

A New Leader for the People
Numbers 25:1-27:23 and 36:1-13
Carol Martin

The opening verses of our reading today begin: "While Israel was staying in Shittim . . ." Perhaps we should take a minute and get our bearings regarding this encampment and be reminded of the significance of Shittim in the Bible.

Shittim is a large area in the plains of Moab directly across from Jericho, immediately east of the Jordan and north of the Dead Sea. Shittim is significant in Israel's history because it is the site of the last encampment of the nation at the end of their wilderness wanderings just before crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land.

Israel remained at Shittim for a long time before traversing into Canaan. While there, the episode involving Balaam and his donkey, who were hired by King Balak of Moab, occurred. It's here that the Israelites were enticed into idolatrous Baal worship and immoral sexual relations with Moabite and Midianite women bringing judgment from God. It's here a tribe-by-tribe census was taken of all the men ready for battle; an issue of inheritance rights was decided; Joshua was declared Moses'

successor; Moses delivered his farewell speech; and, from here Joshua would send out two men to spy on Jericho before Israel crossed the Jordan.

I've divided the events of our lesson this week into four areas:

1. Condemning the sin
2. Counting the people
3. Clarifying the inheritance
4. Commissioning the successor

Condemning the sin

As we studied in our last lesson, Balaam may not have been successful in cursing the Israelites for Balak; however, he was not through trying to earn his fee. Apparently, his counsel was to invite the Israelites to be neighborly and co-mingle with the locals. As is so often the case when one takes the first step toward enemy territory, the second one becomes easier to take until you're fully entrenched in their society. Scripture says the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women and eat and bow down to their god, Baal of Peor, thus causing the Lord's anger to burn against them.

God's judgment? A plague, as well as the order to publicly put to death all the leaders who had joined in worshipping Baal. Yet even while the people were weeping before the Tent of Meeting, Zimri, a leader in the tribe of Simeon, brought Cozbi, a Midianite chief's daughter, into his tent right before the eyes of Moses and the priests. What a blatant act of defiance!

If ever there was a case of righteous indignation, this was it. Phinehas, the priest, grabbed his spear, followed them into their tent and drove it right through both of them as they were having sex. Three things resulted from that action: 1) God ordered Moses to treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them (vs.16) 2) the plague was stopped, although 24,000 had died in it (vs.9) and 3) God made a covenant of peace with Phinehas declaring he and his descendants would have a lasting priesthood because he was zealous for the honor of God (vs. 13).

Zeal is a good four-letter word we should certainly have in our vocabulary. It spurs us to take action, to put our passion for Christ up front and out in the open, to put shoe leather on our walk with Christ, and to honor Him when we stand for righteousness. The Apostle Paul was certainly zealous in his desire that his fellow Israelites might be saved. Yet in Romans

10:2 he states, "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge." Therein lies the test, doesn't it? People can be sincere and passionate, but be sincerely and passionately wrong if they don't know God's Word and His standard of righteousness. That is the blessing of our Bible Study together to know the truth of God. If we stand for nothing, we fall for anything. Phinehas stood for God's righteousness and was rewarded for his zeal.

Counting the people

It was almost forty years earlier that the adult males of Israel had been numbered at Sinai. Since then they had fallen by the wayside. Those to be numbered were of the new generation who either started from Egypt as children or were born in the wilderness. A large majority had never eaten anything but manna.

Comparison with the first census shows that the total number of adult males had decreased by 1,820. Seven tribes increased and five decreased. This in itself suggests something of the rigors of the wilderness journey. The decrease well illustrates the unfruitfulness of wilderness life, that life which is out of God's

plan. Wandering away from the Lord causes us to lose our spiritual strength.

Judah, the largest of the tribes in the first census, increased in size and retained its lead among the tribes. This tribe was given the responsibility of leading the nation while on the march and when it went into war. It's fitting, because it was the tribe from which Christ came. But look at Simeon. It stood third in size at the first numbering, but now was the smallest. Perhaps if many of the Simeonites followed after their leader, Zimri, many of them would have been among the slain in the previous chapter.

