

## **Don't Mess This UP: We're almost Home**

### **Numbers 26-36**

Recently, I was at a “9 Marks at 9:00” gathering. You can tell that is a young man’s assembly simply by the time. That is 30 minutes past my bedtime and a good hour past my brain time. If it had been a meeting comprised of old men, it would have been called “9 Marks at 5:00am.” Leading that largely youthful gathering of up-and-coming pastors and scholars was a panel of notables. Among them was Al Mohler, the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>i</sup>

Sensing the transitioning out of the old guard that pulled the largest protestant denomination out of theological liberalism and, perhaps, the drift of the new generation, Al had this to say to that audience: *Don't mess this up. My children and my grandchildren are in your churches. Don't mess this up.*

This captures the sentiment of this text in Numbers. Moses is preparing the new generation to enter the land, a land even he will not be able to enter (27:12-14: cf. 20:12). Moses is saying, in short, to the new generation in these final 11 chapters of Numbers, *Don't mess this up!*

I want to walk through this text for a bit and then make some applications. The applications will be the main points of the sermon.

The census of chapter 26 signals that the exodus generation, save Joshua and Caleb, has died in the wilderness.<sup>ii</sup> Presumably, the plague of chapter 25 finished them off. They were faithless to the end. The task at hand for Moses was to prepare the new generation to enter a land yet to be possessed with God.<sup>iii</sup>

That is why every detail of these chapters has to do with possessing the land. You can see this in the change of emphases from the first to the second census. The purpose of the first census (Num 1) was to identify the *men who were able to go to war*. That phrase is mentioned 14 times in the census of chapter 1.<sup>iv</sup> The purpose of the census of the new generation is the division of the land (26:52-56).

To show that possessing the land is the issue of the text, the final chapters of Numbers are bookended by the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad (27:1-11; 36:1-12). Inheritance moved through sons in ancient Israel. Since Zelophehad died and had no sons and was only a regular old sinner (cf. 27:3), his daughters propose that they be given his inheritance (27:4). Moses took their case to the

LORD since it was not addressed in case law. The LORD agreed with the daughters of Zelophehad (27:7).

This decision raised another issue in case law brought by Zelophehad's clan, namely his brothers (36:2), addressed in Numbers 36. Since a clan's land inheritance was theirs in perpetuity, what would happen if Zelophehad's daughters married outside the clan or the tribe (36:3)? The LORD determined that they could marry whom they thought best, but only within their father's clan (36:6). The daughters agreed (36:10-12).

This case highlights an essential difference between the old and the new generation. The old generation complained, grumbled, and rebelled.<sup>v</sup> They did not believe that God had their best interest at heart. The new generation brought their cases to Moses and obeyed the directives of the LORD.

The end of chapter 27 is the moving account of Moses, in light of his impending death, asking the LORD to choose his successor (27:15-17). Joshua, of the old generation, is to lead Israel in possessing the land. Unlike Moses, Joshua will need to hear from God through the high priest (27:20-21). This may seem like a step backwards to us, but it is a necessary step forward. The LORD is establishing leadership among his people.

Chapters 28 and 29 deal with offerings and feasts, and chapter 30 deals with oaths and vows. All of which are expressions of a godward direction of life. Life in the land must revolve around deep devotion to things of God. The entire rhythm of life was to revolve around the worship of God and right expressions of devotion to him.

Chapter 31 is a clear example of holy war. The Israelite army is acting an agent of God's judgment on Midian: Moses commanded, *Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the LORD's vengeance on Midian* (31:3).<sup>vi</sup> Among the Midianite kings Israel executed was Zur, who was the father of Cozbi, the very one Phinehas killed in chapter 25 (31:8; cf 25:15). Also, Balaam was dispatched for his part on the instigating Israel's apostasy (31:8b, 16). Israel was instructed to kill everyone except the young girls who had not known a man (31:17).

Texts like this are hard for us to wrap our heads around. To possess the land Israel had to learn to obey God is executing holy war. In God's covenant with Abraham,

he had told Abraham that Israel would be in Egypt 400 years after which time the sin of the Amorites would be full, that is ripe of judgment (Gen 15:12-16).

