

Sunday School Lesson for October 19, 2025
Numbers 33:50-56 and 34:13-15

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this third Sunday of October, we've been tracing the steps of the Israelites as they make their way to the Promised Land after their miraculous deliverance from Egypt. As we come to chapters 33 and 34 of the Book of Numbers where our focal texts are found today, we'll see how the Lord instructed Moses to tell the people how the land would be divided among the twelve tribes, how they were to deal with the Canaanite people and their customs, and a warning if they failed to carry out these instructions.

Since our study last week from chapter 22, the story of Balaam and Balak continue into chapters 23 and 24. In chapter 25, we read of the success of Balaam's corruption of the Israelites through his suggestion that the Moabites and Amalekites offer their daughters to the Israelites as wives, the punishment God brought upon the people for worshiping the idols of those daughters, and how the plague was stopped by a man named Phineas.

Chapter 26 contains the record of the census that was taken with the conclusion that none of those who were counted in the previous census / before the forty years of wandering in the wilderness as punishment for their refusal to seize the Promised Land / were still alive, save Caleb and Joshua.

In chapter 27, we read of the Lord's counsel to Moses regarding the distribution of the estate of a man who had five daughters but no sons. In the second half of this chapter, the Lord has Moses appoint Joshua as his successor. Numbers, chapters 27 and 28 provide instructions for the offerings of the people that were to be made daily; on the Sabbath; on the first day of the month; on the day of the first-fruits; on the first, tenth, and fifteenth days of the seventh month; and during the annual festivals of Passover, Unleavened

Bread, the Festival of Weeks, the New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. It's quite a list, to say the least.

Because God expects those who make a vow to fulfil what they've promised, in chapter thirty we find God's instructions for honoring vows. In chapter 31, the Lord gives Moses instructions for dealing with the Amalekites in preparation for his own death. In the first verse, we read the Lord saying, "Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people." The remainder of the chapter records the deaths of the kings of Midian, all the Midianite males and all females who were not virgins, along with Balaam, as well as an inventory of the spoils and how they were distributed.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad had accumulated quite a collection of sheep and cattle, and they found that the land east of the Jordan had excellent pastureland. In chapter 32, we find the record of their negotiations with Moses to stay on that side of the Jordan as long as they joined their brothers in seizing the land to the west before they returned.

As the Israelites make final preparations to begin their conquest of the Promised Land, Moses pauses to recollect their journey up to this point. The first 49 verses of chapter 33 provide an itinerary of sorts, from Egypt to the plains of Moab where they were currently encamped. We don't know how long they bivouacked in each location on their way to Kadesh-Barnea, and it's likely that they revisited these sites during the forty years of their wilderness wanderings.

With verse fifty of chapter 33--the beginning of our first focal text for today, the Lord lays out his battle plan for seizing the Promised Land: "And the Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, "When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all

their metal images and demolish all their high places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it. You shall inherit the land by lot according to your clans. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance. Wherever the lot falls for anyone, that shall be his. According to the tribes of your fathers you shall inherit. But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them / whom you let remain / shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.”””

So, we're back on the plains of Moab where we've been for the last two weeks [as shown here on the map](#). The wilderness wanderings are over. A census has been taken that verifies that all those who refused to follow the Lord's instructions to go up and possess the land promised to them through Abraham have died in the desert--all except Caleb and Joshua--named as the two most prominent, although we know there were those of the tribe of Levite who also joined them. From where they are on the east side of the Jordan River, they need only look to the west to see the city of Jericho and the beautiful land that lay before them--a land flowing with milk and honey. Their Promised Land.

But they needed some direction as they crossed the river and began seizing the territory, and the Lord outlines those instructions in the closing verses here in chapter 33 that we also find in Exodus, chapter 26. Their plan had three objectives that were imperative to this campaign. First, they were to “drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you”--verse 52. This was not an option. If the people were to remain holy unto the Lord as they'd been told so many times already, they must not allow any vestige of the idolatry of the current inhabitants to remain, all the inhabitants of the land were to be removed, lest they be infected by that same idolatry.

In our day, this seems to be a little harsh, to put it mildly, but we need to remember several things. First, God is sovereign. If He has willed that judgment come upon the Canaanites for their idolatry and Israel is to be the means He uses to execute that judgment, just as He would later use the Chaldeans to bring judgment upon the Israelites for their idolatry, God is perfectly just and righteous in His judgments. As one commentator puts it, “‘The earth is the Lord’s,’ and no one, therefore, can dispute his right in the abstract to evict any of his tenants and to put others in possession. ... The first duty of a landlord is to see that the occupancy of his property is not abused for illegal or immoral ends; and this duty ... necessitates eviction under certain circumstances. It is not, therefore, necessary to argue that the Canaanites were more infamous than many others; it is enough to remember that God had assumed towards the land which they occupied ... a relation which did not allow him to overlook their [egregious sin].”