The major purpose of the census was to give Joshua a basis for an equitable assignment of the lands of Canaan to the various tribes. This is indicated in Numbers 26:52-56. The size of the territory allocated would be proportional to the tribes' population, whereas the location of the territory would be determined by lot. We're going to study more about that distribution in the book of Joshua. As before, the Levites were numbered separately.

Now I know, if you're like me, when a chapter in our weekly lesson is full of genealogy and names that don't really relate to us, it's easy to just skip over them and get to a bottom line (in our case the number in each tribe). But what is the first thing our

New Testament starts with? Matthew 1:1 begins, "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:"

To verify to the Jews that Jesus was indeed their Messiah, their expected King, Matthew had to prove His lineage. So, in Numbers 26:20-21 we find the same names – Perez and Hezron – that Matthew cites as earthly ancestors of Jesus. Individuals matter to God. Throughout the Old Testament we have Jewish lineage mentioned time and again. Even later when the exiles returned after their captivity in Babylon, Nehemiah 7:5 says, "So God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found genealogical record of those who has been the first to return." Nehemiah went on in 7:64 regarding the priests, "These searched for their family records, but could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean."

Every family usually has someone who takes an interest in keeping or researching family history. That's why websites like Ancestry.com are so popular today. It's part of that longing in each of us to answer the question, "Who am I?" And while earthly lineage is interesting and often revealing, the true answer to that question is found in Jesus Christ. Romans 8:16-17, "The Spirit

himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ . . ." 1 John 5:1, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God . . ." 1 John 5:11-12, "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

So, who am I? The ultimate answer for every believer is, "I am a child of God."

Well, back to Numbers 26. In verse 33 we're told that Zelophehad had no sons, only five daughters, and we're given their names. Then the genealogy account ends in verse 65 stating, ". . . the Lord told those Israelites they would surely die in the desert, and not one of them was left except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun."

Clearly, we can see the goodness of God to this people, notwithstanding their provocations. Although the number fell a little short of what was at Mt. Sinai, yet those now numbered had the advantage that they were still middle-aged men, between twenty and sixty, in the prime of their time for service, and during the thirty-eight years of their wandering and wasting in the

wilderness they had every opportunity of acquainting themselves with the laws and ordinances of God. This leads us into my third point.

Clarifying the inheritance

Now Israel was comprised of a new generation, and this new generation would have new problems. It's always been a problem for one generation to understand another generation. When you're young, you criticize the older generation, and when you're old, you criticize the younger generation. That seems to be human nature.

In chapter 27 we see that this new generation had a new problem that it brought to Moses, who didn't know what to do. He had to appeal to the Lord, because primarily women just didn't count. In fact, they were treated as chattel. We're told how many men left in the exodus, and how many men were counted in both of the census takings. We can only assume that the number of women and children greatly increased the actual number of those traveling.

There was no law in Israel permitting women to inherit property, so there seemed no hope of these bereaved, helpless women getting a home in the Promised Land now that they had

reached its border. But they were descended from Joseph (they belonged to the tribe of Manasseh) and, like their great ancestor, had strong faith in the goodness and justice of God. So, ignoring all precedent, they went to Moses and the priest, explained their case, and requested an inheritance.

Their case was determined by divine oracle as God granted their petition. In fact, the point was settled for all future occasions and a general law was made that, in case a man had no sons, his estate should go to his daughters or on down to his nearest relative in his clan.

However, this ruling brought up another question that concerned the family heads in the tribe of Manasseh. In Numbers 36:3 they expressed their concern: Now suppose they (the daughters of Zelophehad) marry men from other Israelite tribes; then their inheritance will be taken from our ancestral inheritance and added to that of the tribe they marry into. And so part of the inheritance to us will be taken away.

Then at the Lord's command Moses gave this order concerning the daughters: They may marry anyone they please as long as they marry within the tribal clan of their father. No inheritance in Israel is to pass from tribe to tribe, for every

Israelite shall keep the tribal land inherited from their forefather.
(vs.6-7)

The result? The girls did marry within the clans of the descendants of Manasseh and their inheritance remained in their father's clan and tribe.

Suffice it to say, some 1500 years before Christ, we see in Scripture that God was already showing His compassion and concern for women's rights.