This episode with the Midianites and the conquest of Canaan foreshadow the final judgment. God has a right to wrath.<sup>vii</sup> The whole world knows, and nature teaches us, there must be a reckoning, a setting of things right (Rom 1:32). Dear friend, *God has appointed the day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead* (Acts 17:31). The only hope for any man is to repent.

Chapters 32-35 deal with possession of the land. In chapter 32, Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh asked that their possession might be the conquered lands of the Amorite kings east of the Jordan (32:1-5; cf. 21:21-35). At first Moses thought they were looking for a way not to participate in the conquest. All he could imagine was the spy debacle all over again (see chapters 13-14), the result of which was condemnation of the exodus generation (32:6-15). They assured Moses that they would participate fully in the conquest (32:16-19). Moses agreed their possession could be outside the land, but they could *be sure their sins would find them out* if they crawfished on that deal (32:23).

Chapter 33 interrupts instructions about divvying-up the land to recount the stops of Israel for the past 40 years. It is a real trip down memory lane, with few details related to any stop.

The boundaries of the land, yet to be possessed, are set out in chapter 34 along with men from the tribes who will be responsible for dividing the land once it is conquered.

Chapter 35 deals with the land for the Levites. The Levites did not get a possession in the land. The tribes were to give the Levites 48 cities scattered throughout the land along with some surrounding pasture. 6 of the 48 cities were to be cities of refuge.

You can understand why Moses is so careful in his instructions to the Israelites. He is in effect saying, *Don't mess this up!* How do we move from one generation to the next? Much ground has been gained. My exhortation to the coming generation is, *Don't mess this up!* Here's a few words of advice.

### **1. Recall the journey**

In chapter 33, Moses recalls the journey of the Israelites starting from Egypt (33:3) moving to their camp by the Jordan just before they entered the land (33:49). He mentions 40 different camps where Israel stayed during their 40 years in the wilderness. Most the Israelites would not have stayed at all those camps. They were born somewhere along the way. They needed to know their history.

Curiously, Moses left out much detail, only occasionally mentioning what happened at a particular camp.<sup>viii</sup>

40 different camps, a whole generation dying out, and few details mentioned, what is his point?

In looking at history, you can see the faithfulness of God. God had said they would spend 40 years in the wilderness; they spent 40 years in the wilderness. God had said not one of the exodus generation, except Joshua and Caleb, would enter the land; so it was.

God will be true to who he is no matter which way the culture goes or what people in the culture think of it. If the old generation was unfaithful and spent their lives wandering from camp to camp to camp, the new generation should understand what is at stake in their obedience.

We need to know history because we have not been alive for most of it. It is not like the world began the day I was born. We don't wake up in a new world every day. There is continuity in history. You can't just go to college attend a class or two and jettison all you have been taught up till now.

One of the problems of the current generation in any age is chronological snobbery. We look at the past and are so critical of our forefathers, while paying no attention to our own theological drift and inconsistencies.

I recall a time in the not too distant past when to be in seminary classroom holding to the inerrancy of Scripture, the reality of the miracles, justification by faith, the bodily resurrection of Christ less off anyone else, and sinlessness nature of Christ put you in a ridiculed minority.

Perhaps some in this generation take those doctrines for granted, not considering those affirmations were hard fought to preserve. Now those who have had the privilege of growing up in a healthier church life are ready to jettison the progress made on the altar of a cultural Marxism that his captured many. Now the gospel is everything justice: social justice, reproductive justice, gender affirming justice,

pronoun justice, and environmental justice. Many churches are now declaring “Creation Care” as their mission.<sup>ix</sup> All of these are said to be *gospel issues*. Ironically, none of them is just or gospel.

The move toward the reforming of the church in its polity and doctrine has been hard fought. You may not have been alive for the battle, so don’t take what you have inherited for granted. Don’t mess this up!

This leads us to the second point.

## **2. Learn from the past.**

Not only know your history but learn from it.

