

Count me in!

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[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, I just pray now, Lord, that you will continue to preserve my voice, that I might be able to preach your word, and I pray that your word, Lord, would indeed cause us, Lord, to marvel at you and to live for you this morning, even as we look at your book of Numbers this morning.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. A few weeks ago, I mentioned the Scottish athlete Eric Liddell, who won the 400-meters gold medal at the 1924 Olympics.

Liddell was a Christian, and he famously decided not to run in the 100 meters, his normal event, because the qualifying heat was on a Sunday.

And his conviction was that the Lord would not permit him to do so on the Sabbath. And this story, of course, is told in the Oscar-winning film Chariots of Fire.

But if you were to watch that film, at the very end, just before the credits roll, the screen turns black, and these words appear on the screen.

[1 : 1 6] Eric Liddell, missionary, died in occupied China at the end of World War II. And that's all we get from the movie about his life after the Olympics.

But in those few words, we get the real story of Eric Liddell. And it isn't about winning gold medals. You see, Eric was determined to make his life count.

And for him, making his life count wasn't about Olympic glory. No, it was about God's glory. And for him, that meant going to China, where he was born, to preach the gospel.

So that's where he went. And while he was there, World War II happened, and Liddell ended up being thrown into a prison camp. But it was at that very prison camp where he made his life count most.

In the camp, he taught science to the children, who called him Uncle Eric, using a homemade textbook. He ensured that whatever little food was smuggled in was shared amongst the prisoners.

[2 : 3 2] He carried supplies to the elderly. He helped build shells for a prostitute, never asking for anything in return, and taught Bible studies.

In fact, he was the only one trusted to referee a hockey match in the camp because everyone knew that he would not take science.

In the most trying of circumstances, he made life in the camp almost normal. As one theologian observed, he did none of the stunning things we hear about in inspiring chapel sermons on missions, and all of the anonymous things that everyday life as a Christian involves.

And so when Eric died suddenly of a brain tumour, the entire camp mourned his passing. Five months later, when those children were rescued from the camp, almost all the stories they told their rescuers were about Uncle Eric.

One of them, many years later, would say this about him. What was his secret? He unreservedly committed his life to Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord.

- [3 : 54] He made his life count. Well, I imagine that's what we all want, don't we? We want to make our life count.
- We want to make a difference. We want to do something of significance. We want to leave a lasting impression. And if we are Christians, we want to make our lives count in the eyes of the Lord.
- That's what Eric Little wanted. But how? How can we make our lives count? What would it involve? And that's where our passage this morning, Numbers chapter 1 to 4, comes in.
- Huh? I can hear you say already. The book of Numbers? Why go there? Isn't that like going to Matt's class to look for the meaning of life?
- Apologies to all Matt's teachers out there, but somehow I don't think that's where we go for inspiration. Why are we spending the next three months or so in this book anyhow?
- [5 : 00] Isn't it boring? I mean, pastor, I've actually tried to read it. But when I got to Numbers chapter 7 and read 70 verses about how much a silver plate weighs and how many rams were bought, I gave up.
- And isn't it confusing? Pastor, I've skim read the book. And it's got all those strange people and strange places and even strange incidents.
- The Kohathites and Gershonites. The desert of Paran and the valley, the Zeret Valley. And even unexpectedly, a talking donkey.
- So, pastor, what does this have to do with us? The book of Numbers feels as relevant to us as learning the mathematical formula for the volume of a cone. Now, that's an understandable reaction.
- But if we are Christians, that means we believe in 2 Timothy 3. All scripture is God-breathed and useful for equipping us.
- [6 : 04] We believe in Romans chapter 15 verse 4 that the scriptures were written for our encouragement and hope. And that means we believe the book of Numbers is God-breathed, useful for equipping us, and written for our encouragement and hope.
- And most importantly, the one we follow, Christ himself, thinks that this book has something to offer.
- In John chapter 3, Jesus engages in conversation with a Pharisee called Nicodemus. They talk about super important things. How to be reborn.
- How to have new life. How to know if you are counted in God's kingdom. And Jesus says, well, Nicodemus, all this is possible only if I go and hang on the cross.
- And to make his point, he references an episode in the book of Numbers. I'll let you go and find out what that is for yourself.
- [7 : 11] But by doing so, Jesus is signaling to us. The book of Numbers ultimately finds its meaning and fulfillment in him.
- Like the rest of the Bible, it's centered on the gospel. And so that means it's a book worth opening up. Well, okay then, you say, but still reading statistics and figures is pretty dry.
- Convince me more. Well, let me say, first of all, that the book of Numbers, despite its title, is far more than just numbers, lists, and genealogies.
- In fact, that's the minority of the book. But it's true that there are some chapters where it's mostly numbers, like some of the chapters we're going to look at this morning.
- But think about it. When given the context, numbers can be exciting, can't they? Some of you get excited when Samsung, Apple, or Asus announces their latest smartphones or laptops.