Second, the tides of war and population were continually flowing and receding in that part of the world. The ideas of nations and national boundaries were not nearly as well-developed as they are today. When the Israelites reached Canaan, they had the same relative right as anyone else to occupy it, and they would do so as long as they could establish and maintain their rights to the land at the point of the sword.

Third, God’s holiness required that His people be holy. In Exodus, chapter nineteen, verse five, the Lord told the people, “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” and we see this repeated several times in the Book of Deuteronomy. In the Book of Leviticus, God commands that His people be set apart for His purposes, and so we find the words of chapter eleven, verse 45 echoed throughout this book where the Lord says: “For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” Their covenant obligations required

that they be holy, and you can't be holy--you can't fulfill God's perfect plan and purpose for your life--if you participate in the worship of idols--not then, not now.

And there's a fourth reason. God's will for His chosen people was that they reflect the holiness of God so that the world might see in them the justice and the mercy of God. They were to be the means God would use to bring all the people of the world to faith in Him. They couldn't do that if their own worship was compromised with idolatry. The elimination of every vestige of idolatry had to be complete lest their witness become tainted and the people of other nations reject the Lord, just as Paul said had become the case as he writes in Romans, chapter two, verse 24: "For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'"

We might note one exception to this general command to completely eliminate all the current inhabitants of the land. In such places as Exodus, chapter 22, verse 21 and chapter 23, verse 9; Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 33; and Deuteronomy, chapter ten, verse 19, we read about the treatment of sojourners--non-native Israelites who have taken up residence among God's chosen people. For example, in Leviticus, chapter nineteen, verse 33, we hear the Lord say, "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." So while the general command to drive out all the inhabitants was necessary to maintain the purity of God's chosen people, individual Canaanites who chose to repent and turn to God were to be welcomed and treated with the same kindness and generosity as widows and orphans.

Their second objective in this campaign was to "destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places." The Canaanites had developed a rather elaborate system of polytheistic belief and practice that was deeply embedded in their culture. In many ways, the

artistic representations of their various idols was highly developed, and included, among others, these three categories of worship aids, if you will, that helped them--in their minds--engage with the idol and the power it supposedly represented. Because they were physical representations of false gods, they were to be eliminated from the land / God's chosen people were about to make their new home.

First were the “figured stones,” “engraved stones,” or “pictures” as it's translated in the King James Version. It's a rather general word that only appears six times in our Old Testaments that refers to any shaped representation--whether carved in stone or an image that's formed by the mind.

Second were the “metal” “molten” or “cast” images, depending on your translation. This would have been a representation of an idol made by melting a certain metal like silver or gold or a mixture of metals and pouring it into a mold--quite easily made and quite common. Smaller ones were made for household use, and larger ones were made for public worship. Demetrius, the silversmith in Ephesus who raised a great cry against Paul for his preaching there in Acts, chapter nineteen, verse 24, made his living by making and selling such molten images.

Third, they were to “demolish all their high places.” These high places were consecrated groves of trees or enclosed places of worship located on some prominent peak or knoll, whether natural or man-made as some were within the city gates. These places of worship allowed for decentralized and individually-crafted opportunities for worship. A person could erect an altar on a nearby hill and consecrate it to whatever idol he chose to imagine and practice whatever form of worship he chose. In the Old Testament, we find that worship at the high places involved offerings of animal sacrifices, incense, and oils, and included sacred pillars, Asherah poles, prostitution, child sacrifice, and divination--all practices that were never to be a part of the lifestyles of the covenant people of God.

The third objective in their march into the Promised Land was that they were to “take possession of the land and settle in it.” Their wanderings would finally come to an end, and they would make full use of what they found there: “great and good cities that [they] did not build, and houses full of all good things that [they] did not fill, and cisterns that [they] did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that [they] did not plant” as the Lord described the land in Deuteronomy, chapter six, verses ten and eleven. In settling there, they would make the land their own as their inheritance from the Lord.

As they took possession of the land and settled in it, there had to be a way of distributing the land fairly among the twelve tribes, and the instructions for that are provided in verse 54: “You shall inherit the land by lot according to your clans. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance. Wherever the lot falls for anyone, that shall be his. According to the tribes of your fathers you shall inherit.” These instructions were previously outlined in Numbers, chapter 26. One Jewish tradition says that the names of the tribes and the twelve allotments of territories were printed on separate rolls of parchment and placed in an urn. Eleazar, the priest, then put his hand in the urn and drew out one tribe scroll and one property scroll, and this was the means by which the land was apportioned. Since the results of the casting of lots was believed to be determined by God, it was a simple way of discerning the will of the Lord in cases like this.

