

CHAPTER 31

This chapter belongs to “the book of the wars of the Lord,” in which it is probable it was inserted. It is the history of a holy war, a war with Midian. Here is,

- I.** A divine command for the war (v. 1, 2).
- II.** The undertaking of the war (v. 3-6).
- III.** The glorious success of it (v. 7-12).
- IV.** Their triumphant return from the war.
 - 1.** The respect Moses paid to the soldiers (v. 13).
 - 2.** The rebuke he gave them for sparing the women (v. 14-18).
 - 3.** The directions he gave them for the purifying of themselves and their effects (v. 19-24).
 - 4.** The distribution of the spoil they had taken, one half to the soldiers, the other to the congregation, and a tribute to the Lord out of each (v. 25-47).
 - 5.** The free-will offering of the officers (v. 48, etc.).

~~GEN~~ NUMBERS 31:1-6

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE MIDIANITES

Here,

I. The Lord of hosts gives orders to Moses to make war upon the Midianites, and his commission no doubt justified this war, though it will not serve to justify the like without such commission. The Midianites were the posterity of Abraham by Ketuarah, ~~GEN~~ Genesis 25:2. Some of them settled south of Canaan, among whom Jethro lived, and they retained the worship of the true God; but these were settled east of Canaan, and had fallen into idolatry, neighbours to, and in confederacy with, the Moabites. Their land was not designed to be given to Israel, nor would Israel have meddled with them if they had not made themselves obnoxious to their resentment by sending their bad women among them to draw them to whoredom and idolatry. This was the provocation, this was the quarrel. For this (says God) *avenge Israel of the Midianites*, v. 2.

1. God would have the Midianites chastised, an inroad made upon that part of their country which lay next to the camp of Israel, and which was probably more concerned in that mischief than the Moabites, who therefore were let alone. God will have us to reckon those our worst enemies that draw us to sin, and to avoid them; and since *every man is tempted when he is drawn aside of his own lusts*, and these are the Midianites which ensnare us with their wiles, on them we should avenge ourselves, not only make no league with them, but make war upon them by living a life of mortification. God had taken vengeance on his own people for yielding to the Midianites' temptations; now the Midianites, that gave the temptation, must be reckoned with, for *the deceived and the deceiver are his* (¹⁸²⁶Job 12:16), both accountable to his tribunal; and, though *judgment begin at the house of God*, it shall not end there, ¹⁸⁴⁷1 Peter 4:17. There is a day coming when vengeance will be taken on those that have introduced errors and corruptions into the church, and the devil that deceived men will be *cast into the lake of fire*. Israel's quarrel with Amalek, that fought against them, was not avenged till long after: but their quarrel with Midian, that debauched them, was speedily avenged, for they were looked upon as much more the dangerous and malicious enemies.

2. God would have it done by Moses, in his life-time, that he who had so deeply resented that injury might have the satisfaction of seeing it avenged. "See this execution done upon the enemies of God and Israel, and *afterwards thou shalt be gathered to thy people*." This was the only piece of service of this kind that Moses must further do, and then he has accomplished, as a hireling, his day, and shall have his *quietus* — *enter into rest*: hitherto his usefulness must come, and no further; the wars of Canaan must be carried on by another hand. Note, God sometimes removes useful men when we think they can be ill spared; but this ought to satisfy us, that they are never removed till they have done the work which was appointed them.

II. Moses gives orders to the people to prepare for this expedition, v. 3. He would not have the whole body of the camp to stir, but they must *arm some of themselves to the war*, such as were either most fit or most forward, and *avenge the Lord of Midian*. God said, *Avenge Israel*; Moses says, *Avenge the Lord*; for the interests of God and Israel are united, and the cause of both is one and the same. And if God, in what he does, shows himself jealous for the honour of Israel, surely Israel, in what they do, ought to show themselves jealous for the glory of God. Then only we can

justify the avenging of ourselves when it is the vengeance of the Lord that we engage in. Nay, for this reason we are forbidden to avenge ourselves, because God has said, *Vengeance is mine, I will repay.*

III. A detachment is drawn out accordingly for this service, 1000 *out of every tribe*, 12,000 in all, a small number in comparison with what they could have sent, and it is probable small in comparison with the number of the enemies they were sent against. But God would teach them that it is all one to him *to save by many or by few*, ^{404b}1 Samuel 14:6.

