

NUMBERS

Lesson 29 - Chapters 25 and 26

As we leave behind our study of Balaam and Balak, we move on into Numbers with yet another of the many rebellions against Yehoveh and the resultant divine retributions. One would think that after nearly 40 years of living in the Wilderness, with the Wilderness Tabernacle always in view, an operating Priesthood, an unbendable 7th day Shabbat, regular Festivals and remembrances, and the ever-present Moses as their leader that Israel would have conformed to all that the Lord had given them as ordinances and rules to live by. But, as we find out in chapter 25, that was certainly anything but the case.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 25 all

What an undulating path Israel seems to travel: the high highs, followed by the low lows; mountain tops to valleys and back again. From holy obedience to casual irreverence, from proper worship of the Almighty to great and high-handed sins against Him. No sooner have we finished the episode of Balaam pronouncing glorious and victorious prophetic blessings over an Israel that bears no guilt in God's eyes, and an affirmation of their unique and separate identity with the Lord from among all the nations, than we find the Hebrews cavorting with the enemy, reveling with their gods, and partying with their women.

We might ask ourselves at this point, "don't they ever learn?" How many deaths at God's own hand must they suffer before they fully submit to His Lordship? Well on the one hand we see the infamous description of the Hebrews as being a "stiff-necked" people being developed. But on the other we see that it's less a matter of short memories and more a matter of a different group of people having to learn the same lessons that had previously been taught to their elders. By now God's curse upon Israel that none of the people who came up out of Egypt (who had attained an age of 20 by the time they left) were still alive save for Joshua and Caleb. So while the 1st Exodus generation had suffered much as a result of their rebellions, this new generation was either not yet born or had failed to absorb the lessons meted out upon their elders.

This may also answer the often-asked question: why does Numbers, and later Deuteronomy, tend to repeat so much of what had already been given to Israel (and us) from the book of Exodus? The reason is really no different than how it has always been with mankind: we never seem to learn from history. It is said that a wise man learns from his mistakes, but a WISER man learns from the mistakes of others. The new generation of Israelites didn't take Yehoveh seriously and so were about to pay a terrible price.

Verse 1 tells us that Israel was probably still at the same encampment they were when Balaam and Balak stood on 3 different hilltops, gazing at this vast horde of Hebrews, with King Balak trying to convince the gentile sorcerer Balaam to curse Israel for him. This was at a place called Shittim, which literally means Acacia tree. Let's begin by understanding that it is highly unlikely that at the moment it was occurring Israel had no idea of the shenanigans that had occurred with Balaam and Balak. That is to say that the folks of Israel had NO idea at the time it was happening that King Balak was working furiously to have Israel spiritually cursed. In fact it is Tradition that Balaam suggested as he was leaving to go back to Mesopotamia that as an alternative means of defeating Israel that King Balak infiltrate Israel with his people and befriend them in an attempt to slowly turn Israel away from Yehoveh. The immediate goal would be to get Israel to worship the gods of Moab, because this was a culturally typical sign of alliance and respect. Sure enough we're told that the Hebrews (the men) started messing around with the Moabite women; almost for sure these were the younger and eligible men but might have also included a few of the middle aged who felt free to cavort with women other than their wives. Further it is said at the beginning of verse 2 that the setting for this "whoring" was a sacrifice to the gods of Moab. What is happening here is a festival to Ba'al; or as he was officially called during this era in the Trans-Jordan region, Chemosh.

And this whoring also likely revolved around the pagan practice of religious prostitution that was common among most of the Mystery Religions of this time. Chemosh who is here called Ba'al -Peor (or better "the Ba'al of Peor") was one of several gods involved with fertility so sacred sex was at the core of every celebration in honor of any fertility god or goddess. Therefore we have two major violations of God's commandments at play: Israel was coveting other gods than Yehoveh, and they were committing fornication (and in some cases adultery) and this with foreign women. This could all be lumped into the category of idolatry.

I want to draw a parallel for you that I hope cause us all a little discomfort. Sometimes we get the wrong mental picture of what was happening in the bible, as thus it can be hard for us to relate to it on a personal level.

So many of the great pivotal moments in the bible were subtle and not particularly noticeable at first. It's like that in mankind's history in general. When those first Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock it was a minor blip on the radar screen. A handful of people commissioned a ship to reach the New World and start a new life there. They didn't come to claim it for another nation (which would have been noticed and significant); they just came to escape religious persecution (primarily by the institutional Church in Europe).