- [8 : 17] And the first thing you look at is numbers. Oh, the battery power is 100% more than the last model. This iPhone has 512 gigabytes of storage space.
- That laptop has 32 gigabytes of memory space. And so on. Those numbers are exactly what causes people to line up outside the store before it goes on sale for the first time.
- And numbers can tell a story. Think, for instance, of GE14, where the supporters of each party are anxiously counting the number of seats won throughout the night.
- Oh, BN 35, 36. Oh, wait, wait, wait. PH is coming back up 34. They're catching up. Oh, PH is now overtaken 45 to 44. And in Selangau, the guy is up by only 100 votes.
- There's drama. Who's going to win? And certainly fans of Manchester City and Liverpool can relate. They too were busy looking at the numbers for the last few weeks of the season because the two teams were neck and neck with each other in the Premier League.
- [9 : 27] How many games left? What's the goal difference? How many points do we need to secure victory? See, the numbers tell a gripping story.
- So I hope I've shown you enough to give the book of Numbers a chance. But let's go back to our initial question. How can we make our lives count?
- And this morning, numbers 1 to 4 will show us three fundamental actions to consider. How can we make our lives count?
- Firstly, by standing up and being counted amongst God's people. Let me say that again. By standing up and being counted amongst God's people.
- Open your Bibles back to the book of Numbers if you've closed it already. And we begin with God speaking to Moses. And this is the first instruction he gives.
- [10 : 28] Verse 2. Take a census. In other words, it's time for the Israelites to stand up and be counted.
- Go by every clan, every family, and pick out those males who are 20 years old and above, God says. Now, why count?
- In the Bible, in the days of Joseph and Mary, the Roman Emperor Caesar famously takes a census, which results in Jesus being born in Joseph's hometown, Bethlehem.
- Caesar did so mainly for taxation purposes. And today, that's often why governments still take a census. To know how much to allocate funding and to develop housing and labor policies.
- But here in the book of Numbers, God has a different purpose. Look at verse 3. You and Aaron are to count according to their divisions all the men in Israel who are 20 years old or more and able to serve in the army.
- [11 : 38] God wants his people to get organized. He's getting ready an army. He's preparing them for a conquest. But why?
- Isn't it enough to be at peace with where they are? Well, to answer that question, come back with me to the very first word of Numbers. And that word is not actually there in any of the English translations I consulted.
- So it's not there in your NIV. But it's there in the original Hebrew scriptures. And that word is? And. A-N-D. And the Lord spoke to Moses.
- And that word, and, reminds us that Numbers is actually a continuation of a bigger story. Stretching all the way back to Genesis chapter 12.
- Back in Genesis 12, God speaks to Moses' ancestor, Abraham, and makes promises to him. I'm going to make you into a great nation, he says, a great multitude.

[12 : 50] I'm going to bless you. And I'm going to take you to this promised land. And it's not an exaggeration to say that the rest of the Bible is about how God keeps these promises.

The rest of the book of Genesis is about how Abraham's children grow into a nation. And then when we fast forward a little bit to Exodus chapter 6, we find God restating these promises in a slightly different way.

I'm going to redeem you from slavery in Egypt, he says to Moses. And I'm going to take you as my people. And I will bring you to the land I promised your ancestor Abraham.

So in other words, God wants to take his people somewhere. He's got a destination in mind. A clear finishing line. And an end point in time.

And so he does what he says. He rescues them out of Egypt. And they start heading for the promised land. That's what we find in the book of Exodus. And they end up at Mount Sinai.

[14 : 05] Where the people take a break. And God gives his law to them. That's what the book of Leviticus is about. But even in Leviticus, God doesn't let them forget.

They are journeying with him somewhere. There's a destination. So for example, in Leviticus chapter 25 verse 2, God starts by saying, When you enter the land I am going to give you.

And then he goes on to talk about Sabbath laws. But he keeps their focus forward looking to this land that they are not in yet.

And so as we begin the book of Numbers, God's people haven't arrived. They've been redeemed. But they're not at their destination.