We finish chapter 27, verses 12-22 with my last point:

Commissioning the successor

We've been following Moses for a long time. We're now at a point where he is to prepare to pass from this earthly scene. Deuteronomy 32:48-49 elaborates on Numbers 27:12 of today's reading: On that same day the Lord told Moses, "Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession."

It must have been a painful and difficult time of Moses' life to hear the Lord tell him to take a last look at the land he wouldn't enter, and then be told again that the reason for his

being denied entrance was his rebellion against the Lord's commandments. Vs. 14, ". . . for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both you (and Aaron) disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes."

Remember we studied a couple of lessons ago that it was at the Desert of Zin where Miriam, Moses' sister died and was buried, and where the people grumbled that there was no water. There the Lord said to Moses in 20:8, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water." As Moses gathered the grumbling people, in his frustration with them, he said (vs.10-11), "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

Numbers 20:12, But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them." He had struck the rock rather than just speak to it.

From there Israel traveled to Edom, were denied passage, and continued their desert wandering and fighting the battles we learned about in last week's lesson. Now camped at Shittim, the Promised Land was in sight. But the Lord had not yet given the signal to go in and possess the land.

The Lord's proclamation reminding Moses that he would not enter the land was harsh news, but not new news to Moses. He'd been living with the consequences of his sin for a long time, knowing what his fate would be. Like his brother, Aaron, he was not going enter the Promised Land. Yet, he remained true to God's calling to lead His people. Do you suppose the average Israelite knew what lay ahead for their leader, or was it just private between Moses and God? Wouldn't you think if they knew they would have been more compassionate and cooperative with Moses?

Many people have burdens to bear and do so in silence. For believers, however, we need to remember the words to the old hymn, "I Must Tell Jesus." *I must tell Jesus all of my trials, I cannot bear these burdens alone; In my distress He kindly will help me, He ever loves and cares for His own. I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! I cannot bear my burdens alone; I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.*

Moses' concern was not that it was time for him to be gathered to his people, but that the Lord would appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who would lead them so the Lord's people would not be like sheep without a shepherd.

Moses did not try to select his successor; rather, he elected to make God's choice his own. And the Lord did not disappoint him. Without hesitation, ". . . the Lord said to Moses, 'Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation; and commission him in their sight.'" (27:18-19) By laying his hand on Joshua, Moses would be conferring his authority on him. This act would declare to the Israelites that Joshua had the reins of leadership and therefore was to be obeyed.

"Moses did just as the Lord commanded him; and he took Joshua and set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation. Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses." (vs. 22-23) To lay his hands on Joshua was not to endow him with the Spirit, which he already had, but to visibly mark him out as the new

leader. Thereafter Joshua would seek out the divine will through the Urim contained in the breastplate of the priest, Eleazar. Actually, Eleazar played little part in the ceremony, although he would become God's spokesman to interpret God's will to Joshua.

Although Joshua has been commissioned as Moses' successor, we're not through with the leadership of Moses quite yet. There's more to learn in the remainder of this Book of Numbers and the Book of Deuteronomy before Moses leaves the scene.

I would assume, however, there would be great comfort for Moses knowing God had chosen his successor. It's natural for us to want our work for the Lord to continue after we're gone; for another to succeed where we may have failed; and to have that person advance and claim all the promises and blessings of God. How satisfying it must have been to Moses to know he had the privilege of an intimate relationship with God Himself.

Hopefully, today's lesson has caused us to reflect about our own life. We too have been guilty of sin, yet our gracious God has not condemned us, but has instead forgiven us through the shed blood of Jesus Christ as we have confessed and repented of that sin. We've been counted as one of His children, a co-heir with

Christ. His promises have clarified our inheritance, the kingdom of heaven. And, our successors have been chosen through our witness to others who have accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Each generation must pass the torch of the good news of the gospel to the next. Let the Lord find us faithful to do that.

Let's pray: Father, You are indeed holy, righteous, just, and worthy of all our praise and thanksgiving for the work You've given us to do for Your kingdom. Help us to be faithful as Moses was during difficult times and trust You to lead the way through our wilderness travels on this earth as we draw nearer to our Promised Land. In Jesus' name. Amen.