

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 18

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

CHAPTER 31

INTRODUCTION

The Midianites wanted to curse Israel through Balaam. Israel knew nothing of their plan. But God saw and heard about their secret plan and Balaam. Instead of cursing Israel he blessed Israel! Later Balaam advised the Midianites to lure the men of Israel with their women and lead them to participate in their worship of Baal. As a result, 24,000 Israelite men died. This chapter records God's judgement on the proud Midianites for their evil deeds. It was a clear fulfilment of God's earlier promise (25:16-18). The sin of the Midianites against the people of God had reached the time of judgement. God says, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23).

Israel's battle with the Midianites was a dress rehearsal for the many more wars that would have to be fought in Canaan. This experience would boost their morale and the necessity on their part to trust and depend on God completely. The account of the killing of the Midianites may pose some difficulties in accepting and understanding it. But with a proper understanding of God and His ways and thoughts, it is not difficult for His children to accept.

Generally, the chapter can be divided into four sections: 1) the war against the Midianites [31:1-12]; 2) the anger of Moses against the military officers [31:13-24]; 3) the distribution of the war booty [31:25-47], and 4) the freewill thanksgiving offering to God by the heads of the Israelite army (31:48-54).

OUTLINE

A. The LORD Commanded Moses to Destroy the Midianites (31:1-12).

1. The LORD commanded Moses to avenge the children of Israel on the Midianites before his death (31:1-2).
2. The preparation to go to war against the Midianites (31:3-5).
3. Moses sent the children of Israel on a holy war against the Midianites (31:6-11).
 - a) Twelve thousand soldiers went to war, and Phinehas (6).
 - b) The children of Israel were victorious and slew all the males (7).
 - c) They slew the five kings and Balaam (8)
 - d) The children of Israel took the women and children captives, cattle, flocks and goods (9).
 - e) They burnt all the cities (10).
 - f) Summary of the booty (11)
4. The soldiers brought the captives and the booty before Moses, Eleazar, the priest, and all the congregation (31:12).

B. Moses Rebuked the Military Leaders for Midianite Women (31:13-24).

1. Moses and Eleazar, the priest, and the heads of the children of Israel went out of the camp to meet the returning soldiers (31:13).
2. Moses Ordered the Killing of the Midianite Women and Children (31:14-18).
 - a) Moses was angry because they spared the Midianite women (14).
 - b) The military leaders had spared the women who took the counsel of Balaam and caused the death of the children of Israel (15-16).
 - c) Moses commanded the killing of all the Midianite women who were not virgins and all the captured Midianite boys (17).
 - d) Moses commanded that all the girls who were virgins be spared to be assimilated into Israel (18).
3. The warriors must remain outside the camp and go through the required seven-day ritual purification (31:19-20).
4. Every precious booty of gold, silver, brass, iron, tin, and lead would be purified by fire and the water of purification (31:21-23).
5. The clothes of the warriors also had to be washed on the seventh day before they could re-enter the camp (31:24).

C. The Booty of the War was Shared Among the Whole Nation (31:25-47).

1. The LORD commanded Moses to apportion the booty of the war (31:25).
2. The booty of men and beasts would be shared fifty-fifty between the warriors and the rest of the congregation (31:26-27).
3. Point two percent (0.2%) of the warriors share would be taken and given to the LORD'S priest, Eleazar, for the LORD'S heave offering (31:28-29).
4. Two percent (2%) of the share of the congregation would be taken and given to the Levites because they served the Tabernacle of the LORD (31:30).
5. The details of the war booty and the apportioning to the LORD, the Levites, the warriors and the rest of the congregation (31:31-47).
 - a) Moses and Eleazar did as the LORD commanded (31).
 - b) The sum total of the war booty (32-35).
 - c) The warrior's half portion (36).
 - d) The LORD'S apportion (37-41).
 - e) The congregation's share (42-46).
 - f) The Levites' apportion (47).

D. The Warriors Made a Free-will Thanksgiving Offering to the LORD (31:48-54).

1. The military officers reported to Moses that none of them were killed (31:48-49).

2. They therefore brought an offering to the LORD (31:50).
3. Moses and Eleazar accepted the gifts of gold and wrought jewels for a memorial for the children of Israel before the LORD into the Tabernacle (31:51-54).

