

The End of the Road (Numbers 31-36)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

I. Introduction

- a. We have come to the end of the book of **Numbers**. At the end of the 40 years in the Wilderness, Moses has handed off leadership responsibility to Joshua. His death is approaching, after which Joshua will be the one to lead the Israelites across the Jordan River and into Canaan, the Promised Land.
- b. The Israelites have faced the last major trial in the Wilderness, in which their men were drawn into sexual immorality and idolatry with the Moabite (or Midianite) women, in **Numbers 25**.
 - i. Because of that sin, 24,000 Israelites died. It was only stopped by the bold action of Phinehas. As a reward for his zeal, the Lord granted him and his descendants the “covenant of peace”, the high priesthood.
- c. The Lord told Moses to conduct a second census of the people, approximately 40 years after the first census.
- d. While I encourage everyone to read through all of the text of **Numbers**, our practice in this expository teaching series has been to focus on things of practical concern.
 - i. That includes moral lessons for us, connections to New Testament teachings, prophecies and foreshadowings.
 - ii. We plan to continue that approach in the current lesson and focus here on a few key points embedded in the last six chapters.

II. The Defeat of the Midianites

- a. Read **Numbers 31:1-12**.
 - i. From the opening line of this passage, it sounds as if this is the last major assignment that the Lord asks Moses to do before his death.
 1. The Lord tells Moses that after he “exact vengeance from the Midianites”, he will be “added to [his] people”. (**Numbers 31:2**)
 2. The Israelites are commanded to enter into battle against Midian, to “repay vengeance from the Lord” upon them. They are to be the agents of God’s judgment and wrath upon the Midianites.

- ii. **Question:** Why such a strong judgment against the Midianites? Why did the Lord direct that they be wiped out like this?
 - 1. This goes back to the story of **Numbers 25**, where 24,000 Israelites died in a plague due to committing sexual immorality and idolatry with the Moabite women.
 - 2. Read **Numbers 25**.
 - a. The Lord called the Israelites to be at enmity with the Midianites because of their treachery and deceit in getting the Israelite men involved in sexual immorality, as well as idolatry with Baal of Peor. (**Numbers 25:16-17**)
 - 3. Note that the Midianites will become bitter enemies threatening the Jews later on in Canaan, throughout the book of **Judges**.
 - iii. Phinehas is given a prominent role in the battle against Midian.
 - 1. Recall that Phinehas was honored by the Lord with the high priesthood, for what he did in boldly confronting serious sin, even in the family of a leader, in **Numbers 25**.
 - iv. Balaam the prophet was among those slain with the Midianites.
 - v. The Israelites prevail in the battle. They kill all the men, but take the women, cattle and other plunder and return to meet Moses, Eleazar the high priest and the rest of the Israelites.
- b. Read **Numbers 31:13-18**.
- i. Moses is upset with the returning Israelite warriors, when he sees that they have taken all the Midianite women captive. The Midianite women were the ones who had seduced the Israelite men at Baal Peor into sexual immorality and idolatry, which was the reason for God's judgment on that nation.
 - ii. Here we also learn an important detail about the last days of Balaam, the prophet.
 - 1. "For *on account of Balaam's counsel*, they [the Midianite women] were with the sons of Israel and caused them to depart from and despise the Lord's word in the incident at Peor, when there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord." (**Numbers 31:16**)

2. Recall that when we first encountered Balaam in a prior message in this series, I described him as *an unusually complex character*, in the sense that his spiritual journey, as recorded in the Scriptures, can be described by four phases:
 - a. He started off 'good' (declines to take money to curse Israel); then
 - b. Turned 'bad' (when the Angel of the Lord approaches him to slay him in the incident with the talking donkey; then
 - c. Turned 'good' again (after repenting, refusing to curse Israel and uttering great Spirit-inspired prophecies about Jesus); but finally...
 - d. Ended his life '*very bad*' (*teaching the Midianites to seduce the Israelite men, and pulling them away from the Lord to worship the Baal of Peor*).
- iii. Jesus referred to this passage when he addressed the church in Pergamum, one of the seven churches of Asia Minor, addressed in **Revelation 2-3**.