Thus here in Moab the actions of the people of Israel in interacting with the Moabites would have at first seemed welcome and natural. It would have seemed peaceful, respectful, and neighborly on both sides. Moab was not the home of savages who sought to do terrible things to all who came near to them; they were just pretty much regular folks. For the young men of Israel to spy some pretty girls from another and different (probably appealing) culture was something to be humanly expected.

Moab worshipped various gods including Ba'al as the chief god. It was not Israel's calling to convert foreigners as they journeyed towards the Promised Land and they certainly felt no

obligation to attempt it. So, people being people, Israel showed some respect for the Moabites' beliefs even if they didn't agree with them; how else would they be able to get along in a civil manner?

Yet NEVER in the Holy Scriptures are God's followers EVER taught to show respect to false gods of other cultures, not even as a means to peaceful co-existence. And the reason why is demonstrated right here in the first 2 verses of Numbers 25. Invariably the respect and tolerance of pagan ways and their gods turns to the adopting of some of those ways and the watering down or perversion of the ways of God Almighty.

God calls this whoring because for Him idolatry practiced by His set-apart people is unfaithfulness. Whoring doesn't necessarily mean that the Israelite men were going after Moabite prostitutes (though some did), rather it means that by having closer and closer relationships with a foreign people whose culture was all about honoring other gods the men of Israel were automatically being unfaithful to Yehoveh.

Let me fast forward to the 21st century. No group of people as a whole more than Christians and Jews are seeking to find a way to forge a relationship with an enormous group of people who openly worship a false god. Over and over Christian and Jewish leaders, and political leaders who claim Christian beliefs, say that we must show respect for Islam (at least peaceful Islam). And the thing is, that respect BEGINS with showing respect for the god of Islam because that is what Muslims demand.

We have a sitting President who makes his Christian faith front and center but who, not long after 9/11, stood in a Mosque as 100's of millions of viewers watched and listened. He told the whole world that Allah is the same as the Christian god, and that Christianity and Islam must show respect for each other's beliefs as the obvious route to peace and co-existence. We must compromise and make allowances for one another. The applause was thunderous and the world acclaimed him for it, as did the bulk of Christianity and Judaism. After all, didn't Jesus preach peace at any price?

There in Moab the deadly spiral of apostasy and idolatry began subtly and unnoticed with Hebrew men merely forming acquaintanceships with Moabite women. Pretty soon, as says verse 2, the Moabite women did what was natural: they invited their new Hebrew friends to join them at some of their national festive occasions (an honest and sincere attempt to be social). And of course, just as it was for Israel, all of Moab's festive occasions revolved around one of their gods or another. Many within Israel had no qualms with this, and in attending some of Moab's religious celebrations saw no conflict with that versus their worship of Yehoveh. For them they were but forging a peaceful relationship with the Moabites. We are attempting the same exact thing today, for the same reasons. Judaism invokes humanitarianism and Christians invoke the love and peace commanded by Jesus as our platform for reaching out a hand of tolerance to Islam. God's reaction to these kinds of human efforts and misuse of His commandments is well stated in Numbers 25:3: ".....the anger of Adonai blazed up against Israel".

These acts were then, and still are, considered "high-handed" sins, the worst of the worst, and

so the punishment will be commensurate with the crime. It is clear that the Lord (and so the writer of these Scriptures) sees what is happening as a national rebellion of Israel against Yehoveh; all of Israel is held responsible for this apostasy. The Lord's response is swift and severe: He orders that the chiefs or heads of the people are to be punished first.

Now we run into a bit of a problem with what actually was intended here because the wording in the Hebrew is ambiguous. What it says is that the "**rosh**" (Hebrew for "heads") of the people should be singled out for retribution. Usually this is taken to mean the tribal princes (literally the top man over each of the 12 tribes) and possibly some clan leaders as well. Further many translations say that the Lord ordered that these tribal chiefs are to be hung (by the neck) meaning to be executed by hanging. It is doubtful that hanging, as we think of, was what the Lord had in mind. Strangulation was seen as most inhumane and wasn't even allowed as a method to kill animals for food; so probably this was not ordered for men no matter how terrible their sin. Therefore this is a standard term that means to be impaled on a pole, which was fairly usual for that era. It was usual enough that in Deuteronomy a law was created to deal with it. In Deuteronomy 21:22 we read, **"....If a man is guilty of a capital offense and is put to death, and you impale him on a pole, you must not let his corpse remain on that pole overnight, but must bury him in the same day."**

