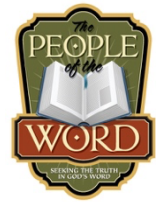


Preparing For The Conquest (Numbers 30-35)

A QUICK OVERVIEW

If Leviticus tends to be an unappealing book to contemporary readers with all its laws and regulations, then Numbers must be one of the most difficult in terms of “what in the world is going on?” The problem for us is that it is such a mixture of things—narrative, additional laws, census lists, prophecies from the pagan Balaam, the well-known Aaronic blessing that we sing today (*The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you...6:22-27*) — and it is not easy to see how it all fits together.



Numbers primarily records the pilgrimage of Israel through the desert from the foot of Mount Sinai to its encampment in the plains of Moab (on the east bank of the Jordan River), poised for conquest. But it is the second generation that ends up on the east bank—because the exodus generation refused to enter by way of the more direct southern route (at Kadesh) and so were judged by God as not worthy to enter at all, except for Joshua and Caleb. I’ve always thought it interesting that Joshua sent just **TWO spies** into Jericho (Joshua 2:1), not TWELVE. We’re not making that mistake again!

The basic travel narratives are found in 9:15-14:45 (from Sinai to Kadesh, including the refusal to enter and the declaration of God’s judgment) and 20:1-22:1 (from Kadesh to the plains of Moab along the Jordan). I included a map for reference.

There are four other major sections of narrative that have slightly different functions:

- (1) 7:1-9:14 records the preparations for the journey;
- (2) chapters 16-17 speak to the issue of Moses’ and Aaron’s God-given (and recognized) leadership;
- (3) the Balaam cycle (22:2-24:25) and the seduction at Shittim with the Baal of Peor (ch. 25) anticipate both the fulfillment of God’s giving them the land and their own capacity nonetheless to be seduced by Canaanite idolatry;
- (4) chapters 31-36 narrate events on the east bank as they prepare for conquest which will be our focus in this study.



In order to appreciate how the narrative of Numbers works, we need to recall two items from Genesis and Exodus.

First, the primary driving force behind everything is God's promise/covenant with Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. This is what keeps the narrative going in all of its parts. And God will bring about the fulfillment of that covenant promise, even in the face of Israel's reluctance and disobedience.

Second, the conquest of the land involves the second stage of the holy war. The first stage—against Pharaoh in Exodus—even though led by Moses, was carried out by God the Divine Warrior through miraculous intervention. In this second stage, God intends his own people to be involved (See 2 Cor. 5:11-21. In the New Covenant, God involves us as His ambassadors, making His appeal to a world from Him, through us). He rescued them from slavery in order to make them his own people and place them in the land, but they must take ownership of the actual conquest of the land. This accounts for the two census lists, which count the men who can fight and put the tribes in battle formation around the tabernacle. The list at the beginning (from which Numbers derives its name) prepares the first generation for conquest by way of Kadesh; the second prepares the second generation for conquest by way of the Transjordan. This backdrop accounts for the various narratives at the end, including the succession of Joshua (27:12-23) and the matters in chapters 31-36 that anticipate the conquest.

In Moab: Preparations for Entry into the Land (26:1-36:13)

Chapter 30 – Concerning Vows

A vow before God is no small thing. God expressly commanded that Israel should be careful to keep its vows, and to fulfill every oath made.

In many circles today, the breaking of a promise is just standard business practice – but before God, it is simply sin or the violation of the sacred trust in a relationship.

In Deuteronomy 23:21, Moses reminds the next generation, *"When you make a vow to the LORD your God, be prompt in fulfilling whatever you promised him."*

The principal issue is that a vow is not to be made rashly. The chapter details when vows must be kept and when they can be altered. The bottom line is that protections were put into place to keep the community from exploiting one another for words, in this case, vows, spoken that were impetuous or reckless. How many of us have made promises that we would later regret? Oops.

Why protections for women, and not men? Women, in their society, would have a much more difficult time fulfilling the vow. They simply didn't have the resources to do so. Notice the older women (widowed and divorced) don't have such protections. Presumably, they are older and wiser.