And so the whole book is about a journey. And that's why the book of Numbers is actually directly relevant for Christians. Like these Israelites, we've been redeemed.

[15 : 11] We've been rescued. Christ has bought us at a price. But we are not home yet. We are not where we are supposed to be. In the heavenly city.

At rest with God. There's a long way to go yet. And in Numbers chapter 1 to 4, God is getting his people ready for the journey home.

And that's what he's doing today. Because where are the people? Verse 1 tells us they are in the desert.

They're in the wilderness. And that's actually the original Hebrew title for this book. In the wilderness. And that wilderness is actually a difficult place.

In his final speech. In the book of Deuteronomy. Moses describes the wilderness as a dreadful place. A thirsty and waterless land.

[16 : 13] Associated with death. Well, that's our world today, isn't it? It's a place where people are thirsting for something more.

As they chase after money. Or experiences. Or that relationship they think can satisfy them. It's a place where death all too often makes its unwanted presence known.

And so that's why God's people have to stand up and be counted. To make this journey through the wilderness. They have to realize they are not tourists. If you are going to travel through Syria at the height of the war when ISIS was busy attacking the place.

Right? You'll soon be in big trouble, wouldn't you? No, they are not tourists. They are warriors. They have to put their hands up and say, Yes, I am one of God's people.

And to make it in this world that I am in, I'm going to need the mindset of a soldier. But count me in.

[17 : 25] So do you realize that God is taking you somewhere? When you sign up to be a Christian, you are actually signing up for a journey. You are signing up for a larger purpose.

You are signing up to go God's way. Now that's actually reassuring. Because that means you know where you are going. It's so easy, isn't it, to drift through year after year wondering what life is all about.

It's so easy to just go through the motions week after week. Passing those exams. Getting that paycheck. Waiting for the next holiday.

But God says when you sign up to be a Christian, you sign up for something bigger. You are no longer living for the next paycheck, the next promotion, the next shiny possession, the next worldly achievement.

No. No. As Colossians 3 puts it, you now set your minds and hearts on things above. Your goals change. Your destination changes.

[18 : 29] Your life is now defined by the fact that you're on a journey to the new creation. That's exactly what happened to Eric Little.

Each person comes to the crossroads at some period of his life he wants to preach and must make his decision for or against his master.

He must decide whether he wants to stand up and be counted amongst God's people or not. And if he does, then he's got a new commanding officer.

The Lord himself. And so in Numbers 1, that's what we find. From verses 20 to 46, we hear people saying, Count me in.

From the descendants of Reuben, 46,500. From the descendants of Simeon, 59,300. On and on it goes until we get that final number at verse 46.

[19 : 39] 603,550 people. And here's some more wonderful news. Even as you stand up and be counted, you're not just a number to God.

Look at chapter 1, verse 19. The people were listed by name. One by one. You matter to him.

You belong to him personally. If you're a Christian, God has personally recorded your name in the book of life. And indeed, when we examine the names of the representatives of each tribe found in verses 5 to 15, which Christina so wonderfully read to us, we find something striking.

Many of those names remind us of who we belong to. For example, in verse 5, Elisor means, My God is a rock.

In verse 6, Shalumeo means, The peace of God. In verse 10, Elishama means, God has heard. In verse 15, Pedro means, Met by God.

[21 : 00] And those names remind us that actually, Even before we stand up and be counted, God has already stood up and counted each person he has bought with the blood of his son.

Jesus is proof that God has heard. God has met us. God has brought peace. God has become our rock. Well, those are the privileges we have when we are counted in amongst, in Christ, amongst God's people.

Our identities change. We belong to him. But with those privileges comes responsibilities and commitments.

Because you belong to him, you are not your own. You sign up for a fight. You belong in the Lord's army. In New Testament terms, that's the church.

So if you say, count me in, you are saying, I'm committed to the army's way of life. I'm committed to gathering together to encourage one another, as Hebrews chapter 10 tells us.

[22 : 19] I'm committed to loving one another, as one John urges us. I'm committed to protecting the good name of the gospel, as Galatians 1 teaches us.

And I'm committed to declaring God's good news to the world, as 1 Peter 2 calls on us to do. I'm in the Lord's army.

I'm in an army that's not about committing violent jihad, but about following the Lord and living as light. And yes, this army is often messy.

The book of Numbers is going to make that abundantly clear. But it's still his army. And so when you say, count me in, I want to live as Christ caused me to.

