NUMBERS

Chapter 31

*Vengeance on the Midianites*

**The Lord said to Moses, 2 “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people.” 3 So Moses said to the people, “Arm some of your men to go to war against the Midianites and to carry out the Lord’s vengeance on them. 4 Send into battle a thousand men from each of the tribes of Israel.” 5 So twelve thousand men armed for battle, a thousand from each tribe, were supplied from the clans of Israel. 6 Moses sent them into battle, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, who took with him articles from the sanctuary and the trumpets for signaling. 7 They fought against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every man. 8 Among their victims were Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur and Reba—the five kings of Midian. They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword. 9 The Israelites captured the Midianite women and children and took all the Midianite herds, flocks and goods as plunder. 10 They burned all the towns where the Midianites had settled, as well as all their camps. 11 They took all the plunder and spoils, including the people and animals, 12 and brought the captives, spoils and plunder to Moses and Eleazar the priest and the Israelite assembly at their camp on the plains of Moab, by the Jordan across from Jericho.13 Moses, Eleazar the priest and all the leaders of the community went to meet them outside the camp. 14 Moses was angry with the officers of the army—the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds—who returned from the battle. 15 “Have you allowed all the women to live?” he asked them. 16 “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, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people. 17 Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, 18 but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man. 19 “All of you who have killed anyone or touched anyone who was killed must stay outside the camp seven days. On the third and seventh days you must purify yourselves and your captives. 20 Purify every garment as well as everything made of leather, goat hair or wood.”21 Then Eleazar the priest said to the soldiers who had gone into battle, “This is the requirement of the law that the Lord gave Moses: 22 Gold, silver, bronze, iron, tin, lead 23 and anything else that can withstand fire must be put through the fire, and then it will be clean. But it must also be purified with the water of cleansing. And whatever cannot withstand fire must be put through that water. 24 On the seventh day wash your clothes and you will be clean. Then you may come into the camp.”**

**31:1–24** The Lord declares a holy war (see Introduction to Joshua: The Conquest and the Ethical Question of War) against the Midianites as one of Moses’ last actions before the end of his life. Moses was not motivated by petty jealousy; rather, the war was “the Lord’s vengeance” (v. 3) for the Midianites’ part in seducing the Israelites to engage in sexual immorality and to worship the Baal of Peor. (See 25:16–18, where the specific mention of Cozbi, a Midianite woman, heightens the anger expressed in ch. 31.) (CSB)

**31:2** *Avenge*. God was provoked to vengeance on the Midianites because they had seduced Israel to idolatry (v 16; ch 25). The war seems to focus specifically on Midianites involved with corrupting Israel (five kings, v 8), not the entire people of Midian. Ambrose: “A deeper vengeance is taken on fiercer foes, and on those that are false as well as on those who have done greater wrongs, as was the case with the Midianites” (*NPNF* 2 10:24). (TLSB)

*Midianites*. The nationality of Moses’ wife and her family (Ex 2:16–22). (TLSB)

*gathered to your people.* A euphemism for death (see, e.g., Ge 25:8, 17; 35:29). (CSB)

**31:4** *a thousand men from each of the tribes of Israel.* The burden of the holy war had to be shared equally among the tribes. (CSB)

**31:6** *Phinehas.* His zeal for the Lord’s honor led him to execute Zimri and Cozbi (25:8). Now he leads in the sacred aspects of the battle to demonstrate that this is a holy war. (CSB)

He, not Joshua or Eleazar, was chosen to direct this campaign, because he had proved that he was “jealous for his God” (25:6–13). (TLSB)

*the vessels of the sanctuary*. Lit, “the instruments of holiness,” which are “the trumpets for the alarm. (TLSB)

*trumpets.* See note on 10:3. (CSB)

**31:7** *as the Lord commanded Moses.* The battle was the Lord’s. (CSB)

*killed every male*. Unlike the war of conquest, where the Canaanites would be wiped out (see pp 338–40), the soldiers plan to spare the Midianite women and children (v 9). (TLSB)

**31:8** *the kings of Midian*. Regional tribal rulers. (TLSB)

*They also killed Balaam.* Ch. 25 lacks the name of the principal instigator of the seduction of the Israelite men to the depraved worship of Baal. But here he is found among the dead. What Balaam had been unable to accomplish through acts of magic or sorcery (chs. 22–24) he was almost able to achieve by his advice to the Midianites (v. 16). (CSB)

**31:9–18** While the troops killed the men of Midian, they spared the women and children as plunder. Moses commanded that only the virgin women (who were thus innocent of the indecencies at Peor) could be spared; the guilty women and the boys (who might endanger the inheritance rights of Israelite men) were to be put to death (vv. 15–17). (CSB)

**31:9** *captive the women* … *their little ones*. Common strategy in tribal warfare. Men of fighting age could not be absorbed into a new tribe. However, women and children could be assimilated and were shown mercy. Whereas other nations regarded the taking of women as part of the spoils of war (Jgs 5:30), Moses here distinguishes between the captives and the plunder. (TLSB)

**31:15–16** Moses is concerned about the assimilation of the women and the boys because the Midianites had specifically sought to corrupt Israel before. However, because adultery was punishable by death under the Law (Lv 20:10) Moses might have regarded the Midianites here as adulterous and deserving the full punishment. Though Moses’ decisions accord with God’s original command to avenge the people of Israel (v 2), the specific orders about treatment of prisoners do not have God’s explicit command or approval (cf 2Ki 6:18–23). (TLSB)