With that said, let's be careful what we say and the promises we make. You'll recall Jephthah's only daughter lost her life and John the Baptist lost his head because of a rash oath that was made (See Judges 11:30-40; Matthew 14:6-10).

Here's what Solomon wrote in the book of Ecclesiastes, *As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut. It is evil to make mindless offerings to God. Don't make rash promises...After all, God is in heaven, and you are here on earth. So let your words be few* (5:1-7). Once those words leave our lips, we can never get them back.

In commenting about Abraham Lincoln, one writer quipped, "when Lincoln had nothing to say, he said nothing." Good advice.

- Prov. 10:8, *The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin.*
- Prov. 10:14, *Wise men store up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.*
- Prov. 10:19, *When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.*

Let me say this, gossip, lies, careless speech are too common. With the use of social media and the internet, it only takes seconds to spread a rumor or half-truth. But even without the use of social media, the ability to do irreparable harm to another with careless words is immense as these carelessly spoken words travel quickly.

The story is told of a young man who went to a pastor and asked how he could take back the slanderous words he had spoken about another person. The pastor told him to take a feather pillow, go up to the top of the nearby hill and release all the feathers from the pillow and return to him. The young did as he was asked, scattering the feathers from atop the hill. He then returned to the pastor. The pastor then told him to now go out into the surrounding area and gather up all the feathers he had released. The young replied it would be impossible as the wind had carried the feathers everywhere, near and far. The pastor looked at the young man and said to him, so it is to retrieve the words carelessly spoken of another.

What's the better way forward? How about Paul's command? *"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."* Eph. 4:31-32

Can we simply this? Jesus did. *Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'* – Matt. 5:37. James repeated the command in chapter 5 and verse 12 of his letter. Good counsel. No. That's a command!

Chapter 31 - Concerning The Midianites

This, the last war of Moses's leadership before God brings his life to an end, was to be a war of vengeance against Midian. It is announced by the Lord, not Moses. It was "the LORD's vengeance" because of the wickedness of the Midianites, who caused the seduction of the Israelites (25:16-18).

On hearing the command of the Lord, Moses turned to the people and called for a strike force. This was a limited, contained, special task calling for a limited army of special forces. One thousand men were to come from each of the tribes of Israel, a representative army for the whole nation.

The five kings that the Israelites killed mentioned in verse 8 are memorialized forever as enemies of the Lord. Among the names are two surprises. One is Zur, the father of Cozbi (see 25:15). You'll remember her, the Midianite woman who was stabbed to death with Zimri by Phinehas. Cozbi is like Jezebel, a person of position and influence who led God's people away from a devotion to His purposes. The other surprise is Balaam. The story of chapter 25 lacks the name of the principal instigator of the seduction of the men of Israel.

31:16 clears it up, *"These are the very ones **who followed Balaam's advice** and caused the people of Israel to rebel against the LORD at Mount Peor. They are the ones who caused the plague to strike the LORD's people."*

While the men of Midian were killed in battle, the women and children were spared. Moses commanded that only the virgin women (who were thus innocent of the indecencies at Peor) could be spared; the guilty women and the boys would not. This was harsh, but done with the understanding that in that ancient culture, the boys would have grown into men with the solemn responsibility to avenge their father's death and to perpetuate Midianite culture – which was anti-God.

The brutality demanded in verses 17-18 is nearly unimaginable. It is one thing to kill a woman in battle, and the death of children as collateral damage. But this verse demands the purposeful killing of women and children after the battle was over. Those girls who were to be kept alive would have to be rather young, and their mothers would have had to be killed.

The only way to understand such a command is to realize what was at stake in the story of Baal Peor. Numbers 25 records an altogether new type of sin and rebellion—one that bears within itself the threat of the doom of the nation as a whole. It was this very type of evil that finally destroyed the Hebrew kingdoms in 722 b.c. and 586 b.c. respectively.