Well, you begin to make your life count for something more. Because you want to make it count for the Lord. Well, let's move on to our second point.

[23 : 21] So secondly, we make our life count by staying mindful of God's presence. By staying mindful of God's presence. Now, think in general about seating arrangements.

They communicate, they use something about the person seated, don't they? So in a team meeting, the person seated at the head of the table is often seen as the one in charge.

At a wedding dinner, the person seated at the top table is seen as the VIP guest or an important family member. And here in Numbers chapter 2, we are shown the seating arrangements of the 12 tribes.

So in verses 3 to 9, we hear that the tribes of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun are on the east side. And then in verses 10 to 16, we are told that Reuben, Simeon and Gad are to be on the south side.

And then so on, those on the west side and north side are mentioned as well. And I tried to show it in that diagram on your handout. But how do we know who's the most important?

[24 : 32] Well, it's not so much who's on the east, or the west, but who's at the center. Look at chapter 2, verses 1 to 2. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, the Israelites are to camp round the tent of meeting, some distance from it, each of them under their standard and holding the banners of their family.

And so right at the center of the camp is the tent of meeting. What's that? Well, it's basically a portable sanctuary. And it's where God meets with his people.

It's the showcase of his presence. And that tells us where God should be in our midst and in our lives. Right at the center.

God's people are arranged around God. His presence is at the heart of everything they do. Whether they are resting and setting down camp, or whether they are on the move, marching towards the promised land, God is always to be at the center.

And so if you want to make your life count, you need to know where to place God. And let me tell you where he cannot be. Imagine your life as a car.

[25 : 59] Well, first of all, God cannot be outside the car. And sometimes that's where we place him. We think of him like the field attendant at the shell station who gives us a boost every once in a while.

Or maybe like the car wash person whom we turn to for a cleanup when our life gets some mud on it. But otherwise, we just pay him our deals from time to time.

We wave politely to him. But he's got no control over your car. Second of all, God can't be your backseat passenger. Or sometimes that's where we place him.

We are friends. He's in our lives. And he gives us advice on where to go and how to drive there from time to time. But in the end, we consider his words to be just that.

Advice. They're not binding. We decide our own destination and our own route. We're the guys in charge. of the steering wheel. No, no, no.

[27 : 00] That wouldn't work. He has to be the driver. He sets the direction. He plots the course. We submit to his plans, not the other way round.

And that's what it means for God to be at the center of our lives. That's exactly how Eric Liddell saw it. As his biographer notes, athletics for him was just an add-on.

God was the main driving force of his life. So, is he at the center of yours? How do you know?

Well, the test whether he is or not is quite simple. Are you listening to him? One of the most repeated phrases in the book of Numbers is, the Lord said or the Lord spoke.

It's right there in 1 verse 1 and 2 verse 1 and 3 verse 1 and 4 verse 1 and 4 verse 21 and 5 verse 1 and on and on for at least another hundred times.

[28 : 07] God is not a silent God. He speaks to us in the Spirit-inspired words of the Scriptures. You have that right in front of you.

But are you listening? It's good to reflect honestly. Well, here are some possible signs that we might not be. Number one, when we acquire biblical knowledge and treat them as mere outward facts, not to be applied inwardly.

Number two, when we know we are indulging in certain things we shouldn't, but his words of warning doesn't really bother us. Number three, when we lack compassion to those in need and we don't care that much whether people really know Jesus or not, whether they hear his word of the kingdom.

Number four, when we are pretty confident we are right all the time and feel little need for God's pronouncement of mercy.

So let's not be people who merely attend church services without being attentive to the God we worship. When we put him at the center of our lives and really listen to him, we make our lives count.

[29 : 34] For then, God is present in our actions. Eric Little did simple things. Being fair in a sports match, building shelves for a lady.

But because he was radically God-centered, his impact was felt for years and years. And we mustn't take God lightly.

God's at the center of this camp. He is wonderfully present with us. But his presence is not something to take for granted. You might have noticed that I haven't touched on a group prominently mentioned in Numbers 1-4 so far.

And that's the Levites. In Numbers 1-47, they were not included in the military census because they had a special job.

They had to be in charge of the tabernacle. And in Numbers 3-5-10, we are told they are duties. In verse 7, the NIV says that they are to perform duties, and in verse 8, they are to take care of the furnishings.

[30 : 45] But actually, in both verses, the NIV makes it a bit soft. Actually, it's more precisely translated that they are to be on guard duty. And in fact, they don't just take care of the furnishings, they guard the furnishings.