These instructions end with an ominous warning from the Lord in verse 55: “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.” If the children of Israel were to fail to completely remove the Canaanites and their influence from the land the Lord was giving to them, not only would the people who remained / inflict the most painful injuries upon them--figuratively depicted as

“barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides” just as they had recently experienced in the events of chapter 31--the Lord would do the very same things to the Israelites that He intended to do to the Canaanites--drive them out of the land and destroy them.

You might ask why this warning was necessary. Well, we need only look back to their recent encounter with the Midianites. When the Israelite army returned, victorious over the kings of the Midianites, having burned their cities and encampments, and returned with a considerable collection of the spoils of war, / Moses, Eleazar, and all the chiefs of the congregation went to meet them outside the camp--Numbers, chapter 31, verse fourteen: “And Moses was angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war. Moses said to them, ‘Have you let all the women live? Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD. Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him.’” Because the Israelite men had begun to take Midianite wives and participate in the worship of the Midianite idols, God had sent a plague among the people and 24 thousand people died. The religious customs of the Midianites had led the Israelites away from God. Those customs and practices were a plague among God’s chosen people and had to be eradicated. The Israelite soldiers had failed to eliminate this threat, so Moses was angered by their willingness to compromise at such an early stage in their conquest. As a result, another warning of the danger of failing to follow the Lord’s instructions regarding the possession of the land was necessary.

Tragically, the children of Israel failed to take the Lord’s warning to heart. Instead of driving the Canaanites out of the land that God was giving them, they compromised, and not only allowed many of the people there to remain but began making their idolatrous worship part of their worship of the living

God to the point that, in a very short period of time, the worship of God had been cast aside and replaced with idol worship. Eventually, their disobedience and idolatry led to the dispersion of the ten northern tribes by the Assyrians in 722 BC and the two, remaining, southern tribes by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Although Judah and Benjamin--the two southern tribes--were allowed to return home after a 70-year-long exile in Babylon, the ten northern tribes never returned to their homeland. They had to learn the hard way that failure to follow the Lord's instructions leads to disaster.

In our second focal passage in today's lesson, we turn to the next chapter--chapter 34--and verses thirteen through fifteen where Moses passes on the Lord's instructions for the distribution of the land among the twelve tribes. The chapter opens with a description of the geographical locations that would mark the boundaries for this new nation. **You can see those boundaries on this map**, and you can locate some of the survey points, although many of them can't be accurately identified today, as I read from chapter 34, beginning in the first verse, "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Command the people of Israel, and say to them, "When you enter the land of Canaan (this is the land that shall fall to you for an inheritance, the land of Canaan as defined by its borders), your south side shall be from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom, and your southern border shall run from the end of the Salt Sea"--also known as the Dead Sea--"on the east. And your border shall turn south of the ascent of Akrabbim, and cross to Zin, and its limit shall be south of Kadesh-barnea. Then it shall go on to Hazar-addar, and pass along to Azmon. And the border shall turn from Azmon to the Brook of Egypt, and its limit shall be at the sea." The "sea" of course, is the Mediterranean Sea, also called the Great Sea. "For the western border, you shall have the Great Sea and its coast. This shall be your western border. This shall be your northern border: from the Great Sea you shall draw a line to Mount Hor. From Mount Hor you shall draw a line to Lebo-hamath, and the limit of the border shall be at Zedad. Then the border

shall extend to Ziphron, and its limit shall be at Hazar-enan. This shall be your northern border.

“You shall draw a line for your eastern border from Hazar-enan to Shepham. And the border shall go down from Shepham to Riblah on the east side of Ain. And the border shall go down and reach to the shoulder of the Sea of Chinnereth”--also known as the Sea of Galilee--“on the east. And the border shall go down to the Jordan, and its limit shall be at the Salt Sea. This shall be your land as defined by its borders all around.”

These were the initial boundaries of the Promised Land as the children of Israel encamped near Moab to the east of the Jordan River, waiting eagerly and expectantly to see the ancient promise to their father, Abraham, fulfilled. It would be their inheritance--a gift from God Himself.

One of the resources provided in the Leader's Packet includes a handout entitled, “Why This Land?” Let me share with you part of that information. In answering the question, we find that “The land that would become ancient Israel extended about 80 to 100 miles west to east from the Mediterranean Sea to east of the Jordan River and about 250 miles north to south from Dan to Beersheba--a region about the size of New Jersey.

It was part of the Fertile Crescent that stretched from the Persian Gulf, north through Mesopotamia, curving westward to the north of the Arabian Desert, and then heading south through Canaan to Egypt. Nearly all the people of the ancient Near East lived in the Fertile Crescent.

