

BIBLE BRIEFING

“One Nation, Under God”

NUMBERS 30 - 32

Introduction

Unity is powerful. It can establish a home; it can encourage a nation.

Disunity is just as powerful, but in a disruptive way. It ruins the home; it jeopardizes the nation.

The next few chapters of The Book of Numbers can teach us a lot about unity and disunity. The children of Israel were still on their way to the border of the Promised Land. They were ending the forty-year camping trip and would be establishing more permanent dwellings – both for individual families, and for all the families as a unique nation.

In chapter thirty, we'll see principles to maintain the unity of the home and family. In chapters thirty-one and thirty-two, we'll see the benefits of national unity; but we'll also see the bane of disunity.

Chapter Thirty – Unity at Home

It's a chapter on vows and oaths – on the importance of keeping your word. Words are far more significant than we sometimes think. There's a Quaker saying that goes like this: “Of your unspoken words, you are the master; of your spoken words, the servant; of your written words, the slave.”

Some people say it's wrong to ever make a vow, or take an oath. Not true! There are wedding vows; you swear oaths in court. Overall, I'd say just tell the truth and use your words carefully and sparingly.

There is a difference between “**vows**” and “**oaths**.” The vow was a promise to do a certain thing for the Lord, while the oath was a promise not to do a certain thing.

Men were expected to have integrity and keep their word:

Numbers 30:1 Then Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes concerning the children of Israel, saying, "This *is* the thing which the Lord has commanded:
Numbers 30:2 If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by some agreement, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

Women were treated differently with regard to vows and oaths. The first case is that of a single young woman at home:

Numbers 30:3 "Or if a woman makes a vow to the Lord, and binds *herself* by some agreement while in her father's house in her youth,
Numbers 30:4 and her father hears her vow and the agreement by which she has bound herself, and her father holds his peace, then all her vows shall stand, and every agreement with which she has bound herself shall stand.
Numbers 30:5 But if her father overrules her on the day that he hears, then none of her vows nor her agreements by which she has bound herself shall stand; and the Lord will release her, because her father overruled her.
Numbers 30:6 "If indeed she takes a husband, while bound by her vows or by a rash utterance from her lips by which she bound herself,
Numbers 30:7 and her husband hears *it*, and makes no response to her on the day that he hears, then her vows shall stand, and her agreements by which she bound herself shall stand.
Numbers 30:8 But if her husband overrules her on the day that he hears *it*, he shall make void her vow which she took and what she uttered with her lips, by which she bound herself, and the Lord will release her.

We're going to talk about headship in the home... But first I would note that the dad must have been pretty involved with his kids, to know what his daughter was saying and doing.

The next case is that of a widow or divorcee:

Numbers 30:9 "Also any vow of a widow or a divorced woman, by which she has bound herself, shall stand against her.

These women are experienced and mature and can make wise decisions, although age and experience aren't always a guarantee of wisdom. If they make promises to the Lord, these promises must be fulfilled.

The final case is the married woman:

Numbers 30:10 “If she vowed in her husband’s house, or bound herself by an agreement with an oath,
Numbers 30:11 and her husband heard *it*, and made no response to her *and* did not overrule her, then all her vows shall stand, and every agreement by which she bound herself shall stand.
Numbers 30:12 But if her husband truly made them void on the day he heard *them*, then whatever proceeded from her lips concerning her vows or concerning the agreement binding her, it shall not stand; her husband has made them void, and the Lord will release her.
Numbers 30:13 Every vow and every binding oath to afflict her soul, her husband may confirm it, or her husband may make it void.
Numbers 30:14 Now if her husband makes no response whatever to her from day to day, then he confirms all her vows or all the agreements that bind her; he confirms them, because he made no response to her on the day that he heard *them*.
Numbers 30:15 But if he does make them void after he has heard *them*, then he shall bear her guilt.”
Numbers 30:16 These *are* the statutes which the Lord commanded Moses, between a man and his wife, and between a father and his daughter in her youth in her father’s house.

Written into this ruling are some important truths, not the least of which is the power of speech. To make a promise is to obligate oneself to the Lord, whether people realize this or not. The foundations of society today are eroding because of unkept promises, whether they be official contracts, marriage vows, political pledges, or words spoken on the witness stand. We expect the Lord to keep His promises, and He expects us to keep ours. Truth is the cement that holds society together.

A second truth is the importance of authority and subordination in society and in the home. While all people are created equal before God and the Law, there are still levels of authority and responsibility that must be respected. The unmarried girl in her father’s home is subject to her father’s will, and the married woman is subject to her husband’s will. Before making vows, the young girl should consult her father and the wife her husband, and the engaged girl should speak with her betrothed.

