



Numbers - Chapter Thirty One

V Numbers 22:1-36:13 - Israel in the Plains of Moab (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirty One

The Midianites were a group of nomadic tribes who inhabited the deserts on the fringes of Canaan. They were associated with the Ishmaelites, Amalekites, and Moabites. It is the Moabite Midianites who are the target here. Instigated by Balaam, they had seduced the Israelites into worshipping Baal at Peor, so a brief but fierce military campaign is launched against them, for persuading Israelites to worship other gods is a capital offence according to Deuteronomy Chapter 13. As the last campaign led by Moses, this one sets precedents for the coming invasion of the land of Canaan.

V.e Numbers 31:1-54 - Retribution on Midian

Refer to the chapter summary above.

V.e.i Numbers 31:1-12 - War against Midian

This campaign against the Midianites is punishment for their seduction of Israel away from her true husband, the Lord; refer to Numbers 25:1-13.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² 'Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites; afterwards you shall be gathered to your people.' ³ So Moses said to the people, 'Arm some of your number for the war, so that they may go against Midian, to execute the Lord's vengeance on Midian. ⁴ You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war.' ⁵ So out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe were conscripted, twelve thousand armed for battle.

Numbers 31:1-5

Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites. The Midianites were a nomadic people, at this time associated with the people of Moab. They were descended from Abraham through his second wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2). God commanded they be attacked in retribution for their seduction of Israel into sexual immorality and idolatry (Numbers Chapter 25).

Most people are generally uncomfortable with the idea of vengeance because it does not seem consistent with God's love. Yet, in the right context, vengeance is something good that God is interested in. The Scriptures repeatedly speak of the vengeance of God as a positive thing. Evil comes when vengeance is taken into the hands of individuals or nations without the authority of God. In this circumstance, Israel was in a unique place with a special call to be an instrument of God's vengeance. This is something no person should take upon themselves today, knowing that ancient Israel had this unique place in God's plan. So, when God-ordained instruments of authority, such as a government, take appropriate vengeance on evildoers, Christians can be at peace, knowing that good has been done when vengeance has been executed. However, this is always a fine line to tread and it should be in the heart of all Christians to pray that God will guide such governments and that they will be receptive to him.

In fact, God claims vengeance for himself: *<<Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly>> (Deuteronomy 32:35), and confirmed by Paul: <<Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'>> (Romans 12:19). Scripture provides many examples, including: <<She said to him, 'My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the Lord has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites'>> (Judges 11:36), <<May the Lord judge between me and you! May the Lord avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you>> (1 Samuel 24:12), <<The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock, and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation, the God who gave me vengeance and brought down peoples under me>> (2 Samuel 22:47-48), <<Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples>> (Psalm 149:6-7), <<For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of vindication by Zion's cause>> (Isaiah 34:8), <<That day is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of retribution, to gain vindication from his foes. The sword shall devour and be sated, and drink its fill of their blood. For the Lord God of hosts holds a sacrifice in the land of the north by the river Euphrates>> (Jeremiah 46:10), and: <<I will execute great vengeance on them with wrathful punishments. Then they shall know that I am the Lord, when I lay my vengeance on them>> (Ezekiel 25:17).*

Afterwards you shall be gathered to your people. Moses was again reminded that the time of his death was approaching. As it turned out, it was not immediately after this battle, but afterward none the less.

You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war. The burden for warfare, no doubt casualties would be expected although on this occasion there were no deaths recorded, was to be shared equally among the twelve fighting tribes. No account is taken of the fact that some tribes were more numerous than others.

⁶ Moses sent them to the war, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar the priest, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for sounding the alarm in his hand. ⁷ They did battle against Midian, as the Lord had commanded Moses, and killed every male. ⁸ They killed the kings of Midian: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian, in addition to others who were slain by them; and they also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword. ⁹ The Israelites took the women of Midian and their little ones captive; and they took all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods as booty. ¹⁰ All their towns where they had settled, and all their encampments, they burned, ¹¹ but they took all the spoil and all the booty, both people and animals. ¹² Then they brought the captives and the booty and the spoil to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the Israelites, at the camp on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.

