear God's *zeal* for the welfare of our souls. Even more fundamental is God's *zeal*—His oath—that He will do this: "Indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Num. 14:21).

The blessed message of the Gospel is that God loves us through Jesus Christ, to be sure. But what makes the Gospel Good News for all the world is not that God loves just a few, but that God has chosen to spread His holy saving love through the whole earth so that Jesus Christ will be exalted by rescuing, transforming, and plucking men and women and children from eternal damnation!

Sometimes our view of God's love is so narrow that had we written up this census, we'd have expected and been glad that only a few would still be numbered among God's holy warriors. But the fact that God's army has not been diminished despite the people's sin and rebellion—because of the effective power of God's love—is a testimony that God's saving love and His willingness to bring people to repentance and renewal is far greater than we often consider. Thank God for His love for sinners! Thank God He does not let His people be forever overcome! Thank God He is more powerful than our sin and rebellion! Thank God He wills to have His glory fill the whole earth, and He swears He will do this!

Why are we, His people, content to let His glory barely fill the corner of a room? Why are we so quick to feel that our sin and our past and Satan have predestined us to failure and destruction when God has declared He is in the business of filling the earth with His glory and changing people's lives?

Many evangelicals sneer at the message that God predestines people to salvation. In our rapidly deteriorating culture we presently face relationships so twisted by demonic malice, leaders so possessed with the lust for power and the worship of masses, and human predators bent on harvesting the vulnerable for their self-gratification, that soon the naive doctrine of man's "freedom of the will" shall offer no more comfort in the face of powers mere men cannot overcome. In the battle for the souls of nations, cultures, and households that they may be won to Christ, those who formerly presumed upon man's power to free himself from sin will be forced to conclude that if God does not call out the army of holy warriors and free them for Himself, they will never escape the clutches of demonic overlords who govern their every move.

The message of the second census is that we can no longer allow a false view of the power of sin to color our view of the world and make it seem God is distant, uncaring, unable to rescue us from our sin so entrenched! God is more able to save and is willing to save than we are to believe these facts! That's the message here!

I've hinted that these passages form part of the grand theme of "Paradise Restored." Without linking Numbers 1 and 26 to this doctrine, we'll leave the book of Numbers with a dissatisfying dilemma on our hearts. If what I've said is true, why did Israel ultimately fail? Does that mean God's promises are null and void? Paul answers that in Romans 9-11. But I believe he begins answering it for our purposes in Romans 5.

There, the point this passage is making is brought to its ultimate fulfillment:

For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.... As sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:19, 21).

The census passages show this purpose of God being fulfilled in a significant, but partial and temporary, way. They show the faithfulness of one man resulting in the compounded blessing which created a mighty earthly army of holy warriors who mirrored the angelic host. In a real sense, we see in Numbers the angelic army which surrounds the throne of heaven now has its counterpart assembling on earth around God's tabernacle-throne. Yet this assembly points to a far greater victory to come.

What happened here at the foot of Sinai is merely a shadow, a type, a prefiguring of Jesus' work of gathering the saints of all time into a holy church, a holy assembly of the saved. God's promise, the source of our hope and strength, is that Jesus' work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead will create a greater army of saints than even are assembled in Numbers. So great will be Jesus' victory that in the perspective of eternity our song of praise will be that though sin reigned unto death, the much greater determiner of men's and women's fates, when the Book of Life is opened, is that Jesus caused grace to reign unto eternal life!

When history is over the question will be asked, "What had a greater effect on the course of human history: man's sin or God's grace?" By far, the work of the One Man Jesus in bringing salvation will result in more salvation and blessedness than Adam's sin caused wretchedness and damnation. In this life, the saints don't always understand this or see how it's true sometimes. But as Abraham saw the small—though real—fulfillment to be a "father of nations" in Isaac, we see now in each rescued soul, each advancement of the Gospel, the small but real fulfillment that one day in heaven a greater census will be taken, a greater numbering will be made. And God's promise to Abraham so wonderfully fulfilled by Numbers 1 and 26 will look trifling and insignificant. Why? Jesus' work will far overshadow it as a new and greater holy army of transformed sinners gather around the throne to praise Him forever.

What have these things to say regarding spiritual warfare? Much. They are essential to our understanding because of the larger context of Numbers: the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. In Egypt, the people of God had seemingly entered into that state as hostages where they had come to totally depend on their captors for thought and direction. They might even have been called complacent and satisfied with the predicament they knew rather than accept the risks of freedom. As the plagues against Egypt which made a mockery of their gods demonstrated, their coming Exodus would literally be an escape from a demonized society into the freedom of the sons of God.

Notably, it is insignificant for the Bible as to whether the dominion of demons oppressing God's people was exercised through the institutions of society shaped by satanic principle rather than God's law, or the immediate machinations of dark spirits as when the magicians sought to contest the plagues and power demonstrated by Moses, or a combination of the two. There are no extended descriptions of dialogues between Moses and the vanquished spirits. There are no incantations prescribed to exorcise demons from people or institutions. Frankly, there is not much description about the inner workings of the demonic world at all. Only God's victory over it is demonstrated by proving time and again in Numbers 1 through 26 that God's commitment to His promises is active and alive, even during those times when Satan's oppression is crushing in intensity and supported by an entire demonized society. God's promises, Numbers teaches us, are so powerful nothing can undo them! The first lesson we learn here for our spiritual battles is that victory comes through faithfulness to our covenant with God. That's nothing other than seeking to become radically obedient to God's program for us as revealed in Scripture. This commitment leads us to focus upon who God is and how we are to relate to Him, instead of seeking to master "the deep things of Satan," which is condemned

(Rev. 2:24).