Relationships bring responsibilities, and to rush into unwise commitments is to incur penalties that can be costly.

Chapters Thirty-one & Thirty-two – Unity & Disunity In The Nation

God's people were to act as one to defeat their enemies. God determined to destroy the Midianites. Though the people of Israel were wrong in getting entangled with the Midianites earlier, at Baal Peor, Midian was wrong in following Balaam's counsel and trying to destroy Israel.

By the way: The church has no mandate from God to engage in "holy wars" because our enemies aren't flesh and blood and our weapons are spiritual. The sword of the Spirit is the only sword we use to advance the cause of Christ.

Numbers 31:1 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

Numbers 31:2 "Take vengeance on the Midianites for the children of Israel. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people."

This would be Moses' last battle. Everyone wants to finish strong.

Numbers 31:3 So Moses spoke to the people, saying, "Arm some of yourselves for war, and let them go against the Midianites to take vengeance for the Lord on Midian.

Numbers 31:4 A thousand from each tribe of all the tribes of Israel you shall send to the war."

Numbers 31:5 So there were recruited from the divisions of Israel one thousand from *each* tribe, twelve thousand armed for war.

This was really a very small number. I'm guessing there were many more who wanted to go and fight, but were restricted. Well, they could still help win the battle! Prayer... Worship... Readiness...

Numbers 31:6 Then Moses sent them to the war, one thousand from *each* tribe; he sent them to the war with Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the holy articles and the signal trumpets in his hand.

Joshua would have been leading the army; but Phinehas was there, to reward him for his earlier zeal, and to remind the people that their victories were essentially spiritual in nature.

Devotional: "The sword of the Lord, and Gideon..."

Numbers 31:7 And they warred against the Midianites, just as the Lord commanded Moses, and they killed all the males.

Numbers 31:8 They killed the kings of Midian with *the rest of* those who were killed - Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. Balaam the son of Beor they also killed with the sword.

Balaam didn't have very long to enjoy the things of this world. No one does, really.

Numbers 31:9 And the children of Israel took the women of Midian captive, with their little ones, and took as spoil all their cattle, all their flocks, and all their goods.

Numbers 31:10 They also burned with fire all the cities where they dwelt, and all their forts.

I feel obligated to point out each time there is a slaughter that these were wicked, evil folks; and that God had given them ample opportunity to repent.

Failure to follow Moses' orders brings them into a state of disunity and division:

Numbers 31:12 Then they brought the captives, the booty, and the spoil to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the children of Israel, to the camp in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, *across from* Jericho.

Numbers 31:13 And Moses, Eleazar the priest, and all the leaders of the congregation, went to meet them outside the camp.

Numbers 31:14 But Moses was angry with the officers of the army, *with* the captains over thousands and captains over hundreds, who had come from the battle.

Numbers 31:15 And Moses said to them: "Have you kept all the women alive?"

Numbers 31:16 Look, these *women* caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord.

The presence of the Midianite women and girls in the camp only gave further opportunity for the sin that had almost destroyed Israel. The nation had won the battle but was now in danger of losing the victory, a mistake that God's people have made more than once down through the centuries.

Numbers 31:17 Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man intimately.

Numbers 31:18 But keep alive for yourselves all the young girls who have not known a man intimately.

Numbers 31:19 And as for you, remain outside the camp seven days; whoever has killed any person, and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves and your captives on the third day and on the seventh day.

Numbers 31:20 Purify every garment, everything made of leather, everything woven of goats' *hair*, and everything made of wood."

Numbers 31:21 Then Eleazar the priest said to the men of war who had gone to the battle, "This *is* the ordinance of the law which the Lord commanded Moses:

Numbers 31:22 "Only the gold, the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead,

Numbers 31:23 everything that can endure fire, you shall put through the fire, and it shall be clean; and it shall be purified with the water of purification. But all that cannot endure fire you shall put through water.

Numbers 31:24 And you shall wash your clothes on the seventh day and be clean, and afterward you may come into the camp."

Moses commanded that the male children be slain as well as the women and girls who were not virgins. The virgins remaining could be taken by the men to be servants. Most were under age twelve; they would be raised in the Hebrew culture, to follow Jehovah.

Since the soldiers had been defiled in battle by touching dead bodies, they had to obey the law of cleansing, and Moses applied this same rule to the female captives who were now expected to obey Jewish law. The great amount of wealth that was taken from Midian also had to be purified, either by fire or by the water of cleansing, and it would take a week for this purification to be completed.

This week-long period of purification would remind the 12,000 soldiers and the people in the camp that the nations they would face in Canaan were dangerous, not only because they were enemies but they were also unclean sinners who could tempt them and defile them. Moses wanted to prevent another defeat like Baal Peor.