Question - Can the total destruction of Midian in Numbers 31 be morally justified?

Note: Cancel culture is telling us that anything that offends our contemporary sensibilities is anathema, and it pays no regard to the standards of the time period in which said event took place. We have to judge the Bible based on the cultural norms out of which it was created. Violence was normal. This narrative was likely not shocking to its audience.

The question is, how do we deal with this text and others like it today?

Numbers 31 narrates the total destruction of the Midianites who had conspired to seduce the Israelites to fornication and idolatry at the incident of Baal-peor (Num. 25:1-9). The plague that resulted **against the Israelites** on that occasion mounted to a total of twenty-four thousand and a serious alienation with God. The heinousness of their crime against the Lord's people and the threat of future allurements to apostasy made the Midianites ripe for judgment.

Was this action morally justified? It was quite apparent, in the light of all the circumstances and the background of this crisis, that the integrity of the entire nation was at stake. Had the threat to Israel's existence as a covenant nation been dealt with any less severely, it is extremely doubtful that Israel would have been able to conquer Canaan at all, or claim the Land of Promise as a sacred trust from God.

See - Why in the Old Testament does God demand so much violence and war of the Jewish nation?

A Couple of Verses. A Few Thoughts. A Point of Application

Eccl 8:11; When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong.

Ps. 10:13; Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, "He won't call me to account"?

Are we doing a disservice by not carrying out the sentence for a crime, by not holding people to account? Yes.

We might be tempted to say, the God of the Old Covenant, the God of judgment, is not the same God of the New Covenant.

We see swift judgment on Annanias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11, and upon those in the Corinthian church who failed to examine themselves while taking the Lord's Supper and thus became weak, sick, and for whom a number had died (see 1 Cor. 11:27-32).

So, what about you and I? What are those things that draw our affections away from God?

I would say this, what we love affects how we manage our resources, how we navigate our relationships, what we dream about, work for, and how we spend our time. In short, **the affection of our hearts sets the direction of our lives**. That's HUGE because no one wants to get to the end of their days and realize they chased the wrong things.

In fact, when we love anything or anyone more than God because we believe it will rescue us from whatever we're suffering, make us feel better, become more content, give us significance, fix something we believe is broken in us, or make us happy, the results are always the same: anger, lack of contentment, frustration, envy, self-pity—and emptiness.

If our affections have drawn us away from God and empty idols are setting the direction for our lives, let's have a conversation with the Lord about it, confess it, set a new direction (repent) and let's thank Him for His patience through the journey.

Lam. 3:22-23, Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

And boy do we need each other. Two questions: Who are the people in your life that are calling you up to greater faithfulness? Who are we calling up to greater faithfulness?

Chapter 32 – Concerning the Transjordan Tribes

Vss. 5-15. Two tribes were content to remain east of the Jordan. We're good! You all go ahead! Oh boy. How does Moses respond?

*"Here you are, a brood of sinners, standing in the place of your fathers and making the LORD even more angry with Israel. If you turn away from following him, he will again leave all this people in the wilderness, and **you will be the cause of their destruction.**"*

OUCH!

David wrote these words, Ps. 69:6, *Lord, the LORD Almighty, may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me; God of Israel, may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me.*

Let's be careful that we're not the cause of our fellow brother's and sister's misstep in their walk with God.

I don't think there is any doubt that the two tribes had fought, had journeyed, and they were perhaps fearful that the risks of the next steps were too great.

I appreciate what John Ortberg wrote in his book, *The Me I Want To Be* as it relates to the risk taking and God's call to be courageous followers,

"Don't ask for comfort. Don't ask for ease. Don't ask for manageability. Ask to be given a burden for a challenge bigger than yourself – one that can make a difference in the world, one that will require the best you have to give it...Ask for a task that will keep you learning and growing and uncomfortable and hungry. We cannot grow unless there has been a challenge to what is familiar and comfortable. The Spirit leads us into adventure. The Spirit leads us into a dangerous world. To ask for the Spirit is to ask for risk." TMIWTB page 247

Chapter 35 - Concerning The Six Cities of Refuge

Our own system of jurisprudence (due process) is modeled after what is outlined here.

