

NUMBERS

Lesson 33 - Chapters 31 and 32

An esteemed 19th century Christian scholar named G.B.Gray calls Numbers chapter 31, "the extermination of the Midianites." That sounds pretty harsh and direct, but in fact that is precisely what this chapter is about.

Last week we took a quick stroll as an overview of Numbers 31 and this week we'll look a little closer. However, I'd like to begin by addressing a concern that some dear friends of mine, and perhaps you who are listening as well, have with the Old Testament in general and it is that there is a tremendous amount of killing and bloodshed and much of it is ordered by the God of Israel upon Israel's (and therefore God's) enemies.

I know a few highly educated folks (including Jewish and Christian scholars, writers, rabbis and pastors) who forthrightly say that they cannot square the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New; a god who leads Israel in conquering nations versus a god who sacrifices Himself, meekly, *for* all nations. Yet, no one denies that we see both of these attributes of God in our Bible. Our problem then is not one of intelligence it is one of faith; we want the God that our human sensibilities would prefer to have, instead of the One who is. So we unilaterally declare that the God of the Old Testament has morphed into the God of the New Testament; not because that's what the Word of God says but because we're more comfortable with that. And this tendency of Christians is really both the cause and the definition of the word idolatry. An idol is the physical image of a god that comes from the minds of men, molded and shaped and ascribed attributes according to human philosophies, characteristics and desires. When we worship those attributes and characteristics instead of the God of the Holy Scriptures as He is, that is idol worship. There is no way around this and giving it some nice Christian name doesn't make it OK.

There are a number of books with Christian-sounding themes making the rounds today and I'm thinking of one very popular new book in particular that I shall not name, which goes to great length to attempt to degrade God by finding various ways of humanizing Him. Yes, to humanize God is to lower and defile His gloriousness. A human is a rather significantly lesser being than Yehoveh. In fact we're not even in the same cosmic ballpark. So to attempt to equate Him with us is an insult of gargantuan proportions to His matchless divine essence. But really this attempt to humanize God is only the next New Age step in returning to the old world of Gnosticism; the first step was to take humans down a notch (to de-humanize mankind) so as to be more equated with animals. This has been thoroughly accomplished nearly universally by demanding that Darwinian Evolutionism be taught and accepted as undisputed fact. The notion being that we were not created by God, but simply evolved from animals and thus we are

nothing more than another species of animal.

So look at the pattern that these deceptive books try to foist upon us: God is above humans, and humans are above animals according to our Holy Texts. But the New Age movement makes a mockery of that by seeking to make God approximately equal to humans, and humans approximately equal to animals. And Churches and Pastors the world over have fallen for this deception from Hell, thinking it is a way for their congregations to get a warmer and fuzzier feeling about God; seeing Him more as a kindly grandfather and friend, and less as the Mighty Creator and King who stands above all things and demands our faithfulness and obedience to Him.

Folks, this is modern age idolatry. It is absolutely no different than molding little figurines of god or gods and bowing down to them. It is making God in OUR image for our convenience. The idols and images we read about in the bible were either people or animals, weren't they? All the gods were ascribed human attributes; they partied, drank, had sex and procreated, worried, could be killed, needed to eat food, could be tricked, and loved to be flattered. And if you've succumbed to this hidden New Age nonsense disguised as Christian literature, then you need to think again. Put down those books and pick up your bibles. Lay aside those novels and publications full of pithy prose and half-truths that make you think it will draw you closer to the Lord when in fact it merely pulls you away by flirting with your emotions and distorting truth. So many folks do this (I think) because they see the bible as being over their heads; you CAN understand the bible. It was made for normal, every day humans to understand. But more than understanding the Word of God we are to believe and follow the Word of God. And we are to take God as He is, not how we would rather He might be.