Verses twenty-five through forty-seven describe the division of the spoil. The people and animals that Israel took as spoils of war were distributed three ways: the soldiers got half, the people in the camp got half, and both the soldiers and the people gave a percentage to the Lord. After all, it was the Lord who gave them the victory.

The soldiers were commanded to bring 1 person or animal out of 500, a total of 840; and the community was to bring 1 person or animal out of 50, which totaled 8,400. These animals and people were given to

Eleazar the high priest to be used for the tabernacle ministry. The women were given tasks to perform to assist the priests and Levites, from whom, we trust, they learned to know and obey the true and living God of Israel.

Numbers 31:48 Then the officers who *were* over thousands of the army, the captains of thousands and captains of hundreds, came near to Moses;
Numbers 31:49 and they said to Moses, “Your servants have taken a count of the men of war who *are* under our command, and not a man of us is missing.
Numbers 31:50 Therefore we have brought an offering for the Lord, what every man found of ornaments of gold: armlets and bracelets and signet rings and earrings and necklaces, to make atonement for ourselves before the Lord.”
Numbers 31:51 So Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from them, all the fashioned ornaments.
Numbers 31:52 And all the gold of the offering that they offered to the Lord, from the captains of thousands and captains of hundreds, was sixteen thousand seven hundred and fifty shekels.
Numbers 31:53 (The men of war had taken spoil, every man for himself.)
Numbers 31:54 And Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the tabernacle of meeting as a memorial for the children of Israel before the Lord.

When the officers counted their men after the battle, they discovered that not one Israelite soldier had been lost! Only the Lord could have done such a miracle and the officers wanted to show their gratitude to Him. They brought a special gift for the sanctuary of God out of the spoils they themselves had received. It’s one thing to bring offerings to God because it’s our duty, and quite something else because we love Him and appreciate what He’s done for us.

Some battles are with friends and family, not enemies. In Chapter Thirty-two, the tribes of Reuben and Gad want permission to settle short of the Promised Land – threatening the unity of the nation.

Numbers 32:1 Now the children of Reuben and the children of Gad had a very great multitude of livestock; and when they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, that indeed the region *was* a place for livestock,
Numbers 32:2 the children of Gad and the children of Reuben came and spoke to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the leaders of the congregation, saying,
Numbers 32:3 “Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Shebam, Nebo, and Beon,
Numbers 32:4 the country which the Lord defeated before the congregation of Israel, *is* a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.”

Numbers 32:5 Therefore they said, "If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession. Do not take us over the Jordan."

Their request sounded reasonable; but it would separate them from the other ten tribes, who were about to embark on a military campaign on the opposite side of the Jordan River.

Numbers 32:6 And Moses said to the children of Gad and to the children of Reuben: "Shall your brethren go to war while you sit here?"

Numbers 32:7 Now why will you discourage the heart of the children of Israel from going over into the land which the Lord has given them?

Numbers 32:8 Thus your fathers did when I sent them away from Kadesh Barnea to see the land.

Numbers 32:9 For when they went up to the Valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the children of Israel, so that they did not go into the land which the Lord had given them.

Numbers 32:10 So the Lord's anger was aroused on that day, and He swore an oath, saying,

Numbers 32:11 'Surely none of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and above, shall see the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because they have not wholly followed Me,

Numbers 32:12 except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, the Kenizzite, and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the Lord.'

Numbers 32:13 So the Lord's anger was aroused against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was gone.

Numbers 32:14 And look! You have risen in your fathers' place, a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the Lord against Israel.

Numbers 32:15 For if you turn away from following Him, He will once again leave them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all these people."

Just as the ten spies had discouraged the whole nation at Kadesh-Barnea, and led the people into thirty-eight wasted years, so these two tribes could discourage Israel by quitting at the very borders of their inheritance. More than that, their selfish attitude could arouse the anger of the Lord, and He might send judgment as He had done before when the people sinned. Even worse, He might just abandon the nation and let them die in the wilderness.

Moses called them "a brood of sinful men." With the facts he had, this was a solid conclusion! Today, the 'name calling' would take precedent and dwarf the sin of the two tribes.

Numbers 32:16 Then they came near to him and said: “We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock, and cities for our little ones,
Numbers 32:17 but we ourselves will be armed, ready to go before the children of Israel until we have brought them to their place; and our little ones will dwell in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land.
Numbers 32:18 We will not return to our homes until every one of the children of Israel has received his inheritance.
Numbers 32:19 For we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has fallen to us on this eastern side of the Jordan.”