But that solves only half of our problem. Did the Lord actually order the execution of all the tribal chiefs of Israel? Overall the Rabbis and Sages say that He did. It makes the most plain sense of the text, and of the context of the story, and the lesson from it is also clear: when national or corporate sin is involved the leadership is most to blame and shall bear the worst consequences. But the Scripture takes this even a step further: it is not just that the leaders' execution is a matter of punishment for national idolatry, it is a matter of **atonement** for Israel that the leaders be killed, as is stated at the end of verse 4 when it says that these men should die in order that "the Lord's wrath may turn away from Israel."

This is a principle that the modern Church has done everything it can to disavow, I'm sorry to say. We've even gone so far as to say that the New Testament God doesn't even punish us any more. I defy you to find that principle anywhere in the Word. What He doesn't do with the faithful Believer is to CONDEMN us (meaning, eternal damnation). But to think that somehow we're immune from the Lord's just discipline (that can be very painful) is dangerously outside of Scripture.

We have encountered the principle of the high-handed sin in Leviticus; and the only atonement for this sin is the blood of the person who committed it. In other words there is a kind of sin for which God will not accept the blood of an animal (an animal sacrifice) as a substitute for the death of the sinner. When we hear the phrase, "his blood is on his own head", that is what it is getting at: no substitution is allowed.

So Moses says to certain other leaders to go and kill those who gave themselves over to Baal-Peor.....that is, the god of Moab. Let's stop here for a second: this is another of those spots where the ancient sages had some trouble; because what Moses ordered these certain leaders to do was NOT what the Lord had told Moses should be done. In essence Yehoveh made all the tribal princes personally responsible for allowing their people to consort with

Chemosh, the Ba'al of Moab, even if those princes had not themselves been directly involved. Moses however turned around and ordered only that people who had actually participated in the pagan rituals should be punished. Hmmm. This is not the first time Moses has veered away from one of the Lord's commands.

Why would Moses have done this? Why was he so reluctant to execute those leaders? Well in order not to go into great detail, I only ask you to think about the scenes we regularly see play out on our TV's, from Iraq. Tribal members and Muslim sect members will do anything to protect their leaders. And the leaders will sacrifice any amount of their people to maintain their own position and power; this is the essence of the tribal system. It's unthinkable that a Hebrew tribal prince, the head of an entire tribe of people, would have willingly submitted to his own execution. It's also unthinkable that the people of that tribe would have stood idly by and allowed it to happen. So from a human government sense, Moses took an easier path and one which felt better to him personally: get the tribal princes (who God told Him to execute) to instead execute some of the lesser leaders UNDER them as punishment for this apostasy. Anyone who's ever spent much time in corporate management understands this principle very well.

What hasn't been said yet, though, is that a plague was now raging among the Israelites as God poured out His wrath on the nation of Israel for their rebellion. So the idea is that the deaths of these leaders would satisfy God's justice, and the plague would end before too many more Israelites died.

In the midst of all this, while people were dying by the thousands and the rest were partying with the pagans, a certain Hebrew man brought a Midianite woman into the camp and introduced her to his kinsman. We discussed last week, or the week before, that Moab and Midian had some type of alliance at this time; that in fact some Midianites had even been part of the official entourage sent from King Balak of Moab up to Mesopotamia to fetch the famous sorcerer Balaam. So at this moment in history the Lord puts the Moabites and Midianites in the same boat: enemies of God. That this Israelite would bring a foreigner into camp at this moment and brazenly walk her right in front of Moses who was standing at the entrance to the Wilderness Tabernacle, is meant to demonstrate the perverted state of mind to which Israel had (once again) succumbed.

Naturally since the Tent of Meeting was where the priests operated, Phinehas (who was the priest in charge of the Tabernacle guards) saw this Hebrew man and Midianite woman wander by and he became incensed at their disregard for the Lord's holiness. He picked up a spear (undoubtedly from the hand of the one of the hundreds of his Levite guards stationed around the Tabernacle area) and followed the licentious couple to this Hebrew man's tent that was so near to the sacred tent. And while this couple is in the act of fornication Phinehas runs them both through with the spear. I don't think I need to draw a picture of how he could kill this couple at one time, with one spear. And just so we understand, the Scripture says he stabbed them through the belly. This is a Hebrew euphemism for the reproductive organs; the idea being they were in the act of sinning with those organs, and by that means will they, therefore, die.