So I find it amusing if not mind numbingly irrational that the same people who despair and apologize over the slaughter of the Midianites here in Numbers will cheer and raise their voices in song over the coming of Armageddon and the total, grisly, merciless annihilation (by our Lord and Messiah) of the billions of people who form the nations but who will not submit to God. Here's the thing to understand: first, whether Torah or the Gospels, this is the same God with the same attributes demonstrating the same principles. Second, at all times in history Yehoveh has chosen moments to slay those who are **not** His.....at times for divine retribution, and at other times sacrificing them for the sake of those who are His. And third, the worst and most horrific slaughtering and blood letting of His foes is YET to happen; it's not recorded in the Old Testament it is in our future. Milder forms of His wrath and divine vengeance happened soon after Adam and Eve, it happened in a global scale at the Great Flood, it happened during the era of the Patriarchs, it happened the night of Passover in Egypt, and it is happening here in Numbers with the Midianites.

Later on in the bible much God-ordained killing will happen as Israel invades Canaan; later still as David expands his kingdom. We will eventually read of nearly 1/4 million Assyrian soldiers dying overnight as they planned to overthrow the Holy City of Jerusalem, killed at the hand of Yehoveh.

We of the 20th and 21st centuries have watched as nations who sought to finally bring the Jewish people to extinction were laid low as the Lord gave might to the nations who sought to

stop such a thing. And we read in our New Testament book of Revelation as our "mild and meek Savior" returns as a ravenous lion and leads the armies of God, sword in hand, as an invincible warrior chief railing against the enemies of God in a final war to end all wars, where the amount of blood letting will be so enormous as to stagger the imagination.

We do not have a God who joyfully kills; we are told that it is His will that ALL would be saved; but He does and will continue to destroy human beings who He deems as wicked in order to achieve His purposes, and among those purposes is to save Israel and to protect all those who are His.

But here's the thing we must not lose sight of: the Lord always deals FIRST with His own people, and THEN with those outsiders who persecute His people. In other words, the same foundational God-principles governed Israel as did ALL the nations of the earth, and the chief of those principles is that ALL will perish for their sins IF they do NOT accept the grace of God as an escape route. We have already read of thousands upon thousands of Israelites being killed by the Lord for rebelling against Him, just as we have read of thousands of gentiles being killed by the Lord for rebelling against Him. The large-scale destruction of Hebrew and gentile sinners is not an OT principle that has somehow been abandoned with the advent of Christ. God's justice did not end at the foot of the Cross.

Romans 2 (for example) goes to great length to explain that the Lord will treat Jew and gentile the same, and subject them to the same standard both in grace and in destruction. **NAS Romans 2:5 *But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who will render to every man according to his deeds: 7 to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; 8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. 9 There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.***

So as pertains to today's lesson: let's recall what we've just read in a couple of previous chapters, that the Hebrew men (God's set apart people) accepted the offer of the Moabite and Midianite women to mix with them; to engage in immoral sex and in idolatry. The crime here, however, in the eyes of the Lord is really adultery; the Lord God is Israel's husband, but the bride is having an affair with another god. The Law says that the consequences of adultery is death; so God's justice demanded that more than 24,000 Israelites died of a divine plague due to their adultery with Chemosh, the god of Moab. As is the God-principle, after the Lord finished dealing with His own people He then turned to those who are NOT His people to deal with them in like manner. That is our context for the account of Numbers 31, the extermination of Midian. Midian is a people who are NOT God's people, and who have intentionally drawn God's people away from Him.

The first couple of verses of chapter 31 bring to light that indeed the war against Midian is the Lord's vengeance, and it is Israel who is to carry out this vengeance on behalf of Yehoveh. Therefore, they are to accomplish this Holy War precisely as He orders it.

First, the Lord ordered that the army will NOT do battle using all 600,000 men of Israel; rather this group is only to consist of 12,000 handpicked soldiers; 1,000 from each of the 12 tribes.