1. Read **Revelation 2:12-17**.

- a. They live in a city "where Satan's throne is... where Satan dwells", and where the church had seen persecution and martyrdom. Jesus saw and appreciated that.
- b. **Question:** What do you think about that reference to Satan? Do you think he has his throne, or special stronghold, in certain cities? If so, which ones?
 - i. This lesson is being presented live in Wakefield, Massachusetts, in the Greater Boston area. From this location, we are only about 10 miles (16km) north of Boston and 10 miles west of Salem, Massachusetts.
 - ii. The City of Salem, Massachusetts, the scene of the infamous witch trials (1692-1693), is today the world headquarters of The Satanic Temple (TST). Later this month (April 28-30, 2023, coinciding with the Germanic pagan celebration of 'Witches Night'), Boston will be host to 'SatanCon 2023'. That event is being promoted

as “the largest satanic gathering in history”, and “a weekend of blasphemy and remembrance”.

1. Some evangelical Christian groups will be holding a counter-convention and revival/outreach in Boston that same weekend. So, it could be an interesting month here in Boston!
- c. It is a good idea, whenever engaged in a battle, to *know your enemy*. The modern strategy of TST (one of the fastest-growing religious movements today) includes the following:
- i. They teach that Satan is not real; and neither is God. Hell is not real, either. There is no belief in the supernatural.
 - ii. TST’s approach features an extremely anti-Christian and secular humanistic approach.
 - iii. Satan is advanced, even among school children with ‘afterschool Satan Clubs’, as an ‘imaginary friend’ who just wants you to be whatever you want to be and to do whatever you want to do.
 - iv. Their agenda includes challenging gender identity, LGBTQ+, and abortion as a ‘sacrament’.
 - v. [NOTE: Some Christians and ex-Satan followers believe that the higher-ups in groups like this do indeed believe that Satan is real, but are using this anti-supernatural approach to make it more palatable to the masses.]
- d. “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold *the doctrine of Balaam*, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.” (**Revelation 2:14**, NKJV)
- i. Interesting to me that in this city where Satan has his throne, there are some members of the church who are following in the footsteps of Balaam.
 - ii. They are corrupting God’s people by enticing them into sexual immorality and idolatry.

- iv. Some takeaways for us from the demise of Balaam include:
1. People who have been used by God to do great things can go bad, sometimes, even *very bad*. Therefore, we should not be surprised when we see things like that happen.
 - a. The New Testament is full of warnings, and the Old Testament has plenty of examples as well.
 - b. It should not damage our faith when we see powerful spiritual leaders fall. Our faith must be based on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
 - i. Our Christian faith should not be based on other people we may look up to, whether other Christians or leaders of religious movements.
 2. We are in the midst of a spiritual war zone. Being non-resistant does not mean being passive conflict-avoiders. Men of God are called to be spiritual warriors like Phinehas was.
 - a. However, we no longer use the old weapons of sword and spear. We now fight a different war against the unseen forces of evil, using different offensive weapons (speaking the truth, confessing and exposing sin, prayer, church discipline, etc.).
 3. Satan is real and always at work.
 - a. He can even work *through other people*, as he did in the case of Judas. (**Luke 22:3**)
 - b. “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary *the devil walks about like a roaring lion*, seeking whom he may devour.” (**1 Peter 5:8**, NKJV)
 - c. As Paul reminds us, we are not ignorant of Satan’s devices. (**2 Corinthians 2:11**)
- c. Read **Numbers 31:20-24**.
- i. The returning soldiers met Moses and Eleazar outside the camp. The men (who have killed or who have touched someone killed) are *unclean*, as are their captives and the plunder.
 - ii. Everything unclean must be purified.
 1. The metals must be put through *fire* to be purified.