*plague*. Refers to a disease that had earlier taken the lives of 24,000 Israelites. Same term used in 1Sm 6:5 (cf 1Sm 5:9, 12, where the men break out with tumors). The character of the plague is not explained. It is possible that it spread by sexual contact, which could have informed Moses’ decisions about handling the Midianite prisoners. (TLSB)

**31:17–18** Moses’ decision eerily parallels the practices of the Egyptians in Ex 1:22. (TLSB)

**31:18** *young girls*. Virgins, who had not been the cause of Israel’s harlotry, were to be spared. They would most easily adapt to life in a new tribe and would also not carry sexually transmitted diseases. (TLSB)

**31:19–24** Since this was holy war, both people (vv. 19–20) and things (vv. 21–24) had to be cleansed (cf. 19:11–13). (CSB)

**31:19–20** *purify*. Those who had come in contact with corpses were to perform the prescribed purification rites (cf v 24).

**31:21–23** *pass through the fire*. All material objects of spoil were to be “purified with the water for impurity” (cf 19:9–19). Metals had to pass through fire to be clean. These actions, too, may point to concerns about the spread of disease. (TLSB)

*Dividing the Spoils*

**25 The Lord said to Moses, 26 “You and Eleazar the priest and the family heads of the community are to count all the people and animals that were captured. 27 Divide the spoils between the soldiers who took part in the battle and the rest of the community. 28 From the soldiers who fought in the battle, set apart as tribute for the Lord one out of every five hundred, whether persons, cattle, donkeys, sheep or goats. 29 Take this tribute from their half share and give it to Eleazar the priest as the Lord’s part. 30 From the Israelites’ half, select one out of every fifty, whether persons, cattle, donkeys, sheep, goats or other animals. Give them to the Levites, who are responsible for the care of the Lord’s tabernacle.” 31 So Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the Lord commanded Moses. 32 The plunder remaining from the spoils that the soldiers took was 675,000 sheep, 33 72,000 cattle, 34 61,000 donkeys 35 and 32,000 women who had never slept with a man. 36 The half share of those who fought in the battle was: 337,500 sheep, 37 of which the tribute for the Lord was 675; 3836,000 cattle, of which the tribute for the Lord was 72; 3930,500 donkeys, of which the tribute for the Lord was 61; 4016,000 people, of which the tribute for the Lord was 32. 41 Moses gave the tribute to Eleazar the priest as the Lord’s part, as the Lord commanded Moses. 42 The half belonging to the Israelites, which Moses set apart from that of the fighting men— 43 the community’s half—was 337,500 sheep, 44 36,000 cattle, 45 30,500 donkeys 46 and 16,000 people. 47 From the Israelites’ half, Moses selected one out of every fifty persons and animals, as the Lord commanded him, and gave them to the Levites, who were responsible for the care of the Lord’s tabernacle. 48 Then the officers who were over the units of the army—the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds—went to Moses 49 and said to him, “Your servants have counted the soldiers under our command, and not one is missing. 50 So we have brought as an offering to the Lord the gold articles each of us acquired—armlets, bracelets, signet rings, earrings and necklaces—to make atonement for ourselves before the Lord.” 51 Moses and Eleazar the priest accepted from them the gold—all the crafted articles. 52 All the gold from the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds that Moses and Eleazar presented as a gift to the Lord weighed 16,750 shekels. 53 Each soldier had taken plunder for himself. 54 Moses and Eleazar the priest accepted the gold from the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds and brought it into the Tent of Meeting as a memorial for the Israelites before the Lord.**

**31:26–35** Another aspect of holy war was the fair distribution of the spoils of war, both among those who fought in the battle and among those who stayed with the community, with appropriate shares to be given to the Lord, whose battle it was (v. 28). (CSB)

**31:27** *into two parts*. All booty was to be shared equally by soldiers and civilians. The former were required to take from their half and give the priests one out of 500; the noncombatants contributed from their part one out of 50 to the Levites. (TLSB)

**31:32–47** The Midianite tribe was wealthy. Since there were 32,000 young women, the total tribe had likely numbered more than 100,000. However, this is clearly not the full number of Midianites, but a local group. (TLSB)

**31:49** *not a man missing*. The battle was miraculous. (TLSB)

**31:50** When the military leaders saw that they had suffered no casualties, they realized how good the Lord had been to them. Out of gratitude, they brought voluntary offerings to Moses and Eleazar. (TLSB)

**Ch 31** Moses is given a final assignment. He is to oversee the destruction of a group of Midianites who had tempted Israel to idolatry and brought a plague among them. God acts forcefully to protect His people from falling away. Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the high priest, coordinates the attack. The victory secures the east bank of the Jordan, from which the Israelites will conquer Canaan. The tactics described here were meant for this specific situation and cannot be used by people today as a guide to “holy war.” Vengeance belongs to God (Dt 32:35) and is enacted through His chosen authorities, not by individuals. Pray for the safety and peace of soldiers, police, and all in such callings. Entrust your life, health, and future to the one and only Savior, who is strong to deliver. • “Entrust your days and burdens To God’s most loving hand; He cares for you while ruling The sky, the sea, the land. For He who guides the tempests Along their thund’rous ways Will find for you a pathway And guide you all your days.” Amen. (*LSB* 754:1) (TLSB)