

Israel Takes Vengeance for the Lord upon Midian

Numbers 31

Numbers 31 - *“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ² “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the children of Israel. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people.”*

³ *So Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Arm some of yourselves for war, and let them go against the Midianites to take vengeance for the LORD on Midian. ⁴ A thousand from each tribe of all the tribes of Israel you shall send to the war.”*

⁵ *So there were recruited from the divisions of Israel one thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war. ⁶ Then Moses sent them to the war, one thousand from each tribe; he sent them to the war with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the holy articles and the signal trumpets in his hand. ⁷ And they warred against the Midianites, just as the LORD commanded Moses, and they killed all the males. ⁸ They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of those who were killed—Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. Balaam the son of Beor they also killed with the sword.*

⁹ *And the children of Israel took the women of Midian captive, with their little ones, and took as spoil all their cattle, all their flocks, and all their goods. ¹⁰ They also burned with fire all the cities where they dwelt, and all their forts. ¹¹ And they took all the spoil and all the booty—of man and beast.*

¹² *Then they brought the captives, the booty, and the spoil to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the children of Israel, to the camp in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho. ¹³ And Moses, Eleazar the priest, and all the leaders of the congregation, went to meet them outside the camp. ¹⁴ But Moses was angry with the officers of the army, with the captains over thousands and captains over hundreds, who had come from the battle.*

¹⁵ *And Moses said to them: “Have you kept all the women alive? ¹⁶ Look, these women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague 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 intimately. ¹⁸ But keep alive for yourselves all the young girls who have not known a man intimately. ¹⁹ And as for you, remain outside the camp seven days; whoever has killed any person, and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves and your captives on the third day and on the seventh day. ²⁰ Purify every garment, everything made of leather, everything woven of goats’ hair, and everything made of wood.”*

²¹ *Then Eleazar the priest said to the men of war who had gone to the battle, “This is the ordinance of the law which the LORD commanded Moses: ²² Only the gold, the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead, ²³ everything that can endure fire, you shall put through the fire, and it shall be clean; and it shall be purified with the water of purification. But all that cannot endure fire you shall put through water. ²⁴ And you shall wash your clothes on the seventh day and be clean, and afterward you may come into the camp.”*

²⁵ *Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²⁶ “Count up the plunder that was taken—of man and beast—you and Eleazar the priest and the chief fathers of the congregation; ²⁷ and divide the plunder into two parts, between those who took part in the war, who went out to battle, and all the congregation. ²⁸ And levy a tribute for the LORD on the men of war who went out to battle: one of every five hundred of the persons, the cattle, the donkeys, and the sheep; ²⁹ take it from their half, and give it to Eleazar the priest as a heave offering to the LORD. ³⁰ And from the children of Israel’s half you shall*

take one of every fifty, drawn from the persons, the cattle, the donkeys, and the sheep, from all the livestock, and give them to the Levites who keep charge of the tabernacle of the LORD.”³¹ So Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the LORD commanded Moses...

⁴¹ So Moses gave the tribute which was the LORD’s heave offering to Eleazar the priest, as the LORD commanded Moses...

⁴⁸ Then the officers who were over thousands of the army, the captains of thousands and captains of hundreds, came near to Moses;⁴⁹ and they said to Moses, “Your servants have taken a count of the men of war who are under our command, and not a man of us is missing.⁵⁰ Therefore we have brought an offering for the LORD, what every man found of ornaments of gold: armlets and bracelets and signet rings and earrings and necklaces, to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD.”⁵¹ So Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from them, all the fashioned ornaments.⁵² And all the gold of the offering that they offered to the LORD, from the captains of thousands and captains of hundreds, was sixteen thousand seven hundred and fifty shekels.⁵³ (The men of war had taken spoil, every man for himself.)⁵⁴ And Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the tabernacle of meeting as a memorial for the children of Israel before the LORD.”

Background Notes

Going to war against the Midianites was Moses’ last official duty. The Lord commanded Israel to go to war against the Midianites because they had joined with the Moabites in seducing Israel, God’s people, to sin (Numbers 25). Phinehas the priest was given the leadership position in this war against the Midianites. Back in Numbers 25, Phinehas was instrumental in stopping the plague when he executed the Israeli man and the Moabite woman who were openly involved in sexual sin.