IV. Phinehas the son of Eleazar is sent along with them. It is strange that no mention is made of Joshua in this great action. If he was general of these forces, who do we not find him leading them out? If he tarried at home, why do we not find him meeting them with Moses at their return? It is probable, each tribe having a captain of its own thousand, there was no general, but they proceeded in the order of their march through the wilderness, Judah first, and the rest in their posts, under the command of their respective captains, spoken of v. 48. But, the war being a holy war, Phinehas was their common head, not to supply the place of a general, but, by the oracle of God, to determine the resolves of their counsels of war, in which the captains of thousands would all acquiesce, and according to which they would act in conjunction. He therefore took with him the holy instruments or vessels, probably the breast-plate of judgment, by which God might be consulted in any emergency. Though he was not yet the high priest, yet he might be delegated *pro hac vice* — *for this particular occasion*, to bear the urim and thummim, as ^{402b}1 Samuel 23:6. And there was a particular reason for sending Phinehas to preside in this expedition; he has already signalized himself for his zeal against the Midianites and their cursed arts to ensnare Israel when he slew Cozbi, a daughter of a chief house in Midian, for her impudence in the matter of Peor, ^{405b}Numbers 25:15. He that had so well used the sword of justice against a particular criminal was best qualified to guide the sword of war against the whole nation. *Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.*

~~GENE~~ NUMBERS 31:7-12

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE MIDIANITES

Here is,

1. The descent which this little army of Israelites made, under the divine commission, conduct, and command, upon the country of Midian. They *warred against the Midianites*. It is very probable that they first published their manifesto, showing the reasons of the war, and requiring them to give up the ringleaders of the mischief to justice; for such afterwards was the *law* (~~DEUT~~ Deuteronomy 20:10), and such the *practice*, (~~JUDG~~ Judges 20:12, 13. But the Midianites justifying what they had done, and standing by those that had done it, the Israelites attacked them with fire and sword, and all the pious fury with which their zeal for God and their people inspired them.

2. The execution (the military execution) they did in this descent.

(1.) *They slew all the males* (v. 7), that is, all they met with as far as they went; they put them all to the sword, and gave no quarter. But that they did not slay all the males of the nation is certain, for we find the Midianites a powerful and formidable enemy to Israel in the days of Gideon; and they were the Midianites of this country, for they are reckoned with the *children of the east*, (~~JUDG~~ Judges 6:3.

(2.) *They slew the kings of Midian* the same that are called *elders of Midian* (~~NUM~~ Numbers 22:4), and the *dukes of Sihon*, (~~JOSH~~ Joshua 13:21. Five of these princes are here named, one of whom is *Zur*, probably the same Zur whose daughter Cosbi was, (~~NUM~~ Numbers 25:15.

(3.) They slew Balaam. Many conjectures there are as to what brought Balaam among the Midianites at this time; it is probable that the Midianites, having intelligence of the march of this army of Israelites against them, hired Balaam to come and assist them with his enchantments, that if he could not prevail to act offensively in their favour, by cursing the armies of Israel, yet he might act defensively, by blessing the country of Midian. Whatever was the occasion of his being there, God's overruling providence brought him thither, and there his just vengeance found him. Had he himself believed what he said of the happy

state of Israel, he would not have herded thus with the enemies of Israel; but justly does he die the death of the wicked (though he pretended to desire that of the righteous), and go *down slain to the pit with the uncircumcised*, who rebelled thus against the convictions of his own conscience. The Midianites' wives were Balaam's projects, it was therefore just that he should perish with them, ^{<3045>}Hosea 4:5. Now was *his* folly made manifest to all men, who foretold the fate of others, but foresaw not his own.

