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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

A TASTE OF SETTLEMENT (31:1–32:42)

The Place of the Passage

The stubborn generation is gone, and a faithful generation has arisen. In this passage, Moses begins to prepare the new generation to enter and settle the land. He teaches them the conduct of war (Numbers 31:1–54) and the rules of settlement after conquest (32:1–42). Many features in this passage are troubling to some readers. War is always a terrible matter, and aspects of its prosecution openly recorded in these paragraphs are intended to sober us. There are always two sides to every work of judgment: visiting the wicked with condemnation and visiting the righteous with their reward. The conquest of Canaan shows both sides of God's judgment. These events in Canaan serve to foreshadow what God will one day bring about in his final judgment upon the whole world. As we study this passage, God's Word sobers and comforts us in preparation for that coming consummation of his kingdom.

The Big Picture

God's judgment brings condemnation to the unrepentant and rest to those forgiven through his atonement.

Gospel Glimpses

JUDGMENT SATISFIED. God's judgments show no partiality or respect for persons (Romans 2:6–11). When Israel sins with Midian, the same judgment is deserved by both nations. God's justice will not make exceptions for Israel. The entire nation of Israel—beginning with its leaders—deserves to perish, and God begins a plague to bring that about (Numbers 25:4–5, 9). But the people of Israel repent,¹ and one of the priests executes atonement among them (25:10–13). Thus God's judgment against Israel is fully satisfied (25:8). In the judgment thereafter executed upon Midian for their role in this evil, all of Midian perishes but not a single person further among Israel dies (31:49). Such a result illustrates the full satisfaction provided through the priestly atonement on behalf of the penitent, who would otherwise deserve judgment just as the world does.

Whole Bible Connections

MIDIAN. The man for whom the Midianite peoples were named was one of the sons of Abraham by Keturah. Like the other sons of Abraham by Keturah, Midian was given his inheritance and sent to the lands of the east so that Isaac alone of Abraham's children would continue to sojourn in Canaan (Genesis 25:1–6). Later sections of Scripture identify a number of geographically separate settlements as

comprising “Midianites”. In several of those texts, Midianites are associated with trading caravans. Some scholars conclude that the Midianites were not confined to a certain territory but may have spread out into several different centers from which they operated trading caravans. If this is correct, it would explain why Moses’ own wife came from a Midianite settlement located in Sinai (Exodus 2:16); why Moses’ brother-in-law (as part of a caravanning people) would have known routes and ideal staging locations and so served as an excellent guide for Moses (Numbers 10:31); and why, despite the complete annihilation of the Transjordan Midianites in Numbers 31, another Midianite population appears later in history to harass Israel in the time of Gideon (Judges 6).

TRANSJORDAN ISRAEL. The borders of the land of promise were natural borders. Its western border was the Mediterranean Sea coast. Its southern border was the Negeb Desert. Its northern border was the mountains of Lebanon. Its eastern border was the Arabah—that part of the Rift Valley in which water from Mount Hermon pooled in the Sea of Galilee and flowed through the Jordan River into the Dead Sea. When the tribes of Reuben and Gad request to settle in territory on the east side of the Jordan, they are initially proposing settlement in a land naturally defined as a separate domain and outside of the Promised Land, thus implying their willingness to be considered a separate people (32:5–7). However, an arrangement is agreed upon whereby Reuben and Gad would remain united with the rest of Israel and continue to participate in the national life of Israel. But the Jordan River would continue to inject a natural boundary between the Transjordan tribes and those inside Canaan. After the conquest was finished, questions about the nation’s unity across that border would emerge and require reaffirmation (Joshua 22:10–34).

Theological Soundings

HUMILITY. The initial settlement proposal of Reuben and Gad was poorly considered and would have brought disaster upon the whole nation. Moses was angry with the leaders of those two tribes and he vigorously rebuked them. If they were to continue on this path, they would “increase still more the fierce anger of the Lord against Israel!” (32:14). When Moses brought such rebukes against the previous generation, the heads of Israel consistently dug in their heels and persisted in their pride. But the humility of the new generation of Israel’s leaders is remarkable. Even though their plans have been published, the elders of Reuben and Gad have the humility to abandon their direction and to develop a new proposal based on the correction Moses gives them. The grace of humility is an important feature of the Christian faith.

Glossary of Terms

PENITENCE. The condition of being repentant and sorrowful for wrongdoing.

REPENTANCE. A complete change of heart and mind regarding one’s overall attitude toward God or one’s individual actions. True regeneration and conversion is always accompanied by repentance.

Please answer the following questions:

Numbers Chapter 31

1. Who were the Israelites to fight against before Moses died? (1-3)
2. How many kings of Midian were killed? (8)
3. Who else was killed with the sword? (8)
4. Why was Moses angry when the army returned? (14-16)
5. What else did the soldiers capture besides people? (32-35)
6. In a previous passage, we read that the Moabites and the Midianites worked together to undermine Israel (22:7). The Moabite plot was to curse Israel, but that plot failed (22:8–24:25). The Midianite strategy was to entice Israel to intermarry with them and to worship their gods (25:1–3). That plot nearly succeeded, and the Lord judged Israel for sinning with Midian. He would have utterly destroyed Israel had not Phineas the priest interceded (25:7–13). Only after Israel's judgment was satisfied through atonement did the Lord call for the judgment of Midian. Who was the offended party in Midian's sin?
7. Midian had deployed its women to seduce Israel. Therefore, Midian's women will share in heaven's justice. In fact, the execution formula in 31:17–18 will bring the full end of all Midianite households. By sparing only unmarried girls, the design is to ensure that the name of Midian comes to a final end. What should such finality teach us about the seriousness of idolatry?

8. Normally, warriors kept victory spoils for themselves. But the Lord gives Moses different instructions for dividing the Midianite plunder and for ritually purifying it. How do these patterns of distribution guard against greed and promote worship instead?

Numbers Chapter 32

1. In this passage, we learn something remarkable about the new generation: they are teachable. The previous generation always stiffened their neck and resisted correction; in this new generation, the leaders of Reuben and Gad accept rebuke and change course. What, specifically, is the original proposal made by these tribal leaders (1-5)?
2. Why did Moses at first deny their request? (6-15)
3. What did the Reubenites and Gadites offer to do if Moses would grant their request (16-19)
4. What other tribe was given land east of Jordan? (33)
5. Under the revised plan, the Reubenites and Gadites will lead the invasion effort (17). Because these two tribes of fighting men will not have families or livestock in tow, they will be able to serve as shock troops at the head of the invasion force. What does this surprising twist illustrate about negotiating with an openness to rebuke and a humble willingness to modify one's plans?