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Genesis 7:11–12, ESV

¹¹ In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. ¹² And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.

Exodus 24:15–18, ESV

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Joshua 5:6, ESV

⁶ For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD; the LORD swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Matthew 4:1-4, ESV

⁴ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

Genesis 7:11-12

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. 2 And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

Revelation 1:4–5

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

Completeness and restoration

Over the centuries, countless people have torn the Bible apart, examining it in extreme detail, looking for hidden meaning. I try to stick to traditional and academic interpretations of the Bible, and I usually avoid anything overly mystical. But there are legitimate analyses of the Bible that pursue these sorts of things – because the original authors of the Bible did indeed deliberately put mystical ideas in Scripture.

Recently, a member of our congregation, Janice, sent me an intriguing article that reminded me of this. It had to do with the number forty. We all know about our first quote from Genesis, which tells us the number of days that it rained in the Great Flood: *rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.* Then, in Exodus, we are told that Moses climbed up the mountain to meet with God, and guess how long he was there? *Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.* You might also remember, that in Joshua, we are told that the people in the desert wandered for so many years, that an entire generation died and a new one was born. How long were the Israelites wandering in the desert as they strove to enter the Promised Land of Canaan? *⁶For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war*

who came out of Egypt, perished. There are actually many other uses of forty in the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrew Bible, and while there are far fewer references in the New Testament, the number forty does appear. You might remember that in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus spent a certain number of days fasting in the desert cleansing himself before he was tested by Satan. *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.*

Another number that is used multiple times in the Bible is seven. Our fifth quote is from Genesis, and it tells us that God made the world in a certain number of days, and that on the next day, he rested. So... How many days are there in a week and which day is our Sabbath? *God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work*

that he had done in creation. The number seven appears a bunch of times in the Book of Revelation. Here's a reference to the number seven, and I choose it because it's not that obvious why seven is significant here. There are how many churches in Asia, the ones to whom John addressed himself? *⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne.*

In the Bible, forty is used as a representation of completeness, or a full cycle. The length of the great flood, the time Moses spent on the mountain, the years the Israelites wandered as homeless and nationless people in the desert, and the number of days Jesus spent alone in the desert.

In comparison, seven represents fulfillment and restoration. The number of days in the cycle of creation. The

number of churches in Asia. Uh, what? That one is a bit obscure for most of us. We have to look at Revelation a bit closer to see this. We've talked about Revelation before. It's a book of prophecy describing a spiritual war between God and the army of Satan. But many think that it is actually an allegory, and that John, the author of the book, was actually describing the end of the Roman Empire, and how God would destroy it. As it turns out the number seven appears over and over and over in Revelation. In it there is an anti-Christ with seven heads, the restoration of Earth takes place during the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet, and after the seventh plague. It is much like the cycle of creation in Genesis: seven represents the fulfillment of the cycle of war and restoration. So, what about there being seven churches in Asia? The point is that by addressing the document to seven churches, John is

symbolically addressing the document to the entire church – which includes all Christians, all of the faithful, and indeed, all of us. Six churches would be just six churches. Seven churches includes everyone who follows Christ.

What is all this about? Why are numbers so symbolic in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament? Numerology is the study of number symbolism. To many, it's considered a cultish area, and not a legitimate academic discipline. But this sells it far short. In some ways, this negative judgement is an example of modern science putting down traditional or ancient areas of philosophical study. The truth is that the authors of the Bible, in particular Israelite, Jewish, and Christian thinkers knew that they could make what they wrote more powerful by slyly making use of numbers. They could convey completeness simply by using the number forty. Why forty? Any number, if it

is used so repetitively, takes on a powerful significance. So, by the time the reader sees the number forty for about the third or fourth time, it makes the reader have lofty visions of a full, godly cycle. And likewise, seven conveys a magnificent sense of restoration. As for the number seven, remember that the Book of Revelation was written long after what we call the Old Testament was established as the basis of Jewish faith, and John, the author of Revelation, was writing to Jews. So, using the number seven was a way to convey deep, mysterious meaning.