- 1) Involuntary manslaughter is to be treated differently than murder. Dt. 19:4-6.
- 2) Judges are to make a thorough investigation. Dt. 19:18.
- 3) Two or three witnesses must testify and concur in order to bring about a conviction. One witness is not sufficient. Nu. 35:30; Matthew 18:15-17; 2 Corinthians 13:1-2; 1 Timothy 5:19.
- 4) If a witness proves to be a liar, he is to receive the punishment intended for the accused. Dt. 19:18:19.

The Seventh City of Refuge – John 14:1-3; Rev. 12:10; Rom. 8:31-34

John 14:1 *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. **I am going there to prepare a place for you.** 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*

God has prepared a place for you and I as the permanent refuge from **the accuser** of our souls.

Rev. 12:10, *Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For **the accuser** of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.*

Rom. 8:31, *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?...**Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?** It is God who justifies. 34 *Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.**

BEAUTIFUL!!!

Whew. That's been quite a journey. From the making of vows, to the Midianite vengeance, to the Transjordan tribes, and finally to the Cities of Refuge. How can we sum it up?

In the words of Micah the prophet (6:8), "what does the LORD require of us?

- 1) To act justly and to
- 2) love mercy and to
- 3) walk humbly with our God.

AMEN.

Why in the Old Testament does God demand so much violence and war of the Jewish nation?

R.C. Sproul, *Now That's A Good Question*

One of the most difficult episodes for us to handle as people who live on this side of the New Testament are the Old Testament records of what is called the *herem*. This is where God calls Israel to embark in what we could call a holy war against the Canaanites. He tells them to go in there and wipe out everyone—men, women, and children. They were forbidden to take prisoners and were to utterly destroy and put the ban, or curse, upon this land before they occupied it for themselves.

When we look at that, we shrink in horror at the degree of violence that is not only tolerated but seemingly commanded by God in that circumstance. Critical scholars in the twentieth century have pointed to that kind of story in the Old Testament as a clear example that this couldn't be the revealed Word of God. They say that this is the case where some bloodthirsty, ancient, seminomadic Hebrews tried to appeal to their deity to sanction their violent acts and that we have to reject that as not being supernaturally inspired interpretations of history.

I take a different view of it. I am satisfied that the Old Testament is the inspired Word of God and that God did in fact command the Jewish nation to institute the *herem* against the Canaanites. God does tell us in the Old Testament why he instituted that policy against the Canaanite people. It's not as though God commanded a group of bloodthirsty marauders to come in and kill innocent people. Rather, the background was that the Canaanites were deeply entrenched in unrestrained forms of paganism that involved even such things as child sacrifice. It was a time of profound inhumanity within that nation. God said to Israel, "I am using you here in this war as an instrument of my judgment upon this nation, and I'm bringing my violence upon this unbelievably wicked people,

the Canaanites.” And he said, “I’m going to have them destroyed” (Deut. 13:12-17). In effect, he said to the Jewish people, “I want you to understand something: I’m giving to the Canaanites their just deserts, but I’m not giving them into your hands because you’re a whole lot better. I could put the same kind of judgment on your heads for your sinfulness and be perfectly justified to do it.” That’s basically the sense of what God communicated to the Jews.

Genesis 15:13-16, Then the LORD said to (Abraham), “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

Deuteronomy 9:3-5, ...Be assured today that the LORD your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you. After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, “The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He said, “I am calling you out of my grace to be a holy nation. I’m tearing down in order to build something new, and out of what I build new, a holy nation, I’m going to bless all of the people in the world. Therefore, I want you to be separated, and I don’t want any of the influences of this pagan heritage to be mixed into my new nation that I’m establishing.” That is the reason he gives. People still choke on it, but if God is, indeed, holy—as I think he is—and we are as disobedient as I know we are, I think we ought to be able to handle that.