Balaam, of all people, was killed in this battle (31:8). Wait a minute! Didn’t Balaam return to Mesopotamia after he failed to curse Israel for King Balak of Moab? Well, apparently Balaam came back to Moab. In fact, he gave Balak the idea to seduce the men of Israel by having the women of Moab and Midian invite them to an immoral, idolatrous orgy. *“They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor...”* (v16). So Balaam was killed in Israel’s battle with the Midianites.

Two questions often come up when reading this chapter.

1. If all the Midianite males were killed, young and old alike (v7 & 17), then where did all the Midianite soldiers come from at the time of Gideon, about 250 years later? (Remember, Gideon fought and defeated the Midianites at the time of Judges.) One answer is that there were several clans of Midianites, and thus Numbers 31 doesn’t refer to all Midianites. Another possible answer is that Israel failed to carry out the execution of all the males, as they were commanded.
2. The other question concerns the character of God. How could a good, loving God direct the Israelites to kill **all** these people, including **all** the male babies? The answer to that question brings us to our first doctrinal point.

Doctrinal Points

1. The defeat of the Midianites was the Lord's vengeance on Midian.

Romans 12:19 says, "...do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." We have an illustration of that biblical principle here in Numbers 31. Israel was not taking its own revenge on the Midianites. God was avenging Himself because of what the Midianites had done to Israel, leading them away from the Lord into idolatry and immorality. This was "holy war." This was God's execution of the guilty.

All the Midianite males were to be killed, so that Midian would no longer be a threat to Israel's physical and spiritual well being. The virgin girls were to be kept alive because they had obviously not been involved in the fornication at Peor. Presumably they became proselytes and married Israeli men.

As to the execution of the so-called "innocent" male babies, let me say two things. First, the Bible teaches that **no one** is "innocent." The entire human race is guilty before God. We are all born with sinful natures, so no one is "born innocent." God would be just in executing every one of us! It is only by God's grace that **anyone** is saved!

Second, I believe that we see a measure of God's grace here. Let me ask you - Where are those executed babies now? We can't be dogmatic, but I believe that they are in the presence of the Lord. Did you ever think of that? A pretty good biblical case can be built for the idea that babies who die before the age of responsibility are part of God's elect company. After all, Jesus died for their sins, and they didn't reject God. In eternity, I believe that every one of those babies will praise God that they died before they grew up and rejected the one true God! Although we can't be dogmatic about this, it's something to think about.

In any case, the defeat of the Midianites was the Lord's vengeance on Midian.

2. The defeat of the Midianites was the Lord's provision for Israel.

In verses 25-47 we see that quite a bit of plunder or booty was taken in the Midianite war. This plunder was to be divided equally between those who actually fought in the battle and those who stayed at home. This is a biblical principle. David practiced this principle in 1 Samuel 30.

Serving the Lord behind the scenes is just as important as serving the Lord on the front lines of the battle. Where and how we serve the Lord is determined by what the Lord calls each one of us to do. However, no matter where or how we serve the Lord, we all share in the blessing of the Lord's work!

A certain percentage of the booty or plunder was to be given to the Lord. The soldiers' percentage was given to the priests for the Lord's work (v41). The percentage from the rest of the people was given to the Levites for the Lord's work (v47). The young women who were "given to the Lord" would have been dedicated to the Lord's service, to help with the

work associated in maintaining the Tabernacle and the worship of Israel. Most of them would have grown up to love the Lord, and most of them, in time, probably married Israeli men. Most of the the priests and Levites in Israel were married.

So the defeat of the Midianites was the Lord's vengeance on Midian, and the Lord's provision for Israel.

Practical Application

Why not give more than what is required?

The children of Israel could keep the plunder they had taken from the Midianites, as long as they purified it by washing it or sending it through the fire (v20-24). At the end of the chapter, the soldiers brought some of this loot in gold and gave it to the Lord. 16,750 shekels - about 420 pounds of gold! The soldiers brought this generous offering to the Lord with thanksgiving because not a single man was lost in the battle. This gift of gold was not required. It was **over and above** what was required.

Many of you have determined before the Lord to give Him a certain percentage of your income, and this is right and good. In fact, you probably don't view the portion you set aside for the Lord as an "option" - you see it as an important "requirement." And that's **good** - but there's no law against giving **more** than what's required! If the Lord has blessed you financially, why not give **more** than what's "required"?