Reuben and Gad approached Moses about taking the conquered lands on the east side of Jordan (outside the land) as their possession. Taking their request at face value it sounds like they are saying in effect, *We can take these lands and not worry about the crossing Jordan and fighting (32:5)*.

Moses read their request through the lens of the spy debacle (cf. Numbers 13-14; 32:6-15). He is concerned that, like the majority report of the spies persuaded a generation to forego possessing the land, their request would have the same effect in the people’s hearts (32:7). Moses went on to argue, you are doing what your father’s did (32:8,14). Because of their faithlessness, not believing God would uphold his covenant, the LORD condemned that entire generation to die in the wilderness (32:10-13). Moses’s concern is that these 2 tribes will cause the death of the present generation in wilderness just as the former generation died (32:15).

In the end, Reuben and Gad are persuaded by Moses, and agree to send their fighting men until the land is conquered if they can have as their inheritance in the land beyond the Jordan (32:31b-32). If, however, they don’t keep their word Moses cautions, *you [will] have sinned against the LORD, and be sure your sins will find you out (32:23)*.

*Your sins will find you out.* I’ve heard text quoted my entire life. How true it is. Learn from the past. Israel sinned in the past and spent 40 years dying in the wilderness. Moses is not going to enter land because of his own sin. We have it on good authority, *Your sins will find you out.*

Don’t be arrogant in looking at the former generation, but don’t repeat their mistakes either. One of the first doctrines to get attacked is the doctrine of justification by faith. When you leave the doctrine of justification by faith, you

have abandoned the gospel. Justification is God declaring the sinner *not guilty*. When you place your faith in Christ, the gavel of God comes down on the bench of divine justice, and he declares you not guilty. That is the gospel! It's not what you deserve. We are declared not guilty because faith unites us to Christ in his sinless life, death for sins, and resurrection from the dead. He ever lives pleading the merit of his life and atoning death as the ground of our guiltless standing before God. In raising Christ from the dead, God signaled the acceptance of Christ's sinless life and atoning death as payment for our sins. We are free! That is good news.

A former generation lost that doctrine and, with it, the gospel. Their sins found them out in their rejection of the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. They moved away from gospel proclamation to social activism. When *Roe v. Wade* became the law of the land in 1973, there was little objection from evangelicals. Why? Theological liberalism. They had moved away from the gospel toward a so-called social gospel.

Don't mess this up! Learn from the past.

### **3. Orient your lives toward the Kingdom of God**

Chapter 28-30 deal with sacrifices and vows, worship and devotion. As you read the text, you can see that all of life was to revolve around the worship of and devotion to the LORD. There were daily offerings (28:1-8), weekly offerings (28:9-10), monthly offering (28:11-15), and yearly offering in the first half of the year (28:16-31) and in the second half of the year (29:1-38).

In addition to all of these were the spontaneous offerings given out of devotion to the LORD (29:39). In that context, people would make vows and oaths to the LORD (Num 30).

The entirety of their lives revolved around the God of Israel. The land inhabited by God and the people was to be the visible expression of the Kingdom of God on earth, which was to spread to encompass the earth.

The entire rhythm of our lives should be set by our worship of and devotion to the LORD. The church is the visible expression of the Kingdom of God on earth now. For many Christians, devotion to Christ is an add-on to a life that revolves around everything else. Attending church is one of the check offs on the grocery list of life.

A dear, sweet member of a church I pastored years ago was an elderly woman who had all but lost her hearing. She told me that she came to church but could not hear a single word that was spoken. She asked, *Do you want to know why I come to church every Sunday?* I said, *Yes, Mrs. Lula, I'd like to know.* She said, *I want everybody to know whose side I'm on.*

Brothers and Sisters, Israel's elaborate system of worship signaled clearly that they were different than the world. Their lives had a different orbit. Each offering in some way prefigured Christ. In their worship and devotion, they served Christ in their OT way. Their lives were oriented around him.

#### **4. Guard the holiness of the church**

The close of chapter 33 (33:50-56) through the end of chapter 35 deal with possessing the land (33:50-56), the boundaries of it (34:1-15), dividing it (34:16-29), and the place of the Levites in it (35:1-34).