COMMENTARY

A Holy War

The LORD commanded Moses to avenge the children of Israel on the Midianites. This was in fulfilment of God's commandment to Moses previously, "*Vex the Midianites, and smite them: for they vex you with their wives, wherewith they have beguiled you in the matter of Peor*" (Numbers 25:16-18a). The cup of the sins of the Midianites had filled up to the brink. God's judgement upon them had finally come. Moses was to muster an army comprising of 12,000 Israelite soldiers, one thousand from each tribe. Moses sent them off to war. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the priest, also joined the soldiers. Phinehas took with him the "holy instruments" and trumpets to blow. The battle was fought and the Midianites were completely defeated. They slew all the Midianite men. They killed five kings, namely Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, Reba, of whom Zur is familiar, for he was the father of Cozbi (25:15).

This was a holy war. God initiated it. God commanded it, and His people carried it out. Apart from the direct commandment of God, the bearing of the "holy instruments" further evidenced God's sanction. It was the

vengeance of God upon the Midianites because they had beguiled God's people and caused them to sin against God. As a result of the sin of His people, 24,000 Israelites died. This reminds us that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living and true God (Hebrews 10:31). God is a consuming fire and will destroy all His enemies (Deuteronomy 9:3).¹

The military officers killed all the Midianite men but they spared the women and the children. They burned their cities and razed all their beautiful palaces to the ground. They captured a vast amount of booty. It was a resounding success. They returned to their camp, but Moses and Eleazar, and the heads of the tribes met them outside the camp. These returning soldiers could not re-enter the camp because they had defiled themselves by touching dead bodies.

Instead of being glad in receiving the returning soldiers after such a great victory, Moses was angry with them. They had spared the women and the children. Moses pointed out that these Midianites were the very cause of their sin against God in Peor. Moses commanded the officers to kill every boy and every woman, except the virgin women, whom they could keep for

¹ Deuteronomy 9:3 Understand therefore this day, that the LORD thy God *is* he which goeth over before thee; *as* a consuming fire he shall destroy them, and he shall bring them down before thy face: so shalt thou drive them out, and destroy them quickly, as the LORD hath said unto thee.

Hebrews 12:29 For our God *is* a consuming fire.

themselves. Of course, the men obeyed Moses and did according to His command.

Some people rejected the historicity of the account because of the “barbaric” killing of the Midianites that is inconceivable on the part of a loving God. This view discredits the infallibility and inerrancy of the Word of God. It is admitted that the judgement upon the women and children may appear harsh in our eyes, but we must remember that God look at sin with holy eyes whereas we look at sin with sin stained eyes. The right view of sin must result in this kind of judgement for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The virgin women and the girls were spared. Only the women who were not virgins and boys were put to death. This seemingly difficult problem is not completely insoluble. Firstly, we must understand that God’s moral criterion and man’s criterion are different. When these critics complain that God could not sanction such “barbarism and utter lack of mercy,” they are indeed making God into man’s own image and positing man’s own moral standard higher than that of God’s. If we take this suicidal path, other things in the Bible could also be brought under the same judgement, and soon there will be very little left of the Word of God. God has declared that His thoughts are not man’s thoughts, neither His ways man’s ways. The degree of the differential is immeasurable, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His ways higher than man’s ways, and His thoughts man’s thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Secondly, Moses gave the reason why the women who were

not virgins had to be put to death. These women were the cause of the Israelites’ sin against God. The fact that the male children had to be put to death is that these children when they grow up and nurtured by their mothers would pose a moral and spiritual threat to the new emergent nation of Israel. Moses commanded it. God did not express His disapproval, unlike the incident at Meribah, when God chided Moses for disobeying Him (20:8-12). Moses walked close to God, who spoke to him face to face. In the final analysis, the only way we can understand this is to accept the fact that it is God’s sovereign right to judge His creation, and being all-wise and all-knowing, He does all things well and right. In this present case, He used Israel as the rod of His wrath against a people whose “cup of iniquity was full overflowing.” If we cannot accept this, neither can we understand and accept the eternal punishment on all unbelievers who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Lake of Fire?

The golden rule of interpreting Scripture by an unknown author (The Defined KJB), “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense. Therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise. God, in revealing His Word, neither intends nor permits the reader to be confused. He wants His children to understand.”