2. People, garments, wood objects and other things that cannot pass through fire must be purified by the *water of purification*.
 - a. Note that we discussed early Christian insights regarding the water of purification in a prior message in this expository series: '*Tithes and the Red Heifer (Numbers 18-19)*'
- iii. This reminds me of the purification and refinement process that we also must go through.
 1. Purification involving water (baptism). Note that many significant things happen for Christians in water baptism, one of which is *spiritual purification*.
 - a. "...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and *our bodies washed with pure water.*" (**Hebrews 10:22**, NKJV)
 - b. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. *But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." (**1 Corinthians 6:9-11**, NKJV)
 - c. "...not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the *washing of regeneration* and renewing of the Holy Spirit...." (**Titus 3:5**, NKJV)
 - d. Ananias told Paul: "And now why are you waiting? Arise and *be baptized, and wash away your sins*, calling on the name of the Lord." (**Acts 22:16**, NKJV)
 2. Purification involving fire (suffering). For those who have already been through the purification by water (Christian baptism), we still have one more type of purification to undergo. Scriptures that refer to us being refined by the fire of suffering include:
 - a. "'Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, Against the Man who is My Companion,' Says the LORD of hosts. 'Strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered;

Then I will turn My hand against the little ones. And it shall come to pass in all the land,' Says the LORD, 'That two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, But one-third shall be left in it: I will bring the one-third through the fire, Will refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them. I will say, "This is My people"; And each one will say, "The LORD is my God."'" (**Zechariah 13:7-9**, NKJV)

- i. Note that the first part of this passage reads "strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered" in the Hebrew Text, and also in the Alexandrian text of the LXX; however, in other LXX texts, it does not match **Matthew 26:31**.
 - ii. The remnant of God's people will be refined in the fire, as are silver and gold (to remove the impurities). This sounds like we should expect it to be a painful process.
- b. Peter, speaking about the hope we Christians have, wrote:
- i. "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, *that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.*" (**1 Peter 1:6-9**, NKJV)
 - ii. "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the *fiery trial* which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." (**1 Peter 4:12-13**, NKJV)
- c. In **Hebrews 5**, the **Hebrews** writer explains that although Jesus was a Son, he had to learn obedience through suffering and was made perfect (= complete)

through the suffering He endured. Then later in the book, the writer turns to us to make the same point:

- i. Read **Hebrews 12:1-13**.
 - ii. We also will be perfected by God through suffering for righteousness sake.
3. **Question:** For those of us who already have been “purified by water”, what should we now expect?
- a. **Answer:** We can expect *further purification* through the fire of suffering, and trials of all kinds.
 - b. That is how Jesus was made perfect. We should expect the same.
 - c. Do not resist or shrink back in discouragement when suffering and trials come in this life (temptations, struggles, illness, losses, betrayals, financial setbacks, etc.)
 - d. We are undergoing the second part of purification: through the fire!

III. Division of Plunder from War, Gifts to the Lord

- a. Overview of the division of the plunder of war. (**Numbers 31:25-35**)
- b. Instructions regarding the Lord’s portion and the portion for the Levites. (**Numbers 31:36-54**)

IV. Division of Land East of the Jordan River (Numbers 32)

- a. 2-1/2 Tribes will end up settling on the east side of the Jordan River.
 - i. The tribes of Reuben and Gad, as well as half of the tribe of Manasseh.
- b. They ask Moses if they can just stay on the eastern side (and not cross over with their brothers).
- c. Agreement is reached whereby they will establish homes and sheep pens, etc., on the east side, but men of war will cross over the Jordan to help their brothers take Canaan, before returning home to the east.