Numbers 31:6-12

Phinehas was the one who intervened in Numbers 25:7 and thereby halted the plague provoked by the worship of Baal. He went as chaplain to the army because his father, the high priest, had to keep away from the pollution caused by death in battle. Although the priests and Levites were not called to fight, some of them would inevitably come into close proximity of battle and may have to suffer the consequences along with the fighting men.

The vessels of the sanctuary. It is not clear exactly what is meant, possibly the priestly garments, the ark, plates and cups, or the Urim and Thummim. The ark was located close to a battle on at least one occasion in later years and was taken by the Philistines: <<*The ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died*>> (1 Samuel 4:11).

They did battle against Midian. According to the custom of the day, all the males of the defeated nation were killed and the women and children were taken as servants, with all the possessions being taken as the spoils of war.

The daughter of Zur was killed by Phinehas (Numbers 25:15).

They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword. Balaam, who had masterminded the strategy by which Israel would be seduced into sexual immorality and idolatry, and who did it all for money and honour, was now dead. He was judged by the vengeance of God, and his money did him no good. There is reason why Jude 11 speaks of the error of Balaam for profit; it is just plain error to sell out God for money - there can only ever be one loser. Balaam had desired a righteous death: <<**Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!**>> (Numbers 23:10) But Balaam had no interest in living the life of the righteous, so he died the death of the sinner, in the company of sinners. The apostle too speaks of Balaam's love for money and the effect it still can have: <<**They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam(A) son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness**>> (2 Peter 2:15).

In Numbers 22:5 it was revealed that Balaam lived in Pethor by the River Euphrates and the last time he was recorded in Scripture it seemed to indicate that he was returning there (Numbers 24:25). It may be that he only travelled as far Moab or that he had returned to the region on some other business.

V.e.ii Numbers 31:13-24 - Return from the War

Normally in wars outside Canaan, the women were spared: <<**You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you**>> (Deuteronomy 20:14). However, these women were responsible for seducing the Israelites and they had to be killed. In addition, if every male child was also killed, this would preclude the perpetuation of the Midianite people and eliminate the Midianites as a nation forever. Girls who were virgins (v.18), and who were not involved with the sin of Baal-peor, were allowed to live and marry Israelite warriors.

V.e.ii.1 Numbers 31:13-18 - Moses' Anger with his Officers

Because the leaders of the army had not killed the women responsible for seducing the Israelites Moses went out to meet them as they returned and vented his anger on them, instructing them to kill all the women who were not married and all the male children as well.

¹³ Moses, Eleazar the priest, and all the leaders of the congregation went to meet them outside the camp. ¹⁴ Moses became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war.

¹⁵ Moses said to them, 'Have you allowed all the women to live?

¹⁶ These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the Lord in the affair of Peor, so that the plague

came among the congregation of the Lord. ¹⁷ Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. ¹⁸ But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves.

Numbers 31:13-18

Have you allowed all the women to live? Moses was angry because the children of Israel failed to see the great danger of sexual immorality and idolatry posed by these women who before led the men of Israel into these exact sins.

Christians are often tripped up by things that were a threat but they did not see them as a threat. Although most Israelites thought these women were safe, they were more dangerous to Israel than an army of mighty warriors. Israel could overcome mighty warriors if they were spiritually strong; but if they were seduced into immorality and idolatry, they would certainly fall. Christians often consider many things as being of danger to them such as hostile governments, secular humanism, academic attack, and so forth; yet the things they accept in their midst as Christians that open the door to immorality and idolatry can do far more real damage than any of those other things.

Kill every male among the little ones. It was not just women that were to be killed but male children as well, echoing the decree of Pharaoh against the Hebrews a couple of generations earlier: <<*The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live'*>> (Exodus 1:15-16), who also saw the continuation of the nation as a threat. The reaction of King Herod to have all young boys killed not long after the birth of Jesus was an attempt to rid himself of a different perceived threat: <<*When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men*>> (Matthew 2:16).