They carefully explained to Moses that they were willing and prepared to enter the land and fight alongside their brothers until Canaan had been conquered. Only *after* the other tribes had received their inheritance would the two tribes (and later half of Manasseh) return to the Transjordan territory to settle down. However, first they would like to build fortified cities, to protect their wives and children, and pens for their cattle. Then they would join the other tribes in crossing the river and confronting the enemy.

Numbers 32:20 Then Moses said to them: “If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves before the Lord for the war,
Numbers 32:21 and all your armed men cross over the Jordan before the Lord until He has driven out His enemies from before Him,
Numbers 32:22 and the land is subdued before the Lord, then afterward you may return and be blameless before the Lord and before Israel; and this land shall be your possession before the Lord.
Numbers 32:23 But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the Lord; and be sure your sin will find you out.
Numbers 32:24 Build cities for your little ones and folds for your sheep, and do what has proceeded out of your mouth.”
Numbers 32:25 And the children of Gad and the children of Reuben spoke to Moses, saying: “Your servants will do as my lord commands.
Numbers 32:26 Our little ones, our wives, our flocks, and all our livestock will be there in the cities of Gilead;
Numbers 32:27 but your servants will cross over, every man armed for war, before the Lord to battle, just as my lord says.”
Numbers 32:28 So Moses gave command concerning them to Eleazar the priest, to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the chief fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel.
Numbers 32:29 And Moses said to them: “If the children of Gad and the children of Reuben cross over the Jordan with you, every man armed for battle before the Lord, and the land is subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilead as a possession.

Numbers 32:30 But if they do not cross over armed with you, they shall have possessions among you in the land of Canaan.”

Numbers 32:31 Then the children of Gad and the children of Reuben answered, saying: “As the Lord has said to your servants, so we will do.

Numbers 32:32 We will cross over armed before the Lord into the land of Canaan, but the possession of our inheritance *shall remain* with us on this side of the Jordan.”

Numbers 32:33 So Moses gave to the children of Gad, to the children of Reuben, and to half the tribe of Manasseh the son of Joseph, the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites and the kingdom of Og king of Bashan, the land with its cities within the borders, the cities of the surrounding country.

Numbers 32:34 And the children of Gad built Dibon and Ataroth and Aroer,

Numbers 32:35 Atroth and Shophan and Jazer and Jogbehah,

Numbers 32:36 Beth Nimrah and Beth Haran, fortified cities, and folds for sheep.

Numbers 32:37 And the children of Reuben built Heshbon and Elealeh and Kirjathaim,

Numbers 32:38 Nebo and Baal Meon (*their* names being changed) and Shibmah; and they gave *other* names to the cities which they built.

Numbers 32:39 And the children of Machir the son of Manasseh went to Gilead and took it, and dispossessed the Amorites who *were* in it.

Numbers 32:40 So Moses gave Gilead to Machir the son of Manasseh, and he dwelt in it.

Numbers 32:41 Also Jair the son of Manasseh went and took its small towns, and called them Havoth Jair.

Numbers 32:42 Then Nobah went and took Kenath and its villages, and he called it Nobah, after his own name.

Moses repeated their promise to the Gadites and Reubenites and added a word of warning: If they didn't keep their promise, they would be sinning against the Lord, and their sin would catch up with them! Their sin would be failure to keep their vow and unwillingness to assist their brothers and sisters in the task God had called them to do.

Moses wouldn't be alive when the nation crossed the river, so he called Eleazar, Joshua, and the leaders of the tribes and told them of the agreement. It would be their responsibility to see to it that the Transjordanic tribes kept their promise and crossed over the river to battle the nations in Canaan. The land they requested was theirs, but they would lose it if they didn't keep their promise.

The nation lingered long enough for the two and a half tribes to move into their land, defeat the enemies that remained, and get their

families and flocks settled safely. But we can't help wondering if these Transjordanic tribes made a wise choice. They were outside the land of promise and separated from the rest of the nation. They made their choice only on the basis of personal gain: the land was good for their flocks and herds. Like Lot, they were walking by sight and not by faith. The tribes did keep their promise, but in spite of that, their location across the Jordan created some problems – as we will see in the Book of Joshua.

Moses' concession was to their weakness. Just because he allowed this, doesn't mean it was God's preference.

Conclusion

Claiming the inheritance in the Promised Land is an illustration of the different ways believers today relate to the will of God and the inheritance He has for us now in Jesus Christ:

1. Some people are like the older generation of Jews that perished in their wandering and never entered the land.
2. Others are like the ten spies who visited the land and saw its wealth but failed to enter in.
3. The Transjordanic tribes entered the land but didn't stay there. They preferred to live on the border and raise their cattle.
4. God wants His people to be like the new generation that trusted God, entered the land, claimed the victory, and enjoyed the blessings.