Second, the Lord ordered that Phinehas, son of Eleazar the High Priest, is to be the War Priest in this campaign. In every battle of ancient cultures each side brought priests as representatives of their gods; Israel was no different. Along with these priests went various ritual objects including shofars for sounding the various battle instructions the way we've all seen Buglers do in the movies. Phinehas was NOT leading the Israelite army; he was basically the chaplain, there only to do priestly service. But it is intended that we notice that it was Phinehas who went with the 12,000; because it was Phinehas who speared the Midianite woman who was having sex with a Hebrew man (killing them both), and thus ending the plague that Yehoveh had brought upon Israel for their adultery.

As is so unique with the Scriptures apart from all ancient literature, we find no detailed description of the battle; no riveting accounts of victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, and no tales of individual heroism. Verse 7 simply states that the Israelites took the field against Midian and annihilated them; they slew every last Midianite man. Period. The outcome was never in doubt; the Lord went ahead of them, it was His army, so it was a sealed victory before they ever picked up a spear or a sword, or looked a Midianite opponent in the eye.

See, there is a principle here that is easily enough grasped, but truly hard for us to believe and internalize: it is that when the Lord sends His armies into battle, it's not actually a contest with a range of possible outcomes like it is with secular armies. It's not a situation whereby strategies and tactics or even the size of the armies determine the results. When the Lord sends His armies into the battle, and they behave as He has ordered, it is really for the sake of humans to simply witness what Yehoveh has already decided and for His Glory to be demonstrated to both sides. By no means is it a fair fight in which the other side actually has an opportunity to win.

RE-READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 31:14 - END

Now, let me remind you of what I just told you; indeed the Israelites killed every Midianite male, but it was ONLY those Midianites who resided in the northern Trans-Jordan region. Various Midianite tribes and clans had settlements all the way from Moab down to the southwestern end of the Arabian Peninsula, and they were not one large unified nation or people group. So, all the descendants of Midian were not exterminated.

The kings of several of the tribes and city-states of these Midianites were also killed, and their names are listed for us. What is more interesting to me, however, is that Balaam.....the Mesopotamian sorcerer who King Balak hired to curse Israel for him (but didn't).....was also put to death by the Israelites. An earlier chapter tells us that Balaam went back home (empty handed) after his encounter with Yehoveh and King Balak; obviously, he came back. Big mistake.

In verse 9 we're told that the women and children of Midian, along with all their livestock, was confiscated. And the towns where the Midianites lived were burned down. These practices

were completely standard for that day. Allow me to comment here on something that can get lost: it was normal procedure to expand ones' own tribe or nation by seizing the women and children (and in some cases, men) of a tribe or nation that they defeated. The Israelites did the same. In fact we see that Jacob (500 years before this war with Midian) grew his clan virtually overnight when, after his sons led the misguided raid of revenge on the city of Shechem and killed all the males (sound familiar?), they took all the women and children of Shechem as slaves. We don't know just how many people we're talking about here, but it would have been substantial, and it would have increased the size of Jacob's family. The same thing was about to happen here in Numbers 31 concerning these Midianites. So most of the time that Israel conquered some king or another, some portion of that kingdom's population wound up belonging to Israel. Therefore Israel's size increased considerably more than just by additional children being born to Hebrew women.

But notice how it also shows that a genealogical purity within Israel was practically impossible from their very inception. The vast majority of those conquered peoples was absorbed into Israel and in a short time was no longer considered foreigners, but Israelites. That is simply the way of tribal society.

The spoils of the Midianite War were brought back to where Moses and Israel was encamped, just a little east of the Jordan River, not far from Jericho. And it probably surprised the returning soldiers that Moses became irate when he saw the Midianite women in tow. Why was Moses so angry? Because these were the women who led (rather easily I suspect) the Hebrew men astray; and as a result of the actions of these women 24,000 Israelites were slain by Yehoveh. It is also confirmed for us that it was Balaam who came up with the bright idea for these pagan women to entice the Hebrew men and in this way weaken Israel. Balaam may not have issued an official curse upon Israel, but he definitely cursed them by his hellish plan to infiltrate Israel with pagan women.