Interestingly, it was that act which stopped the plague; but not before 24,000 people had died from it. Now I'm sure that some of you have a bit of trouble with this priest taking the law into his own hands and killing this couple. Well so did the ancient Rabbis. They attempted all sorts of gyrations in order that Phinehas not look too good in all this. Be that as it may, in verse 10 Phinehas is honored by Yehoveh for taking the lives of these two rebels (a Hebrew and a foreigner). The gist of the situation is that Phinehas had what we Christians like to call a "righteous" burst of anger. It was not that Phinehas was personally offended so much as he stepped forward when no one else would to defend the Lord's honor. The Lord declares that what Phinehas did was not only NOT murder, that in fact it was the needed act of expiation that prevented Yehoveh from wiping out Israel for their high-handed sinning. Even more, the Lord says I grant Phinehas my Shalom; He blessed Phinehas.

Abba then went on to declare that as a reward for his decisive action, Phinehas would be the clan of Levites that would be the priests. This didn't really CHANGE anything; it just clarified something. Phinehas was Eleazar's son, and Eleazar was Aaron's son. Aaron was dead, and Eleazar was now the High Priest. So, one of Eleazar's sons would, naturally, become the next High Priest. The Lord just decided which son that would be: Phinehas.

We kind of see the whole tone of chapter 25 shifts after Phinehas executes the couple. The plague ends, the Lord's justice is met, and it seems as if this shocking act brings Israel to its senses. The generation that would enter the Promised Land had just received a sobering lesson on God's kindness and His severity; His severity to destroy those who casually and callously rebel against Him, and His kindness in providing a means of atonement for those who had not yet died from His wrath. A lesson that they're parents had received on more than one occasion; but they're parents were also prevented from ever entering Canaan.

The chapter ends by the Lord declaring war on the Midianites, a people who seduced the rather easily led Hebrews into worshipping other gods and into unlawful sexual activity. The coming war against Midian (and naturally, their ally Moab) meant that a call to arms of Israel's army would be needed; and as was always done prior to beginning a war or conquest a census would be taken. A census would both alert the men to arm themselves, and give the leader a count of his troops. This is what Numbers 26 is going to concern itself with.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 26 all

We now enter a new phase in the formation of Israel as a nation, the conquest of the Land of Canaan. The final 11 chapters of the Book of Numbers deals with this process of battles, settling, and then moving on over and over again in order to possess the Promised Land.

The first census taken in the first 2 chapters of Numbers was of the 1st generation of the Exodus (a generation that essentially no longer exists). The census we just read about in Numbers chapter 26 is of the 2nd generation, the new generation, of Israel. And this census is for two primary purposes: to determine how many soldiers each tribe would muster and then to determine the amount of territory each tribe would receive when Canaan was divided up among the tribes the Israel.

As with the 1st census (and generally all Biblical census') only men were counted, and then only men of an age that could carry arms and fight. As a contrast however we'll see that while that 1st generation of the Exodus was constantly whining, rebelling, and longing for the good ol' days back in Egypt the new generation was more faithful, more passionate about their mission, and more willing to put their lives on the line to achieve what had been promised to Abraham over 600 years earlier: a land of his own and countless people to fill it.

Israel was camping just to the east of Jericho on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. No doubt everyone within 500 miles in any direction knew exactly where this gigantic population of 3 million Hebrews was; they were too many of them and their exploits too well known for it to be otherwise. Since Aaron is dead and buried on Mt. Hor his son the new High Priest Eleazar is spoken to directly by Yehoveh who tells him how to conduct this new census. The Lord says to take a count of the WHOLE Israelite community, the families who came up out of Egypt. But as we'll soon find out the WHOLE community of Israel no longer includes the tribe of Levi so indeed **they** will NOT be part of the census (however there will be a separate census conducted especially for them).

We won't examine every aspect of the census, I'll just point out some outstanding features. First in verses 8 - 11 we see that there are descendants of Rueben and Korah that remain. The reason that this is important is due to the terrible wrath of the Lord against the tribe of Rueben and the clan of Korah, when the earth opened up and swallowed them and (it appeared at that moment) their entire family. But, here we see that there indeed were survivors because their clan names are listed. In fact, the clan of Korah went on to be quite an important clan of Levites, as they became the singers at the Temple.

