

Numbers 31

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[0 : 00] I turn to Numbers chapter 31. Numbers chapter 31. It's the fourth book of the Bible. I think Numbers 31 makes us very uneasy.

! It talks about the almost! The fundamental annihilation of the Midianite trite. We read how all of them eventually were killed except for one little group, the young unmarried girls. The men were killed. The women were killed. Then the young boys and the baby boys were killed. Every single one of them.

What is a passage like this doing in the Bible? Why on earth are we spending our time thinking about this?

There are certain answers we could give. We could say, couldn't we? And it would be true that these were exceptionally wicked people. The Midianites were morally wicked in every conceivable way.

Centuries earlier they'd forfeited the right to live. God had said to Abraham in Genesis 15-16. He said the iniquity, the great sin of the Amorites. And that's these people. The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

[2 : 09] God delayed judgment. God delayed judgment for centuries. And then he executed judgment on these people. In Leviticus chapter 18 and verse 27 it says that the people of the land did all these abominations, these terrible open sins, so that the land vomited out.

God had that nation before you. So you do have here people who were extremely corrupt and cruel. And morally bankrupt.

And we could point out that God dealt with just severely with his own people. Do you remember? He dealt very severely with his own people as he's done with the Midianites here.

So do you remember some 24,000 of his own people were struck down. 24,000 of his own people were struck down about the sin of Baal Peor.

And we also know, don't we, through studying the book of Numbers, that about a million to a million and a half of his people died in the wilderness because of their unbelief. And it does appear, as you read through the book of Numbers, that God is just and even-handed and the wages of sin is death.

[3 : 28] Or to kind of take a step back from the Bible, I want to argue tonight that we're not really in a position to point a critical finger. The 13th of February of 1945, 773 RAF bombers were sent over the German city in Dresden.

The next day, 527 US heavy bombers loaded with incendiary bombs filled with magnesium, petroleum jelly and phosphorus designed to burn and cause a firestorm.

35,000, possibly up to 100,000 were burned to death. One of the most beautiful medieval cities in Europe was destroyed.

Six months later, a uranium bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. It killed between 70,000 people and another 100,000 people over the next five years.

And so I do think we have to come to these passages and not have kind of chronological slobbery and say, well, these are the barbaric people. That was done long ago.

[4 : 38] How primitive these people were. Something like that would never happen again. Not happen today. How cruel these people were. How could people do these things? The far, far worse things have been done in our own age.

Which million was just a threat to Israel as Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, Al-Qaeda. Since 1967, there have been 8.75 abortions.

8.75 million abortions in the UK. 8.75 million. And so we shouldn't be in a hurry to criticise.

I do need to ask these questions. I think it's to approach the passage in the wrong way. These things did happen. We're not denying that. The slaughter did take place. And we have to take that

into account.

But in the ultimate sense, the true meaning actually was symbolic and prophetic. It was like our Lord's comment on the natural disaster of his day.

[5 : 44] Do you remember? What did Jesus say in response to the natural disaster of his day? He said, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And Numbers 31, as difficult as it is, is about God's judgement.

God's judgement. And so I want to say something first of all tonight about the inevitability of judgement. The inevitability of judgement. The Israelites didn't always behave like this in every war. They didn't. The policy of extermination seems to have been restricted deliberately into the exodus and the entrance into the promised land.

And it was undertaken by the command of God. So look at verse 1. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Abundance the people of Israel on the Midianites. We saw in a previous study that Israel is working a standing army of about 600,000 men.

It's a massive army. But against the Midianites, I don't know if you noticed, only really a token force was sent. There was 12,000 men sent. 1,000 from each tribe. It's not a normal war.

[6 : 52] There's something very different about Numbers 31 that we're meant to pick up. There was something sacred or symbolic about it. The army was led into battle by Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the priest.

And he carried with him the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for alarm in his hand. Verse 6. And they warred against Midian. Verse 7. As the Lord commanded.

We read later in the chapter that the plent of the church was to be purified. Even the slaughter of the women was laid down in the law.

Let me read to you from Deuteronomy 20 and verse 16. But you shall devote them to complete destruction. In the cities of these people that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. You shall save alive nothing that breathes. But you shall devote them to complete destruction. The reason for that otherwise is they would be a constant threat to Israel as history was to prove.

[8 : 01] And there is a degree of mercy extended to the young girls. Who hadn't been implicated by the apostasy of Baal Peor. But you may be saying it's still appalling and it's still barbaric.

All these people were killed. And I want to reply tonight as gently as I can and say what sort of world do you think we're living in?