But there is more to this than just the authors making use of a convenient literary trick. The ancient Israelite culture, and the cultures that followed from it, believed that certain numbers naturally conveyed specific and powerful concepts. To them, numbers conveyed mystical truths. This tradition

actually predates the Israelite culture. Pagan cultures also had significant numerological components. To us, though, what matters is that holy Scripture is what our faith turns to for eternal truths, and early students of the Bible easily saw that numeric symbolism was very important to the writers of the Bible. Augustine, who lived around the year 400 A.D. and who witnessed the final collapse of the Roman Empire from his home in north Africa, wrote about Scripture and numerology. He argued strongly that if we dismiss numerology in our study of the Bible, we will miss important, key scriptural concepts. And the study of numbers and the Bible continues today.

There is a question, though, that I'd like to address: Are numbers simply used as a literary tool that leverages the ancient philosophical belief that certain numbers hold special mystical meaning, or could it be true that God deliberately

speaks to us through numbers? In other words, did the Bible writers use numerology as an easy way to put mystical meaning in their writings, or does God put mystical meaning in numbers? Let me come at this from another direction. When I was in college, I decided at one point that I wanted to do computer work. Back then, there were very few colleges and universities that offered computer science degrees. If you wanted to do software work, you majored in either physics or mathematics. I chose math as my major, even though I wasn't extremely gifted at it. But there was one thing about mathematics that I dearly loved, and that was its elegance. Mathematics takes a chaotic world that is difficult to wrap one's mind around and gives it a clean, coherent, tight representation. Mathematics gives the mathematician a formal, precise foundation that can be used to understand

things that otherwise are so multifaceted and diverse, that they can't be understood. Mathematics provides a clean model for nature that the mathematician uses to put the whole world in his or her mind. Mathematics makes the world meaningful and unafrightening. It gives purpose to things that are otherwise incomprehensible or unimaginably complex. That is why I actually can appreciate the seemingly cultish nature of biblical numerology.

Although I didn't become a mathematician, and would have made a mediocre one at best, I did maintain my love for numbers. I think that God created in us a natural sense that numbers help us organize the world around us. It makes sense that certain numbers would represent specific, important concepts, like completeness and restoration. In fact, these two concepts are at the core of our faith and they appear over and

over in Scripture. Our human journey, as people of faith, is to pursue spiritual completeness. That's what the number forty is all about and that is what many of the stories in the Bible are about. Our spiritual completeness is not dependent upon any living human other than ourselves. It is not dependent upon money or politics or political correctness. Spiritual completeness is not theoretical or abstract. It is practical and real. Everything we need to be complete, to be fully human, to have our lives encompass a full cycle, is provided by God.

We've talked before about the almost-cosmic opening to the Gospel of John: ***1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was in the beginning with God. **3** All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. **4** In him was life, and the life was the light of men. **5** The light shines in the darkness,*

and the darkness has not overcome it. Before even beginning to tell us about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the author of the Gospel sums up what the life of Jesus is all about: completeness. If we want completeness, we just need to turn to Christ. Jesus was there in the beginning. Everything was made through him and if he had not existed, there would have been nothing. Most importantly, Jesus' life is the light of humanity.

And what about the number seven, what about restoration? That's the vehicle for becoming complete, that's how we seal our faith in God. We look inside ourselves and we see what's wrong – and we work to fix it. We do this over and over, all of our lives. Each restoration step makes us more and more complete, brings us closer and closer to the perfect relationship with the God who is completeness, who is the

entire cycle of existence, who embodies a time that had no beginning and will have no end. Through restoration we find infinite completeness. Please pray with me.

God, some of us love numbers, some of us are afraid of them. But all of us live with numbers and all of us know that without them, reality would not be comprehensible. Thank you for Scripture. Thank you for the message that we can use to find spiritual completeness and to achieve restoration no matter what mistakes we have made in life. Please never let us forget those numbers, forty and seven. May they become our essence. Amen.