So Moses decrees that all virgin women are to be spared (but kept, of course, as slaves), and all women who are sexually experienced are to be executed. The reasoning is simple: only women involved in the apostasy of the Israelites against Yehoveh should die. Why should a woman who obviously never had sexual relations with anyone, let alone a Hebrew, be killed? They had no part in persuading the Israelite men to worship Chemosh.

The killing of the boy children is a little harder to take. Yet it is rather typical for the era for a couple of reasons: first, it was a male child's duty that, when he grew up, he was to avenge the death of his father. A Hebrew killed every one of these boys' fathers and so to let them live meant that in time they'd have to be dealt with. And second, since it was the father's name that was given to the children and it was a husband's right to possess all the property of his wife, Moses did not want any male Midianites among the mix to pollute Israel or drain wealth and land away from it.

We now come upon this interesting scene beginning in verse 19 whereby a purification process must take place. Back in verse 13 we are told that Moses and Eleazar the High Priest LEFT the camp of Israel to go out and greet the returning army. This was not so much to honor the victors but to keep defilement from entering into the Israelite camp.

The soldiers were now unclean because they touched death; they had killed and even if they hadn't, they undoubtedly had touched a corpse and at the very least stood in the middle of a field full of dead bodies. Further the people that had been captured were unclean (because they weren't Hebrews and because, by definition, they were polluted with other gods) and they couldn't just be allowed to walk into the camp. So we find a standard 7-day period of cleansing was ordered; the troops had to stay outside the camp and be sprinkled with ashes of the Red Heifer (the special God-ordained concoction that was used especially to cleanse the defilement of death) twice.....on the 3rd day and on the 7th. Further their clothes were to be washed and other objects that they had come into contact with were to be ritually cleansed. All this was in accordance with the Levitical Laws. In verse 22 begins a list of metals confiscated from Midian that must also be purified in order to be brought into the camp. All objects taken from the Midianites must be purified but notice there is no mention of earthenware vessels and pots (of which there must have been thousands); this is because earthenware is porous and therefore cannot be cleansed so it must instead be destroyed.

The purification process for the confiscated items means passing them through fire. However for items that would burn or too easily melt (like glass), they could just be purified with water. This segment on the purification of various objects has since been expanded and codified by the Rabbis such that any cooking vessel must be heated until it is white-hot to be purified; silverware must be scalded; but glass, which is non-porous, can generally just be soaked in cold water. Most traditional Jewish households will follow this procedure to this day for Passover and the Feast of Matza.

Now that the disposition of the captives has been accomplished and the purification of people and objects is done the all-important distribution of the spoils of war occurs. Every soldier expected (and was entitled to) some of the spoils but it was up to the leaders to decide just how the spoils were to be divided. And here is how it was to be done:

The 12,0000 soldiers who actually did the fighting got to keep 1/2 of all the booty; the other half was given to the remaining 3 million Israelites. Interesting isn't it that the soldiers got the lions share of the spoils while the civilians received a little something, but it was orders of magnitude less than the actual combatants' reward. I say interesting because in our day the soldiers are typically among the poorest paid in the government, and yet it is they who make the biggest sacrifice. Civilians who stay safe at home....and in America often spend their time protesting against our soldiers who are out putting their lives on the line.....get the greatest benefit of the soldiers' bravery, while the soldier gets the least. Go figure.

