

February 12

Numbers 25 & 31

Chapter 31 raises for us a very difficult issue, in the very first verse, in which we are told that the Lord said to Moses, *"Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites."* That doesn't sound quite right to us - the very word 'vengeance' seems somehow wrong and wholly inappropriate to God, and yet that is what God said to Moses. Our perplexity grows even more in our reading, as we understand that not only were all the soldiers of Midian killed but all the women who were not virgins and all of the boys as well. This seems so hard and so horrible to us that we shrink away from it. As we move through the Old Testament and come to the Book of Joshua, we are going to be confronted with the question of war and the people of God. I am not sure that we will ever be completely comfortable with chapters like this one, but there are a number of observations that I think we need to make here.

The first is this. Many people have attempted to sweep away the problem by saying that the Old Testament morality of Moses, Joshua and David is somehow inferior to or less highly evolved than the morality of the New Testament. So what we have in Numbers 31 is a 'pre-Christian' or even a 'sub-Christian' perspective. I think that you will quickly see that this kind of explanation has some major problems - not the least of which is the observation that, if that is true, then either God did not tell the Israelites to take this action (that would make the Bible mistaken or lying about this and all that occurred), or God changed (or evolved) between the time of Moses and Christ. Maybe you can live with that explanation, but I certainly cannot. *"I am the Lord, I do not change,"* God says, and unless that is true, we do not have much left upon which to build.

'But,' someone might well object, 'God is a God of love and I do not see much love in Numbers 31'. That may be so, but we dare not read Numbers 31 in isolation from the rest of Scripture that tells us, among other things, that all of God's attributes are held in tension with one another. God is love - so says the book of I John and so says the Book of Exodus and so says the Book of Numbers. But God is also holy and just at the very same time, and the very same dynamics that we saw in operation in the sixth chapter of the Book of Genesis, in the story of Noah and the flood, are back in operation here. The Midianite civilization was, like the civilization of the Canaanite people across the river, a civilization in rebellion against God. They were an idolatrous nation who had forsaken the worship of the one true God for the worship of Baal. They were a morally bankrupt civilization given to all kinds of sexual immorality. The attempt to destroy Israel by luring them first into sexual immorality and then into idolatry had been Balaam's idea (and verse 8 tell us he too died in this battle) but the women who were killed were the ones who had put that strategy into operation.

More than that, God had for many years put off the judgment on the nations that Moses and Joshua were coming against. All the way back in Genesis 15, we found God saying to Abraham that one of the reasons that the children of Israel were going to have to spend 400 years in Egypt was because the wickedness of the nations in and around the Promised Land was not yet complete. Because of his longsuffering

patience, God was giving them yet more time and opportunity to repent. But finally when patience has had its due, there comes a time for justice and for judgment.

That brings us to the next important point. The "vengeance" being meted out was justice - God's justice and judgment - not man's revenge, and it was not only for the sin of opposing Israel and seducing them into idolatry that the Midianites were being judged, but for their whole history of idolatry, sin and rebellion against God.

I know that for many of us the whole idea of a "just war" will continue to be a troubling one, but the war against Midian was a just war - not so much between Israel and Midian, as between God and the Midianites.

You would think that after all they had seen in the wilderness - and all of the plagues and judgments brought upon them by the wrath of a Holy God whose sense of holiness had been offended - that Israel would have learned that if you want a Holy God to live in your midst and bless your life and walk, you have to maintain a lifestyle of obedience and holiness yourself. They should have learned that - they could have learned that - but after all this time they still had not learned that.

God protects their integrity and keeps them from being cursed by foiling the plans of Balak and Balaam, and then they turn right around and compromise themselves by sleeping with the Moabite women, who then invite them to participate in their pagan sacrifices. The Bible says, *"So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor."*

Israel didn't have to worry about Moab or Edom or the Midianites or the Amorites. The Amalekites and the Philistines and the Kenites and the Horites also constituted no threat. Why? - because God was committed to protecting them from all of the other nations. The real enemy was Israel herself. If the people of Israel would simply keep themselves pure, God would do all the rest, but purity was the condition of His presence and His help, and Israel did not keep herself pure. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that it is just the same for us. It's not the enemies 'out there' who will be the biggest problem for us in days to come - yes, they are there, and they will fume and rage and foment and make noise, but in the safety of Christ's ark we need not fear them at all. The real danger is inside the camp - with us and within us - and if we like Israel fall victim to the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life, then we too will feel the hand of God in judgment, and begin to see all the gaps opening up in our hedge of protection that surrounds us at present.

Next, notice that the culprit was sexual immorality. I know that we live in an age when sexual mores have fallen badly, and when Christian young people, and mature people as well, are constantly assaulted with temptations to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. Well, what we are experiencing is not new, and if anything, the children of Israel, on the edge of the Promised Land, were in an even more promiscuous society. Idolatry by itself would not have been very tempting, but sexual sin was tempting then - and it is now - and that was the door through which the Israelites walked en masse toward apostasy and idolatry.

Over and over and over again in the Old Testament and in the New Testament two themes reoccur. These are critically important themes for the people of God. We are to keep ourselves sexually pure - that means sexual relations ONLY within the context of marriage with the partner God has given us. There are no exceptions to that - no special indulgences. If we violate that law of God, we will not really break God's law so much as we will get broken upon it. The other theme is that marriage partners are only to be taken from among the people of God - never from among the unbelievers. Those are firm rules. If you ignore them (as Israel did in Numbers 25) you will be setting yourself up for a huge fall, and you will almost certainly experience that fall. Playing outside the boundaries of God's rules for human sexuality, and playing with those who do not even know Him, will inevitably draw you farther and farther away from God and into a place that invites His judgment.

It is no accident that when Israel could not be cursed by the pagan prophet that the Moabites hired, that they began to seduce them one by one. So brazen was the sexual sin of the people, that while the nation was mourning their sin and the commandment from God to punish it, a man (Zimri) took a Midianite woman (Cozbi) into his tent to lie with her in broad daylight while the rest of the nation was in the front of the Tabernacle confessing. 24,000 more people died because of this disobedience before the Lord. The role of the Midianites in this whole sordid affair earned them a status as the enemies of God's people.

Our time is gone but let me close with one more statement. God's nature still has not changed. Love and justice are still poised and balanced together in His nature. Christ's first coming was an expression of the fullest possible expression of His love. Christ's return at the end of this age will be the answer of His righteousness. You may not like the fact that God judged the Midianite civilization, but you need to know that the same God is also going to one day judge our civilization as well.