

Biblical Viewpoint

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON VARIOUS TOPICS

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Number 40 in the Bible

BY [MICHAEL GRIEGO](#) on [MAY 3, 2024](#) · (0)

Numbers have symbolic meaning in the Bible. The number “40” is pervasive and connected to the fulfillment of God’s promises, not all of them positive. ◇



Ten years ago, I wrote a Biblical Viewpoint post titled *The Number 40 in the Bible*. Of all these posts, it remains the most read post of all time. Not sure why, but I suspect that it has to do with people’s interest in Biblical numerology.

As I wrote that post in light of my upcoming 40th High School Reunion, I am moved to repost this one as we travel this weekend to attend my 50th High School Reunion(!) in Los Angeles.

The Number 40 in the Bible (first published on May 9, 2014)

I have my **High School 40th Reunion** coming up this month. Seems like a lifetime ago since those years of simpler complexity. Lots has happened – graduation from college, marriage, grad school, children, jobs/career, and now grandchildren. It *is* a lifetime. Enough time to learn, grow and stumble many times over. Along the way one develops and gains wisdom, yet always with room to grow even further as the years progress. It’s a significant milestone. It’s like the half-way point of a lifetime of real cognitive adult living.

And **40** is a significant number in the **Scriptures** as well.

Numbers in general have a symbolic meaning in the Bible. The number “40” is

particularly pervasive and connected to the fulfillment of God’s promises, not all of them positive. It is often associated with the theme of **testing, trials** and **judgment**.

Here are some examples:

- The rains fell in Noah's day for 40 days and nights (Genesis 7:4)
- Israel ate manna and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years (Exodus 16:35)
- Moses was with God on the mountain, 40 days and nights, without eating bread or water (Exodus 24:18, 34:28)
- The spies searched the land of Canaan for 40 days (Numbers 13:25)
- 40 lashes (stripes) was the maximum whipping penalty (Deuteronomy 25:3)
- God allowed the land to rest for 40 years (Judges 3:11, 5:31, 8:28)
- Abdon, a judge in Israel, had 40 sons (Judges 12:14)
- Israel did evil; God gave them to an enemy for 40 years (Judges 13:1)
- Eli judged Israel for 40 years (1 Samuel 4:18)
- Goliath presented himself to Israel for 40 days (1 Samuel 17:16)
- Saul reigned for 40 years (Acts 13:21)
- Ishbosheth (Saul's son) was 40 years old when he began to reign (2 Samuel 2:10)
- David reigned over Israel for 40 years (2 Samuel 5:4, 1 Kings 2:11)
- Solomon reigned the same length as his father, 40 years (1 Kings 11:42)
- The holy place of the temple was 40 cubits long (1 Kings 6:17)
- Elijah had one meal that gave him strength for 40 days (1 Kings 19:8)
- Ezekiel bore the iniquity of the house of Judah for 40 days (Ezekiel 4:6)
- Joash reigned 40 years in Jerusalem (2 Kings 12:1)
- Egypt to be laid desolate for 40 years (Ezekiel 29:11-12)
- God gave Nineveh 40 days to repent (Jonah 3:4)
- Jesus fasted 40 days and nights (Matthew 4:2)
- Jesus was tempted 40 days (Luke 4:2, Mark 1:13)
- Jesus remained on earth 40 days after the resurrection (Acts 1:3)

So What of It?

While this is an impressive and uncanny list, the point of its significance is still debatable. After all, seeming to represent a spiritual truth, the Bible never specifically

assigns any special meaning to the number 40.

Many people place too much significance on **Biblical numerology**. Whole books have been written assigning deep meaning to multiple numbers. E. W. Bullinger, a 19th century English theologian, documented much of the popular numeric notions we know today in his book, *Number in Scripture*. Some of his determinations: 1 = unity, 2 = division, 3 = divine perfection, 4 = creation, 5 = grace, 6 = man, 7 = spiritual perfection, etc., are interesting and make for good discussion, but ultimately not necessarily divinely inspired. Suspicion further arises when shown that Bullinger's views are tied to what was called "hyper-dispensationalism" – a controversial belief system in which historic time periods are divine "administrations" or "arrangements" wherein God deals with distinct groups of people on distinct principles and doctrine. He also believed that Christ was crucified with four criminals rather than two.

Secret Codes? No. Types and Shadows? Yes.

Be careful what you read, particularly Bible belief schemes that inject that which is not there plainly. The Bible is straight-forward. God does not call us to search for secret meanings, hidden messages, or special codes. We don't have to find a special meaning behind every number in the Bible. While there are clearly patterns and symbolic usage, often a number in the Bible is simply a number, including the number 40.

But that's not to say there's not something to that long list of 40 days and years above. Particularly God gives us **types** and **shadows (or symbols)** presented as precursors and warnings of the **real deal** for current and later generations. For example, the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years after being given the Law (Old Covenant) by God to **Moses**, who himself was exiled for 40 years and then was alone with God for 40 days prior to coming down the mountain with the Commandments/Law. God judged their disobedience (3000 were killed for worshiping the golden calf). The sinful generation was allowed to die before their children were allowed entrance into the Promised Land.

Likewise, 1500 years later, **Jesus** the Messiah, who spent 40 days in the wilderness prior to the start of his ministry and fulfillment of the Law (New Covenant) in his atoning death on the cross at Calvary, spent 40 days on earth after the resurrection. Then God blessed the new believers (3000 received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost). Given 40 years to accept the gift of grace, judgment came upon the disbelieving Jews in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70. The **"end of the age"** had come; the old was replaced by the new, spiritual temple (Christ/Holy Spirit) in the hearts of all the nations, now both believing Jews and the Gentiles. The promise to Abraham had now been fulfilled.

It's a fascinating story, but not a mystery. The symbolic parallels are real, not imagined. Not one that can't be understood and acknowledged for its supernatural and awe-inspiring power. Now with humbled and aging wisdom, the number '40' in any context, reunions or otherwise, is taking on a whole new light.

Do you appreciate and understand the Scriptures for all their worth?

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. – 2 Timothy 3:16