What is presented in these chapters is the ideal, Israel in full possession of the land with the whole land as the temple dwelling of God.

The stated reason the Levites were scattered throughout the land was to guard the holiness of the people and the sanctity of the land because God dwelled there: *You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel* (35:34). They are guardians of holiness.

Israel never possessed the land as the boundaries here describe (34:1-15). The Levites never occupied the cities here described (35:6). What God spoke in 33:55-56 became their reality.

Israel failed to possess the land. The Levites failed to guard the holiness of God's land temple.<sup>x</sup> Their failure leads us to look elsewhere in the Bible for fulfillment.

The land promise to Abraham was much bigger than the boundaries here described. God promised Abraham the world (Romans 4:13). The promised land was a type of the world. One day when the Kingdom of God fully comes the whole world will be the temple. God will dwell with his people and be their God (cf Rev 21:1-4). The nations will bring their glory and honor into it, *but nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life* (Rev 21:26-27).

In the meantime, the church is the outpost of the Kingdom of God in hostile enemy territory. We are a priestly kingdom charged to be the guardians of the holiness of God among us. You must first guard your life. Brothers and sisters, you cannot become comfortable with sin. The church is the dwelling place of God by the Spirit. If he would not dwell in a polluted land, he will not dwell in a polluted church. You must guard your life, and you must work for the growth, edification, and holiness of one another.

Don't dismiss or ignore history but learn from it. Seek the KOG first, and guard the holiness of church.

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<sup>i</sup>You may know of him by his daily podcast, *The Briefing*, his *Thinking in Public* podcast where he interviews various authors on a wide variety of topics, and/or one of his books.

<sup>ii</sup> just as God had said of them (cf. 14:26-35).

<sup>iii</sup> The central question of the wilderness generation had been, *How can a holy God dwell with a sinful people?* That same question applies to possessing the land as well. Whether they are camped around the tabernacle in the wilderness or are in full possession of the land, this is the central issue (cf. Ex. 33:1-3,12-16).

<sup>iv</sup> See 1:3, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 45. To be sure, the second census identifies the men *who are able to go to war*, but that phrase is used only 1 time (26:2) compared to 14 times in the first census. Possessing the land is not mentioned in the first census. There is a change of emphases.

<sup>v</sup> Over and over the text says, *the people complained* (11:1), *had a strong craving* (11:4), *spoke against Moses* (12:1), *grumbled against Moses and Aaron* (14:2), *assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron* (16:3), *grumbled against Moses and against Aaron* (16:41), *assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron* (20:2), and *spoke against God and against Moses* (21:5).

<sup>vi</sup> A note of interest is no Israelite died in this holy war (31:49). Death had been a major theme for the wilderness generation. There is no death in the final section of Numbers.

<sup>vii</sup> To get some understanding of the holiness of God, even in obeying God's direction regarding the Midianites, the people had to be purified to re-enter the camp and atonement had to be made. They were not less deserving of wrath than the Midianites. They were simply the recipients of divine grace.

<sup>viii</sup> He mentioned a few details regarding leaving Egypt (33:3-4). After leaving Hahiroth, they pass through the sea (33:8). At Elim, there were 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees (33:9). At Rephidim that was no water (33:14). Aaron died on Mount Hor (33:38-39). There on the edge of Edom, the Canaanite king, Arad, heard they were coming (33:40).

<sup>ix</sup> [First Presbyterian Church is Certified as a PC\(USA\) Earth Care Congregation - WBBJ TV](#); Here is their statement: "First Presbyterian Church is just one of the 3331 churches in our denomination that chose to dedicate themselves to intentional care of God's earth this year. This congregation's activities and commitment brings hope to their community and indeed to the world. We believe that First Presbyterian Church will inspire others to respond intentionally to God's call to care for the earth," says Jessica Maudlin, Associate for Sustainable Living and Earth Care Concerns for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

<sup>x</sup> In the second temple period, so derelict were the Priests and Levites that Tobiah moved in the temple to live (Neh. 13:4ff).