The returning soldiers were not permitted to re-enter the camp without the required cleansing ritual. God is holy and He requires

that His children be holy as He is holy. These warriors had come into contact with dead bodies. This made them ceremonially unclean. The law did not allow them to re-enter the camp without being appropriately cleansed. This explains why Moses and Eleazar met the returning soldiers outside the camp. Every soldier including his clothes had to be ritually purified, and the soldiers stayed outside the camp for the mandatory seven days. Every booty that could be purified by fire would have to pass through fire, and those that could not, were to pass through the water.

The Sharing of the Booty

The LORD now spoke to Moses about the distribution of the war booty. The LORD instructed that the sum of the booty be divided into two equal parts to be shared between the soldiers and the rest of the children of Israel. One half was allotted to the soldiers, and the other half to be divided among the children of Israel. Then a tax would be levied upon the soldiers for the LORD, which worked out to be 0.2 percent of their share. This portion was given to Eleazar for a heave offering of the LORD. The tax on the children of Israel would be 2.0 percent of their share. This portion was given to the Levites who kept the charge of the tabernacle of the LORD. Moses and Eleazar did according to the commandment of the LORD.

A principle is established here concerning the distribution of the war booty. The spoils were distributed three ways—the soldiers who went to war, the congregation, and the priests and Levites who served the LORD. It is

interesting and instructive to learn that those who did not go to war were also given a share of the war booty. It must be recognised that while they did not go to war, they played their part behind the scene. One thing that they did was to prepare the warriors before they went to war—preparing the food for them, ensuring they were sufficiently equipped, and gave them the moral encouragement and bidding them God speed.

Then it must be recognised that their victory was solely dependent on the LORD. Not one of the soldiers was killed even though they fought against such great odds. This was clearly an astounding protection only God could give. Therefore the war booty was the LORD'S. The LORD had the right to dispose of it as He desired. This principle of sharing the windfall that God gave to them is a fine lesson for Christians today. Christians should learn to share the blessings God showered upon them with their fellow Christians who are in need. This kind of spirit will remove any trace of unhealthy jealousy and attitude towards one another. Surely this act of generosity and kindness among Christians will delight the LORD and ascend to Him as a sweet savour.

Another valuable truth is that in time of war or the wrath of God, wealth cannot save a person. The vast wealth of the Midianites could not save them. It was worthless. They had to leave them behind and be taken away by others to enjoy. In the day of wrath, the wealth of a person is worthless. Riches profit not in the day of wrath: but righteousness delivers from death (Proverbs 11:4).

Freewill Offering

When the military officers took a count of their men, they found that none of them was killed. The critics charge that this was incredible. The simple explanation is that it was a miracle wrought by the LORD. The LORD supernaturally protected and preserved His people during the war. These military officers, having found that they did not lose a soldier, were filled with gratitude towards God. On top of the tax that was taken from their share, they willingly and gladly gave a thanksgiving offering of the gold ornaments and jewellery which they had taken, to the LORD. Indeed, this is a beautiful and exemplary act on the part of God's children.

The expression "to make an atonement" does not mean in the sense of atoning for their sins or their uncleanness in touching a dead body. Rather it should be understood as an appreciation of their recognition of the LORD who gave them the victory. Moses and Eleazar accepted the offerings and brought them into the tabernacle of the congregation for a memorial. The purpose of a memorial is to provide a permanent reminder to those after them of the incident and also to remind them of the LORD.

SUMMARY

This chapter teaches many valuable lessons. God's sovereignty and rule over His creation is unquestionable. God's judgement of the Midianites demonstrates the great truth that God has mercy on whom He will have mercy. This fundamental truth

should cause man to fear Him and "kiss the Son (Jesus Christ) for if they do not they will perish in His wrath" (Psalm 2:12). Every man every where should repent and obey God's commandment and believe in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave His life that man might live forever!

Today, God does not give the same injunction to His church to declare a holy war against unbelievers. The battles of the Christian church are not flesh and blood, but spiritual powers and personalities in high places of darkness. The sword of the Christian is not made of metal, but it is the Word of God, which is sharper than any two-edged sword. Moreover, God's judgements are still at work today. People still die in the world. Nations rise and fall.

God told Moses that the battle against the Midianites would be his last work on earth and then he would be "gathered unto thy people." Here is a precious and comforting truth. God does not remove His servants until they have completed the work that has been appointed for them to do. This indeed is a great encouragement to God's servants. And when it was the time to go, the spirit of Moses was most exemplary. Paul expressed it succinctly (2 Corinthians 5:8), "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."