God's intention in giving the land to Israel was to make His Name great, as we read in Second Samuel, chapter seven, verse 23. Ever true to His character, God chooses to use the weak and insignificant to show Himself strong, to bring glory to Himself, and to make His Name great--First Corinthians, chapter one, verse 26 through 31. He did this by placing His chosen people in a location where He could cultivate their faith so that they would be a light to the nations, as we'll see in our lesson next week.

Moreover, it was from this land between--in the fullness of time--that God sent forth His Son and launched the mission of spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth.

In verse thirteen of chapter 34, our second focal text for the day, Moses continued his instructions: “Moses commanded the people of Israel, saying, ‘This is the land that you shall inherit by lot, which the Lord has commanded to give to the nine tribes and to the half-tribe. For the tribe of the people of Reuben by their fathers’ houses and the tribe of the people of Gad by their fathers’ houses have received their inheritance, and also the half-tribe of Manasseh. The two tribes and the half-tribe have received their inheritance beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, toward the sunrise.’”

Here again, the distribution of the land would be determined by the casting of lots, perhaps in the way that early tradition described, and it’s the land that “the Lord has commanded to give to the nine tribes and to the half-tribe.” The other two-and-a-half tribes, Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, had chosen to establish their homeland on the eastern side of the Jordan River because of the great number of sheep and cattle they possessed as well as the lushness of the grazing land they found there. Reuben was Jacob and Leah’s firstborn son and the one who tried to convince his brothers not to kill Joseph. Gad was the seventh son born to Jacob whose mother was Zilpah, Leah’s handmaid.

Moses allocated some of the land east of the Jordan to half the tribe of Manasseh. It wasn’t because they were so numerous, as some writers understand Joshua, chapter seventeen, verse fourteen, to suggest, because Manasseh ranked number six in the population census taken in Numbers, chapter 26. It’s possible that Moses left half of this tribe on the east to facilitate the unity of the entire nation that would settle on opposite sides of the river or because the people of the tribe of Manasseh had already seized and claimed land east of the Jordan for their own.

Manasseh was Joseph's firstborn son, but Jacob adopted him along with his brother, Ephraim, for the purpose of the inheritance--which accounts for the Levites not receiving a portion of the land and still leaving twelve tribes--Manasseh and Ephraim each counted separately and effectively replacing the Levites in the allotment.

The two-and-a-half tribes would, of course and as they promised, participate in the taking of the Promised Land, but, once the current occupants had been expelled, they would cross back over the Jordan River and settle in what is now the country of Jordan. This separation and the lack of communication between the tribes, however, would result in many disputes in the future between the two-and-a-half tribes and their brothers on the other side of the Jordan River.

In the remainder of this chapter, we find a list of those appointed to distribute the land--one man from each of the twelve tribes that included Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph, but not the Levites because their inheritance would be found in the cities in the Promised Land as we find in the opening verses of chapter 35. Also in chapter 35, we read about the cities of refuge to which someone who had caused a death might flee to avoid the avenger of wrath until he stands before the congregation for judgment--verse twelve.

Then in the closing chapter of this book--chapter 36, we find a restatement of the decision concerning the inheritance of Zelophehad that was given to his daughters since he had no sons; and the book concludes with this very simple, summary statement: "These are the commandments and the rules that the LORD commanded through Moses to the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho."

Throughout the journey of the Israelites on their way to the land God had promised to them more than six hundred years ago, God had proven Himself faithful time after time. His loving instructions provided them the opportunity

to avoid the dangers and pitfalls they would face as they took the final step in their journey, but those instructions had to be obeyed in every detail. If they did not “destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places,” the idolatrous worship of the Canaanites would distract them from God’s intention for them to be holy as He is holy.

Although we don’t typically have carved or cast images that we worship on some high place like they did, there are idols in our lives that continually need to be destroyed and demolished, lest they lead us astray and keep us from becoming the “the royal priesthood, [the] holy nation, [the] people for his own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light”--First Peter, chapter two, verse nine.

Once again, Paul reminds us in First Corinthians, chapter ten, verse eleven, that “These things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.” Let us be holy, even as He is holy.

Thank you for being part of our brief look at the journey of faith the Israelites followed as they made their way to the homeland God promised to them through Abraham. Next week, we continue to follow the children of Israel on their journey by turning to the next book in our Old Testaments--the book of Deuteronomy where we’ll find the Lord’s final instructions to the people as they prepare to take the decisive next step to actually enter the Promised Land. In our review of Deuteronomy, chapter four, verses one through nine and fifteen through twenty, we’ll hear Moses remind us of part of their history to this point that has been shaped and directed by the Lord as well as a warning to avoid the idols of the land they are about to enter.

As always, as it’s still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

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