Have you forgotten the biblical world? That we were all created by God. And one day every single one of us on this earth who has lived or ever lived will face the reality of God's judgment.

Have we forgotten that every human being on the face of the earth, past, present and future is under, aren't they, a similar death sentence? That we live as members of a doomed race.

Of a condemned race. Do you remember that famous verse in Hebrews chapter 9? Is appointed for man to die once.

[9 : 11] For man once to die. And after that comes judgment. There will be a day coming, there is a day coming, when millions and millions of our fellow human beings will be judged.

And damned. And cast into hell to have fainted infinitely worse, indescribably more terrifying than anything that was done to the Midianites. And if you're like me, we forget very easily the reality of judgment.

There is, isn't there, for those of us who are Christians, a dark shadow under which we live. That is the world we live in, we can never forget.

And that's why Christians are to be essentially serious people. And we can laugh, we do laugh, we can have great fun.

There is joy. But there is a day of judgment that is coming. And that day will be terrifying. And it will be indescribably awful.

[10 : 20] The day when God's wrath is poured forth. And countless millions of our fellow human beings will be cast into hell.

And every time we pray, as we pray this morning, your kingdom come, your will be done. We are praying for the coming of the day of judgment. And this tells us, doesn't it, about the vital importance of sharing, of telling others.

And that you and I are surrounded by people we meet every day. Human beings doomed to the horror of everlasting destruction.

And I have to ask each one of you, as I have to ask myself, have you come to terms with this fact? This fact that by nature you are a sinner.

And that you have broken God's command. And you have rebelled against this holy and almighty God. And this sentence has gone forth against sin. And that unless something changes, you will certainly be condemned to hell forever.

[11 : 31] And our Lord would say to us, don't worry about the midday nights. Worry about yourself. Worry about yourself. Worry about your family.

About your neighbours. About your work colleagues. That was the message, wasn't it? Jesus knew that a tower had fallen and crushed people. It was an awful situation. And everyone was saying, why?

Why has this happened? And Jesus responds to me shockingly, well unless you repent, you also will likewise perish. And wouldn't it be futile to get up in a kind of moral indignation about people here from long ago who you've never met.

And you will never know. And for our hearts to be cold to the living, breathing human beings that we meet with every day. And we talk with every day who are under the sentence of inevitable judgment.

Inevitability of deliverance. Secondly, we have the possibility of deliverance. The possibility of deliverance. Not everyone in this chapter is destroyed. In fact there are people who are the agents of God's destruction.

[12 : 39] There are people for whom this judgment was a blessing. The means of their entering into the promised land and dwelling safely in it. For the people of God this is a most striking victory.

So look at verse 49. The generals come and they say, your servants have counted the men of war under our command. And there's not a man missing from among us.

It's remarkable. There's not a single casualty. There's not a single fallen Israeli soldier. And that was God's intervention.

And the soldiers realised, didn't they, that their deliverance was due to God's mercy and God's grace. And we read in verse 50 that they brought an offering. They brought the Lord's offering to make atonement for ourselves before the Lord.

What are they saying? They're saying, we too deserve to die. They're saying, aren't they, we too are unworthy. And we too were sinners. We need atonement.

[13 : 46] That we may live. And that's our need also. We've just spoken, William, of that terrible universal judgment day that is coming. And we're all guilty. You are guilty and I am guilty.

And the most guilty of us are those who pretend that they're not. And a little voice tonight tells you, if you're saying you're not guilty, there's a little voice in your heart that tells you you're lying. And to be delivered from what we deserve, we need atonement.

And we need an offering that will enable you and I to remain alive in God's final holy war against sin. And the wonder of the Bible's message is this.

That we have that offering, don't we, in the Lord Jesus Christ. The blood of the Lamb of God. Slain in our place. And on the cross at Calvary.

If I can put it in the cross. If I can put it in this way. God the Father carried out holy war against sin. Against sin in the person of his son. And at the cross he judged it.

[14 : 57] And he condemned it so that everyone who believes in him is delivered on the day of judgment. And our sins have been paid for. Atoned for.

And we are declared not guilty. And so tonight you've not got to that point where you've put your trust and you've banked everything that you have on the Lord Jesus Christ. You're not a believer in Jesus.

Do you understand how vital it is that you trust Christ for yourself? Because how will you stand on that day of judgment? What will you have to say to God?

As your sins are brought before you. But tonight you can be delivered. You can be delivered tonight. If you will call on Christ. To be your senior.

And you can know the final verdict of that day brought into tonight. If you will call on Christ to be your senior.

[15 : 59] And if you're a Christian tonight you can face the day of judgment. And you can face the day of judgment without fear. Not only without fear. But with hope and with gladness.