Another example of saying this is that our strategy of overcoming Satan's oppression in any form is a relentless exaltation of Jesus Christ as risen and reigning—the One who justifies and transforms. Satan is mortally wounded in the throes of death. We reveal Satan's ultimate nakedness and powerlessness by proclaiming Christ and pointing out the breadth of His victory as highlighted in Romans 5 so that the Devil's stranglehold is broken.

What about the victims of satanic oppression in any form who doubtless feel like "spoiled goods"? They may even feel their sins of past allegiance to Satan have disqualified them from serving Christ. Numbers declares that it is these very ones God frees from demonic oppression that He transforms into holy warriors through the Word and Spirit. Those who once were to be banished are now become those who guard the new covenant and carry out the conquest of the world through the preaching of the Gospel. It is these who are to claim the promise that God's love will extend to the thousandth generation. It is these who are to hold to God's promises and not dismiss them as something reserved only for some non-existent "super saint," the book of Numbers drives home.

What of those who have lost hope in the church to ever seemingly throw off its irrelevancy and pitiful lack of discipleship? The answer is found in Numbers 26 as it follows years of repeated sin by God's people. God's promise is not frustrated. It marches on and comes to fruition regardless of the sins of man, and it will do so again until the Gospel of Jesus indisputably overshadows the reign of sin, whether that sin has been prompted by man's rebellion or Satan's instigation. Our duty is to persevere and marvel at our glimpses of the "Isaacs" who promise to one day be replaced by the holy armies around God's throne.

Where do evangelical, not to mention Reformed, Christians



go from here? As hinted before, most of the literature available on spiritual warfare seems preoccupied with minimal reference to Scripture and maximum reference to experiences which seemingly give purportedly demonic forces tremendous authority in shaping Christians' views of the spiritual world. Though the saints of Revelation's seven churches triumphed because of the blood of the Lamb and their stubborn clinging to the word of testimony about Christ (i.e., practical obedience unto death, if necessary), modern "Christians" seem concerned to triumph by means of a dialogue with the Devil in hopes of ultimately deceiving the father of deceptions!

For instance, several years ago on a "Christian" radio program, the host related an "incident of demonic oppression." In supposedly "casting out" this demon, the demon reportedly "told" the minister that he had power over the Christian person because of a trinket received from a visiting missionary. The trinket was identified by the demon as an "idol." (Apparently there was no idolatry on the part of the Christian. The idol was merely "giving the demon a foothold," the minister was "told.")

Paul the apostle says "idols are nothing" except to those whose lives have been formerly dominated by them and who remain immature in their knowledge of the one true God (1 Cor. 8). This statement is not to question the power of satanic forces at work in the world, but to question our approach to fighting spiritual warfare. By taking the "words of demons" at face value as this minister did, we give Satan a larger victory because we listen to the purported words of demons, sinners, and wild imaginations, and place them above the Word of God in formulating our strategy in response to evil. Why then do so many discussions about spiritual warfare seem to dissolve into essays about the author's personal experiences with the "boogeyman," instead of chronicling the powerful acts of God in history and the mighty salvation of the One who rose above

and reigns at the Father's right hand?

The book of Numbers suggests that many supposed evangelicals have chosen to replace the Bible with idle (or is that "idol"?) speculation in the area of spiritual conflict. Their advice, then, becomes dangerous, precisely because it positions the believer without God's chosen weapons to fight the holy war in which we are engaged. This movement away from knowing God, as Jesus and Paul did, to knowing the spiritualistic machinations of exorcism like the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:14ff.), coupled with evangelicalism's preference for clichéd "sound bite" theology, essentially means that without an injection of biblical sanity in the area of spiritual warfare, we as the church in America may—like the ten evil spies—wind up bearing false witness against God. Though we are a holy army, we may go into battle deluded about the nature of the enemy and the goal of our God, and defame Him and mock His commands.

Yet the truth we are accountable to follow is that, as Christ's followers, we are God's holy warriors who surround His throne and strive to accomplish His will on earth as is done in heaven. Our source of hope and strength in the face of Satan's harsh, pungent breath and odious threats is not the self-glorifying "experience" of some minister who may or may not have wrestled with Satan and comes away spouting "fighting tips" to which the Bible is a stranger. Instead, as James says, we are to "submit to God" and only then to "resist the Devil" (James 4:7). But even our submission to God is more than mere lip service or a casual prayer in a restaurant. This submission is a recasting of our worldview in light of the shape of God's purposes in the unfolding of His kingdom. Our hope is in the covenant faithfulness of the God who shows His love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments (Ex. 20:17).

Specifically, a Christian "battle plan" begins with our absolute confidence in the truth that, in history, the blessings of

Christ's salvation will far outweigh the wrath of God prompted by men following Satan's lies. When we recast our thinking and live by this confession of hope in God's promises, we can rest assured that ultimately we shall win any spiritual skirmish—whether individual or corporate. Why? The promise of God—that He shall indeed transform sinners through the Gospel of Jesus Christ—is an indestructible promise, as the book of Numbers and all of Scripture teach us.

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