At the end of the list we get the final tally: 601,730 men aged 20 and up, able to be part of the military.

Now look at the chart of tribes before you. We find that some tribes increased while others decreased. Further we see that there were about 1800 fewer men now than there were almost 40 years earlier. This does NOT necessarily indicate that Israel was, overall, a very slightly smaller population. It could be, and it likely was, that this was a much younger population with so many children being born and replacing the older ones who originally came out of Egypt. When you factor in that we're talking about a quarter of 1% difference then we can say that for all practical purposes despite the several battles, plagues, and judgments against the Israelites, the population remained level with only a shift among the tribes as to which grew and which shrunk.

We can see by the chart the Manasseh had the largest population increase, amounting to more than 60% during those 40 years. On the other end of the scale was Simeon, which was decimated: the tribe of Simeon was now, by far, the smallest of the tribes, having LOST 60% of its population. No doubt the Lord's hand guided the increases and decreases, but just as certain this was not supernatural per se. Likely Simeon experienced not only an inordinate amount of deaths versus births, but also suffered many defections of their tribal members into other more robust Israelite tribes. Conversely, Manasseh had a slightly better birthrate and lower death rate as compared to the 11 other tribes; but as they started out in the Exodus as

the largest tribe, and (as sons of Joseph) wielded a lot of power, it was natural that other lesser tribes.....and particularly little Simeon.....would find it attractive to be part of a more dominant tribe like Manessah.

In verse 52 one of the two primary reasons for taking the census is put into use: the division of the land. And, there are two (seemingly at odds) criteria that are to be used by Moses to divvy up Canaan: 1) the size of the territory shall be proportional to the size of the tribe, and 2) the land shall be apportioned by lot. The obvious question is: how can it be both ways at the same time? Was the choosing of the lots a simple game of chance, or (as the Israelites saw it) as the Lord's providence that was going to miraculously coincide with the population of each tribe? No. Here's how the Sages of old say it worked: the general location each tribe (where it was generally situated in Canaan) would be assigned by lot but actual population determined the SIZE. There were areas of Canaan that were more fertile and others that were mostly desert. There were coastal areas that permitted shipping and fishing just as there were hilly areas that were suitable for grazing. There were places along well-established trade routes for the merchants and other places that bordered next to difficult enemies.

So the lot would determine the region and then Moses would determine the borders of each tribe in that region using the rule that the bigger the tribe, the more expansive were its borders.

The final section of Numbers 26 deals with the entirely separate census of the Levites, and its clans are listed. They are listed as distinct because 1), the Lord sees them as no longer part of Israel, and 2) as such they were not entitled to land; the Lord Himself was their portion. The Levites were to be funded and supported by the 12 tribes (if you counted Levi as a tribe of Israel there would be 13 tribes), and so their needs beyond what would be provided were seen as small. Rather, the Levites were given 48 cities scattered throughout the territories of the 12 tribes.

In verse 62 we see that their number was 23,000 males. That number is deceiving however because it counted all males beginning at one MONTH of age and up. The census of the 12 tribes had a lower limit of 20 years and an upper limit of around 50 years; so Levi was easily the smallest of all the tribes.

I think it is fascinating that by this point in history, the 2nd and 3rd born sons of Jacob (the ones who had led the terrible and ungodly raid of revenge upon the helpless male citizens of Shechem about 500 years earlier) were now the least of them all.

Back in Genesis 49 we studied the prophetic blessings of Jacob called Israel upon each of his sons. Simeon and Levi were the ONLY sons grouped together and given one common blessing by Jacob and it was nearer a curse than a blessing. Let me recall it for you.

NAS Genesis 49:5 "Simeon and Levi are brothers; Their swords are implements of violence. 6 "Let my soul not enter into their council; Let not my glory be united with their assembly; Because in their anger they slew men, And in their self-will they lamed oxen. 7 "Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, And scatter them in Israel.

This almost 5 century-old blessing was being realized at the same moment that the 6-century-old promise given to Abraham was also coming about.

The chapter ends with the reminder that all that remained of the males who were under age 20 when Israel fled Egypt, were Joshua and Caleb; 600,000 males had died during those 40 years in the Wilderness. Man, that is a LOT of funerals. Joshua and Caleb were the 2 out of the 12 spies who did their best to convince the leaders of Israel to advance into Canaan 38 years earlier.

Next week, we'll begin chapter 27.