The Shorter Catechism tells us that believers will be openly acknowledged. And acquitted in the day of judgment. And made perfectly blessed. In the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

There is the inevitability of judgment. It is coming. It is universal. And it is terrible. I'm not making light of the horror of Numbers 31.

It is a terrible thing. But there is a possibility of deliverance. In fact there is a certainty of deliverance tonight. For all those who are in Christ. And lastly the responsibility of gratitude.

We come back to that thank offering. Of these soldiers at the end of the chapter. And it seems to have been voluntary. It seems to have been an extra gift. It's not just the tithes that they were required to give earlier in the chapter.

[17:10] They were commanded to do that. But it seems that once they have done that. They ask themselves. Is there anything more that I can give? Is there anything more that we can bring? So in verse 50.

We have brought the Lord's offering. What each man found. Articles of gold. Armlets. Bracelets. Signet rings. Earrings. And beads. To make atonement.

Ourselves. Before the Lord. Moses and Eliezer. The priests. Received from them the gold. All crafted articles. And all the gold. Of the confirmation. That they presented to the Lord.

From the commanders of thousands. And the commanders of hundreds. Was 16,750 shekels. I don't know whether your Bible is on the footnote at the bottom. And the shekel was about 2.5 pounds.

Or 11 grams. So I don't know how much you could have got. If you went to We Buy Gold. In West Ealing. With 6,750 shekels.

[18:06] But I suspect. You could have made a fortune. And it's an enormous amount. But it was gladly given. And it was given gladly. Because God had spared them.

And God had delivered them. And they gave gladly to him. And Moses and Eliezer the priests. They brought him to the tent of meeting. As a memorial for the people of Israel.

Before the Lord. And if we too tonight. Understand the deliverance. Which is ours. In Christ. If we appreciate that. If we appreciate that the atonement.

Has been made for our sin. And what it costs. Well surely tonight. We can do nothing else. Than respond with an offering of our own. Our possessions.

Our hearts. Our lives. To the Saviour. To the Saviour. Who has redeemed us. At the cost of his blood.

[19:03] And if you find. And if you find tonight. That your heart is cold. And if you find an ungenerous. Impulse. In your life. And if you find.

That the Christian life. The cost of it. Is just too high. And the sacrifices. God. Expects you to make. Are too much. Will you go again. To Calvary. Don't you? And you live in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bleeding. And dying for you. And your heart will be warm. That's why we have the Lord's table. It is to strengthen our faith. In Christ.

It is to melt your. Cold. Hard heart. It is as you see the bread broken. As you see the wine poured out.

That is what your saviour did for you. And you will say. As you understand that. What shall I render to the Lord. For all his benefits.

[20:04] Towards me. Hebrews 13.12. The following. We are told that the Lord Jesus.

Also suffered. Outside of the camp. In order to sanctify. In order to make. Clean the people. Through his own blood. And what is the conclusion.

That the writer. Draws. He says. Verse 15. Of Hebrews 13. Therefore. Through him. Then let us. Continually. Offer up a sacrifice. Of praise to God. That is. The fruit of lips. That acknowledge. His name. Do not neglect.

To do good. And it doesn't stop there. But also. To share. What you have. For such sacrifices.

[21:03] Are pleasing to God. The day of judgment. Is coming. And it is more terrible. Than you can ever imagine. But if we are. Quite in Christ.

We have been delivered. It's more terrible. Than we can ever imagine. And yet. If we are in Christ. We have been. Delivered.

And he has experienced. Before us. How long should we live. What sort of people. Should we be. How much of ourselves. Should we be giving. To God. And to others. Well sometimes.

We forget. What we should do. To others. Because we forget. Don't we. What God has done. For us. Are we living. Like people. Who have been delivered. From judgment. By the mercy. And love of Christ. And are we showing it. Showing it. By our lives. And we come back.

[21 : 58] To the end tonight. Really. Where we finish this morning. A hundred years ago. World War One. Do you remember. What it was called. It was often used. This phrase. In the 1920s. It was described.

The First World War. As the war. To end all wars. People were so horrified. By what happened. In the First World War. They said. It must never.

Ever happen again. But we know. Sadly. It wasn't the war. To end all wars. It couldn't be. But there is. Such a war coming. There is.

Such a war coming. Thank God. The war. To end all wars. And God's. Final battle. Against Satan. And when it comes. The outcome. Is certain. As we saw this morning. He is defeated.

And he will be destroyed. But the question is. At the end of this evening. The same as. The question. This morning. What side will you be on?

[22 : 57] Let's pray.