But, as usual, in Israel everything gained in Holy War was the Lord's property and so a prescribed portion was to go to Him. With the establishment of the priesthood that meant that the Priests (and in some cases the common Levites) were to be the recipients of whatever was the Lord's portion. Notice that of the half of the spoils that the soldiers received they only had to "tithe" (so to speak) 1/500th of their share (a mere 2/10ths of 1 percent). On the other hand all the civilians of Israel had to "tithe" 1/50th, 2% of what they received. Unlike what it appears to be, this really is not so much a penalty for the civilians (or a reward to the soldiers) as it is a well-established system based on practicality. It is well documented that a priestly order of 10 Levites was established for each priest serving at the Temple (this was the norm). That is there

was a 10 to 1 ratio of Levites to priests. Recall now that Levites were NOT all priests. Most Levites were the blue-collar workers around the Temple. Only Priests could officiate sacrifices and rituals, never common Levites. So notice that the Levites (as a whole) got 10 times as much as the Priests (the 1/50th tithe for the Levites, versus a 1/500th tithe for the Priests). But since there were 10 times as many Levites as priests, by the time each man got his portion in essence every priest and every Levite received exactly the same amount. Another interesting point, I think, in God's economy as opposed to how men think. In Christian ministry a salary hierarchy is always established with the senior minister getting the most by far, and then each of the more junior ministers getting progressively less. Sometimes the difference is not too big, at other times it is enormous. Perhaps that needs to be rethought in light of the Biblical example.

A long inventory of the plunder of livestock is listed and the numbers are startlingly huge: large enough that most scholars say that this is not possible. Now, I can't really say if that's the case or not: but I can say that of all the places where such numbers of livestock WERE possible, it's right where this all took place. The upper Trans-Jordan is exceedingly good pasture. In fact by next chapter we're going to find that a couple of the 12 tribes want to stay there and not go on into Canaan, for that very reason.

As many good and selfless leaders as we all know of, there are probably at least as many out for personal fame and fortune. Here in the last 7 verses of Numbers 31, we get a truly heart tugging example of Godly leadership. All of the commanders of the various levels of troops from the sergeants up to the top man gave to the Lord **all** the gold and silver jewelry they had taken as their spoils of war. When the fighting was over they had (as standard procedure) made a census and found that, miraculously, not ONE Israelite soldier was killed or missing. So thankful were these brave leaders, and recognizing the Lord's hand upon them, that they turned over their entire personal portion to the priesthood in gratitude for the lives of their men. The regular foot soldier was allowed to keep his entire share.

As a memorial for this day the priests took the precious metals these commanders gave and formed all sorts of ritual objects for use in the Tabernacle.

I emphasized the attitude and action of the leaders of Israel because we see this growing understanding in them of what the Lord expects FROM them. And I have no doubt that it is at least partially as a result of a committed and faithful Israelite leadership that we will soon see Israel cross the Jordan River into Canaan, and win battle after battle, with few losses, and in lightening fashion. God expects much of human leaders; He expects even more of the human leaders who serve Him.

Let's move on to chapter 32.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 32 all

The conquest of the Promised Land has begun. Yet Israel has yet to even enter Canaan. Rather it is the east side of the Jordan, the area of the Trans-Jordan that they have first conquered. And this area is NOT the Promised Land. So, when the tribes of Reuben and Gad

who owned a great deal of cattle (actually, the Hebrew word is *mikneh*, which means livestock in general, not a large herd of cows) come to Moses saying that they would prefer to stay and settle in the land that was formerly Moab, Moses is anything but thrilled. What we see is that the leaders of Gad and Reuben apparently approached some type of leadership council with their request because Eleazar the High Priest is present, along with the chieftains of Israel, probably meaning the 12 tribal leaders.

Moses' first response is: so you want to stay behind in a land all the tribes worked together to conquer, and then sit on your hands while the other 10 tribes fight for the land the Lord has set aside for Israel without you?

Moses is as frightened as he is angry. Not frightened of the military aspect of the situation, that is, having a somewhat smaller army; rather, it is that almost 40 years ago some of the leadership council balked at entering Canaan and the consequences were pretty bad. He certainly didn't want to see whatever it was that the Lord would do to Israel, corporately, as a punishment for even just a portion of Israel not wanting to go forward AGAIN. And so Moses reminds everyone what happened to him or her long ago in Kadesh, and why it happened, and that this is NOT something to be repeated.

We'll continue with chapter 32 next time.