

COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

Preparation for the Wilderness Journey. 1.1-x.10

I. THE MEN OF WAR NUMBERED AND POSITIONS ASSIGNED FOR THE MARCH. 1.1-11.34

a. The military census (1.1-54)

This chapter gives the Greek (and English) name to the book. It describes the census of Israel at Sinai. This is a military census. It lists men, twenty years of age or older, able to go forth to war (3). It is taken at the beginning of the wilderness journey from Sinai in order to determine what human resources are available for defense.

The Christian is thus shown, at the beginning of the wilderness journey, the importance of carefully examining his resources, and knowing what he is prepared to do. This is a necessary counterbalance to the tendency to think that nothing but faith is absolutely vital, not only for salvation, but for every phase of Christian living. God may choose to accomplish great things through those who have faith, even when they are without adequate resources and when they fail in intelligence. Yet it is His will that such instances be the exception rather than the rule. Not only does He desire us at all times to look to Him for strength, and to know that results are entirely in His hands; it is also His will that we determine exactly what resources we have and use them carefully so as to accomplish the utmost for Him. The same truth was presented by Christ in the parables of the Pounds and of the Talents. See Matt. xxv. 14-30; Lk. xix. 12-27. Cf. also Lk. xiv. 28-33.

David was rebuked and severely punished for taking a census (2Sa.xxiv. and I Ch.xxii). At first sight this seems to contradict our present chapter, especially when we note that David's census, like the one described here, had a military purpose (cf. 2 Sa.xxiv.9). However, the ultimate aims of the two numberings were quite different. In Nu.1 God commanded the mustering of all the resources of the people for carrying out His orders; but in the later instance David wished to determine his resources for waging aggressive warfare after the divine purpose of freeing His people had already been accomplished. He desired to bolster his own pride by seeing how great his power was, and hence might