But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves. Therefore, every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him was to be killed. But ones who had not been connected with the immorality and idolatry of the Midianites could be kept alive: <<*So you shall purge the evil from your midst*>> (Deuteronomy 13:5b).

V.e.ii.2 Numbers 31:19-24 - Purification for Uncleaness

Although the war had been ordered by God, and such wars are often called 'holy wars,' it nevertheless made the soldiers unclean. They had to undergo sprinkling with the water mixture described in Chapter 19 and wait outside the camp for a week. The spoils of war also had to be purified.

¹⁹ Camp outside the camp for seven days; whoever of you has killed any person or touched a corpse, purify yourselves and your captives on the third and on the seventh day. ²⁰ You shall purify every garment, every article of skin, everything made of goats' hair, and every article of wood.'

Numbers 31:19-20

Camp outside the camp for seven days. Even though they were fighting this battle under the direct commandment of God, their contact with blood and corpses made the men ceremonially unclean. Therefore, they had to remain separated from the rest of the people, and from the immediate presence of God in their camp, until the cleansing process proscribed by law was completed.

You shall purify every garment, every article of skin, everything made of goats' hair, and every article of wood. As well, anything that had come into contact with the Midianites and the spoil taken from them had to be purified: *<<And anything upon which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether an article of wood or cloth or skin or sacking, any article that is used for any purpose; it shall be dipped into water, and it shall be unclean until the evening, and then it shall be clean>>* (Leviticus 11:32). Then it could be used. This is a valid principle to be observed when Christians want to 'plunder' things from the world and use them for the cause of the Gospel, such as music, media, and other things. However, some things cannot be cleansed, and must be disposed of; while other things can be cleansed, and may be used by the people of God for his glory.

²¹ Eleazar the priest said to the troops who had gone to battle: 'This is the statute of the law that the Lord has commanded Moses: ²² gold, silver, bronze, iron, tin, and lead – ²³ everything that can withstand fire, shall be passed through fire, and it shall be clean. Nevertheless it shall also be purified with the water for purification; and whatever cannot withstand fire, shall be passed through the water. ²⁴ You must wash your clothes on the seventh day, and you shall be clean; afterwards you may come into the camp.'

Numbers 31:21-24

Everything that can withstand fire, shall be passed through fire. All the material spoil had to either be purified by fire or cleansed with water. Only then was it fit for use by God among the people of God.

Fire will be God's way of cleansing the souls of the repentant: *<<But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier*

of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness>> (Malachi 3:2-3), and for the condemnation of the wicked: <<For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus>> (2 Thessalonians 1:6-8), <<for indeed our God is a consuming fire>> (Hebrews 12:29).

Whatever cannot withstand fire, shall be passed through the water. God uses the same means to purify believers today - the fire of trials and the water of washing. When God uses the fire of purification, a believer can say with Job: *<<But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold>>* (Job 23:10). The fire purifies precious metal by causing the impurities, i.e. the dross, to rise to the top, where the refiner can skim them away. The refiner can tell when the gold is pure, because he can then see his reflection in the pool of gold. When God wants to wash his people clean, he not only uses the waters of baptism, but also the ministry of the Word as described by Paul: *<<Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word>>* (Ephesians 5:25-26).

V.e.iii Numbers 31:25-54 - Disposition of Captives and Booty

After taking an inventory of all the spoils of war, Moses was to ensure that it was divided evenly between those who had gone out to battle and the rest of the nation of Israel. From each half different proportions were taken as an offering to God and the Levites serving him.

V.e.iii.1 Numbers 31:25-47 - Dividing the Spoils

The initial division of the spoils of war was that half went to the soldiers and half to those who stayed behind. This practice seems to be one that continued in later years: *<<Who would listen to you in this matter? For the share of the one who goes down into the battle shall be the same as the share of the one who stays by the baggage; they shall share alike>>* (1 Samuel 30:24).

From their share of the spoils the soldiers had to give 0.2% to the priests, and from their share the people had to give 2% to the Levites. A similar but smaller ratio is decreed in Numbers 18:26 for the distribution of the tithes: the Levites give one-tenth of the tithe to the priests, which amounts to 0.1%.