V. Recounting the Stages of the Journey (Numbers 33)

- a. The journey is documented, including places where the Israelites encamped in the Wilderness. (**Numbers 33:1-48**)

- i. It mentions that Aaron died on Mount Hor at the age of 123, in the 40th year of the exodus. (**Numbers 33:38-39**)
- b. Read **Numbers 33:50-56**.
 - i. Warnings and instructions are given to Moses, for him to pass on to the Israelites. This is regarding what they are to do when they enter the Promised Land.
 - ii. They are told to destroy the people of Canaan and all their idols.
 - 1. They are warned that *if they do not do this*, those people shall remain “thorns in their eyes and arrows in their sides”. Also, the Lord will treat them as He was planning to treat their enemies.
 - iii. It is important for us to understand this warning (which later was not heeded) to grasp what will follow in Old Testament history.
 - iv. Note that God is not ‘controlling’ in how He treats people. God gives His people instructions, as well as free choice (whether to obey or not). Furthermore, He warns them in advance of the outcome *if they disobey the Lord*.
 - 1. If we are wise, we will learn from the examples of those who have gone before us and not repeat their mistakes!

VI. Instructions Regarding Boundaries of Canaan (Numbers 34)

- a. Outlines boundaries of Canaan (between Jordan River and the Great Sea) for the 9-1/2 tribes who will settle there.

VII. Cities for Levites, and Cities of Refuge (Numbers 35)

- a. The Levites, unlike the other tribes, would not be assigned a specific territory. Instead, they were to have 6 cities of refuge, plus 42 more cities (therefore 48 total).
- b. If someone killed another person accidentally (not premeditated murder), they could flee to a ‘city of refuge’ and be safe from an avenging relative of the deceased. The person guilty of manslaughter could remain there until the death of the high priest, at which time they could return to their land.
- c. For the death penalty, you needed to have more than one witness.
 - i. Similarly, in a related discussion in **Deuteronomy 19:15**, it says, “by the mouth of two or three witnesses it shall be established”, which is the basis for that reference regarding church discipline in **Matthew 18:16** and in **1 Timothy 5:19**.

d. Read **Numbers 35:33-34**.

- i. Beautiful picture of God's desire that the land not be defiled, so that he could "tabernacle/tent among them".
- ii. See a similar passage in **Revelation 21:1-3**.
 1. God still calls His people to be a holy people.
 2. He still longs to dwell (to 'tent' or 'tabernacle') in the midst of His people!

VIII. Land Inheritance Laws for Women (Numbers 36)

- a. This provides further clarification of what was addressed in **Numbers 27:1-11**.
- b. Daughters of Zelophehad, whose father had no sons, must marry within their tribe in order to maintain land inheritance.

IX. Closing Comments on this Series from Numbers

- a. **Numbers** is an important book that all Christians should strive to read and understand.
 - i. Jesus assumes we know details of the stories in this book.
 1. He pointed to the bronze serpent story in **John 3** (from **Numbers 21**).
 2. He pointed to Balaam's example in **Revelation 2** (from **Numbers 25** and **31**).
 - ii. Peter, Paul and Jude also point to aspects of this story to make practical applications for us.
 1. **1 Corinthians 10**: this is the map of the Christian life!
 2. Joshua and Caleb are examples for us to follow.
 - a. The others (600,000+) are warnings!
 - iii. We see Jesus throughout the story, revealed in many ways, including:
 1. Joshua/Jesus (the name, sheep without shepherd, completer of what Moses started);
 2. The bronze (or copper) serpent that was lifted up; and
 3. Prophecies in Balaam's oracles.

- iv. Dangers of various sins, including:
 - 1. Complaining (which Israel fell into throughout their journey),
 - 2. Faithlessness (10 spies who only saw the obstacles and challenges),
 - 3. Rebellion (Miriam and Aaron, Korah's rebellion),
 - 4. Sexual immorality (with the Midianite women), and
 - 5. Disobedience (Moses striking the rock, etc.).
- v. Here we also found inspiring, heroic examples to follow, such as:
 - 1. Phinehas (given the priesthood for his zeal for righteousness),
 - 2. Joshua and Caleb (for their courage and faithfulness), and
 - 3. Moses (who truly demonstrated the heart of a good shepherd).