Israel was an emergent nation, young and impressionable. The Midianites would be a threat to their spiritual growth. Therefore, it had to be speedily and severely dealt with. This illustrates the need for young Christians or a young church to deal uncompromisingly with sins in their lives and within the church at

the outset. The instant judgement upon the two sons of Aaron when they offered strange fire to the LORD (Lev. 10) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) who were both struck dead for the sin of lying to the Holy Spirit, are two clear examples that support this truth.

The fact that God does not strike people dead immediately whenever they sin, demonstrates His mercy and His desire that the sinner repents. However, that does not remove the fact that God's wrath is no less severe upon those who sin against Him. And if the sinner persists in sinning, God will give them over to a reprobate mind, and eventually and inescapably be cast into the lake of fire forever. For the Christians, it would be His rod of chastisement.

Lastly, the LORD teaches us to recognise that all our possessions and wealth come from Him. Every good and perfect thing come from Him. When He has blessed us with many good things, we must learn to share them willingly and gladly. James Philip aptly comments on the spiritual lesson we should learn, (Philip, Numbers, p.318) "It is almost a truism to say that a thankful heart is a generous heart; perhaps if the church were more conscious of the mercies of God in Christ, there would be more generous and sacrificial giving on the part of His people. The financial problems of any congregation are always, in the last analysis, spiritual." AMEN

DAILY READING & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MONDAY: Numbers 31:1-12; Romans 12:19-20; Ephesians 6:12.²

1. What command did God give to the children of Israel through Moses?

2. What kind of war was it in view of what God told them to do? What were the guidelines for conducting such a war?

3. Why did God command the Israelites to take vengeance upon the Midianites?

²Romans 12:19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but *rather* give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance *is* mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

Ephesians 6:12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*.

TUESDAY: Numbers 31:13-20; Deuteronomy 21:10-14.³

4. Where did Moses and Eleazar, and all the heads of the tribes meet the returning Israeli army? Why?

5. Why was Moses angry with the military officers of the army?

³ Deuteronomy 21:10 When thou goest forth to war against thine enemies, and the LORD thy God hath delivered them into thine hands, and thou hast taken them captive, 11 And seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and hast a desire unto her, that thou wouldest have her to thy wife; 12 Then thou shalt bring her home to thine house; and she shall shave her head, and pare her nails; 13 And she shall put the raiment of her captivity from off her, and shall remain in thine house, and bewail her father and her mother a full month: and after that thou shalt go in unto her, and be her husband, and she shall be thy wife. 14 And it shall be, if thou have no delight in her, then thou shalt let her go whither she will; but thou shalt not sell her at all for money, thou shalt not make merchandise of her, because thou hast humbled her.

6. Was Moses right in ordering the killing of all the women (except those who were virgins) and the male children?

7. What more can we learn about Balaam's work and influence on the Midianites?

WEDNESDAY: Numbers 31:21-24; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 5:26; James 4:8.⁴

⁴ 2 Corinthians 7:1 Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us **cleanse** ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Ephesians 5:26 That he might sanctify and **cleanse** it with the washing of water by the word,

James 4:8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. **Cleanse your** hands, *ye* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *ye* double minded.

8. What important truth do we learn from this seven-day ritual purification?

THURSDAY: Numbers 31:25-41; Joshua 22:8; 1 Samuel 30:24-25.⁵

9. Why did God tell Moses to give half of the war booty to be shared among the children of Israel?

10. What other groups of Israelites were given a portion of the booty, and why?

⁵ Joshua 22:8 And he spake unto them, saying, Return with much riches unto your tents, and with very much cattle, with silver, and with gold, and with brass, and with iron, and with very much raiment: divide the spoil of your enemies with your brethren.

1 Samuel 30:24 For who will hearken unto you in this matter? but as his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff: they shall part alike. 25 And it was so from that day forward, that he made it a statute and an ordinance for Israel unto this day.

FRIDAY: Numbers 31:42-54; Hebrews 13:15-16; 2 Corinthians 9:7.⁶

11. What did the military officers do? What do you say about their action?

12. What do you learn about God in this chapter?

⁶ Hebrews 13:15 By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. 16 But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

2 Corinthians 9:7 Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.