²⁵ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁶ ‘You and Eleazar the priest and the heads of the ancestral houses of the congregation make an inventory of the booty captured, both human and animal. ²⁷ Divide the

booty into two parts, between the warriors who went out to battle and all the congregation. ²⁸ From the share of the warriors who went out to battle, set aside as tribute for the Lord one item out of every five hundred, whether persons, oxen, donkeys, sheep, or goats. ²⁹ Take it from their half and give it to Eleazar the priest as an offering to the Lord. ³⁰ But from the Israelites' half you shall take one out of every fifty, whether persons, oxen, donkeys, sheep, or goats – all the animals – and give them to the Levites who have charge of the tabernacle of the Lord.'

³¹ Then Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the Lord had commanded Moses:

³² The booty remaining from the spoil that the troops had taken totalled six hundred and seventy-five thousand sheep, ³³ seventy-two thousand oxen, ³⁴ sixty-one thousand donkeys, ³⁵ and thirty-two thousand persons in all, women who had not known a man by sleeping with him.

³⁶ The half-share, the portion of those who had gone out to war, was in number three hundred and thirty-seven thousand five hundred sheep and goats, ³⁷ and the Lord's tribute of sheep and goats was six hundred and seventy-five. ³⁸ The oxen were thirty-six thousand, of which the Lord's tribute was seventy-two. ³⁹ The donkeys were thirty thousand five hundred, of which the Lord's tribute was sixty-one. ⁴⁰ The persons were sixteen thousand, of which the Lord's tribute was thirty-two persons. ⁴¹ Moses gave the tribute, the offering for the Lord, to Eleazar the priest, as the Lord had commanded Moses.

⁴² As for the Israelites' half, which Moses separated from that of the troops, ⁴³ the congregation's half was three hundred and thirty-seven thousand five hundred sheep and goats, ⁴⁴ thirty-six thousand oxen, ⁴⁵ thirty thousand five hundred donkeys, ⁴⁶ and sixteen thousand persons. ⁴⁷ From the Israelites' half Moses took one of every fifty, both of persons and of animals, and gave them to the Levites who had charge of the tabernacle of the Lord; as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Numbers 31:25-47

Divide the booty into two parts, between the warriors who went out to battle and all the congregation. Customarily, the spoil belonged to the soldiers alone but God did not want soldiers who were looters or pirates. So he commanded that they also grant some of the spoil to the people of Israel who were not required to fight.

V.e.iii.2 Numbers 31:48-54 - Head Count and Atonement

A check on the numbers returning from battle revealed no losses. But conducting a census demands the payment of ransom, normally half a silver shekel per head (Exodus 30:11-16). On this occasion they dedicate all the gold captured from the Midianites, 16,750 gold shekels, on behalf of 12,000 warriors (v.5). The gold may have been made into vessels for the tabernacle; at any rate it served to remind God of Israel's generosity and to ward off a plague, which a census could provoke: *<<So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand of the people died, from Dan to Beer-sheba>>* (2 Samuel 24:15).

⁴⁸ Then the officers who were over the thousands of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, approached Moses, ⁴⁹ and said to Moses, 'Your servants have counted the warriors who are under our command, and not one of us is missing. ⁵⁰ And we have brought the Lord's offering, what each of us found, articles of gold, armlets and bracelets, signet rings, ear-rings, and pendants, to make atonement for ourselves before the Lord.' ⁵¹ Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from them, all in the form of crafted articles. ⁵² And all the gold of the offering that they offered to the Lord, from the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, was sixteen thousand seven hundred and fifty shekels. ⁵³ (The troops had all taken plunder for themselves.) ⁵⁴ So Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from the commanders of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the tent of meeting as a memorial for the Israelites before the Lord.

Numbers 31:48-54

Not one of us is missing. It can only be a miracle of God that the Israelites did not lose a single soldier in this battle of thousands. It is probably that there were those who were wounded but no deaths is truly amazing in such a battle.

And all the gold of the offering that they offered to the Lord. A portion of the spoil also was to be given to the Lord. Even with the spoils of war, God wanted Israel to have the heart of givers.