In a sense, they are guarding God from his people. Why? Because God is holy. He is a holy God dwelling in the midst of an unholy people.

Well, just look at chapter 3-10, for example. Appoint Aaron and his sons to serve as priests, and anyone else who approaches the sanctuary is to be put to death.

And I won't labor this point because next week, God's holiness comes into sharper focus. But I just want to say this. God's holiness is not a theory.

The Israelites knew that, and Aaron himself knew that. In chapter 3, verses 2-4, we are told that Aaron, Moses' brother, had four sons, but no longer.

[31 : 59] Two of them, Nadab and Abihu, had died because they thought that as priests, they could offer worship in the way that they like.

They presume upon God. and so they were judged and they perished and the story is told in full in Leviticus 10. And the remaining brothers learn their lesson.

If their lives are to count for anything, well, they would need to pay close attention to the instructions of the Lord. And similarly, if we want to make our lives count, we need to keep in mind this.

at the center of our lives stands a holy God. To push him to the side is foolhardy. Well, we now move on to our third and final point.

So, thirdly and briefly, we make our lives count by serving as God's treasured possession, by serving as God's treasured possession.

[33 : 00] Well, at the beginning of Numbers 3, we've just been reminded that our God is a holy God. But at the end of Numbers 3, we are reminded too that our God is a redeeming God.

The Levites are not just a reminder of how dangerous God can be, but also how gracious he is. For yes, they are guardians, but they are also the redeemed.

And that's what chapter 3, verses 40 to 51 are about. Let me just summarize it for you. God asks that all the firstborn Israelites be counted.

It turns out there are 22,273 of them. But there are only 22,000 Levites. Now, back in Exodus chapter 13, God asks that every firstborn son in Israel be consecrated to him.

But here in the book of Numbers, he accepts the Levites to take their place. However, since there's a short fall of 273 Levites, money is paid to redeem the remaining firstborns.

[34 : 14] And so we get a picture of substitution and redemption. The Levites take the place of another, and those not covered by the Levites are bought at a price.

in other words, two things are happening in this picture. A price is paid. That's redemption. But that is not all.

There's a substitution as the Levites devote themselves to God. A life of devotion is required. That's the job of the Levites. And that's what redeemed people do.

They are God's treasured possession. And as such, they serve him. They devote their lives to him. Now, the Levites can be divided into subgroups, such as the Kohathites, the Gershonites, and the Merorites.

And according to Numbers chapter 4, they all serve in different ways. So the priests, they have to set up and set down the tabernacle.

[35 : 19] But once the priests are done, then the Kohathites take over and they are to carry the holy things. And then the Gershonites, another subgroup of the Levites, they were to transport the fabrics like the curtains and coverings.

And then the Merorites transport the frames and the crossbars and things like that. You see, everybody played a part. Indeed, earlier in Numbers chapter 1, we find again many people playing a part.

The Lord asked Moses to take a census, but obviously he wasn't to do it alone because Aaron got involved as well as one man from each tribe.

And so everyone plays a part, not just so-called leaders. And of course, that arrangement carries over into the New Testament church. We post letters and we find that he has plenty of co-workers, both Jew and Gentiles, men and women.

There's Andronicus and Junia, Priscilla and Aquila. And they serve as God calls them to. In Numbers chapter 4, you would have expected the Gershon Knights, not the Kohathites, to handle the most holy things.

[36 : 38] Why? Because Gershon was the clan of the older brother, and usually the older brother takes priority. There was no reason to choose the Kohathites over them.

But God chooses as he pleases, and so he chose the Kohathites, and he does it out of grace and love, not merit.

When Eric Little went to China, he certainly never dreamed that he would serve God in a prison camp. That's not where he might necessarily have chosen to stand up for God.

But God placed him there, and that's where he made his life count. Well, what about you? Where has God placed you? Are you simply waiting for where you think he should place you?

Or are you already making your life count where you already are? And so this morning, that's what God is saying to us through the ancient book of Numbers.

[37 : 44] Are you ready to make your life count for him like Eric Little? One of those children at the camp said, none of us will ever forget this man who was totally committed to putting God first.

A man whose humble life combined muscular Christianity with radiant godliness. And so let's make our life count.

Don't leave today without resolving to do so. Put God at the center, stand up and be counted, and serve him joyfully as one redeemed by Jesus.

For as another missionary to China, city start, one said, only one life, it will soon be passed. Only what's done for Christ will last.

Thank you.