(4.) They took all the *women and children captives*, v. 9.

(5.) They *burnt their cities and goodly castles* (v. 10), not designing to inhabit them themselves (that country was out of their line), but they thus prevented those who had made their escape from sheltering themselves in their own country and settling there again. Some understand it of their idol-temples; it was fit that they should share in this vengeance.

(6.) They plundered the country, and carried off all the cattle and valuable goods, and so returned to the camp of Israel laden with a very rich booty, v. 9, 11, 12. Thus (as when they came out of Egypt) they were enriched with the spoils of their enemies, and furnished with stock for the good land into which God was bringing them.

^{<0813>}NUMBERS 31:13-24

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE MIDIANITES

We have here the triumphant return of the army of Israel from the war with Midian, and here,

I. They were met with great respect, v. 13. Moses himself, notwithstanding his age and gravity, walked out of the camp to congratulate them on their victory, and to grace the solemnity of their triumphs. Public successes should be publicly acknowledged, to the glory of God, and the encouragement of those that have jeopardated their lives in their country's cause.

II. They were severely reprov'd for saving the women alive. It is very probable that Moses had commanded them to kill the women, at least this was implied in the general order to avenge Israel of the Midianites; the

execution having reference to that crime, their drawing them in to the worship of Peor, it was easy to conclude that the women, who were the principal criminals, must not be spared. What! says Moses, *have you saved the women alive?* v. 15. He was moved with a holy indignation at the sight of them. *These were those that caused the children of Israel to commit this trespass;* and therefore,

1. It is just that they should die. The law in case of whoredom was, *The adulterer and adulteress should surely be put to death.* God had put to death the adulterers of Israel by the plague, and now it was fit that the adulteresses of Midian, especially since they had been the tempters, should be put to death by the sword.

2. “It is dangerous to let them live; they will be still tempting the Israelites to uncleanness, and so your captives will be your conquerors and a second time your destroyers.” Severe orders are therefore given that all the grown women should be slain in cold blood, and only the female children spared.

III. They were obliged to purify themselves, according to the ceremony of the law, and to abide without the camp seven days, till their purification was accomplished. For,

1. They had imbrued their hands in blood, by which though they had not contracted any moral guilt, the war being just and lawful, yet they were brought under a ceremonial uncleanness, which rendered them unfit to come near the tabernacle till they were purified. Thus God would preserve in their minds a dread and detestation of murder. David must not build the temple because he had been a *man of war, and had shed blood,* ~~138B~~ 1 Chronicles 28:3.

2. They could not but have touched dead bodies, by which they were polluted, and that required they should be purified with the water of separation, v. 19, 20, 24.

IV. They must likewise purify the spoil they had taken, the captives (v. 19) and all the goods, v. 21-23. What would bear the fire must pass through the fire, and what would not must be washed with water. These things had been use by Midianites, and, having now come into the possession of Israelites, it was fit that they should be sanctified to the service of that holy nation and the honour of their holy God. To us now every thing is sanctified by the word and prayer, if we are sanctified by the

Spirit, who is compared both to fire and water. *To the pure all things are pure.*

~~GENES~~ NUMBERS 31:25-47

DISTRIBUTION OF THE SPOIL

We have here the distribution of the spoil which was taken in this expedition against Midian. God himself directed how it should be distributed, and Moses and Eleazar did according to the directions, and thus unhappy contests among themselves were prevented and the victory was made to turn to the common benefit. It was fit that he who gave them the prey should order the disposal of it. All we have is from God, and therefore must be subject to his will.

I. The prey is ordered to be divided into two parts, one for the 12,000 men that undertook the war, and the other for the congregation. The prey that was divided seems to have been only the captives and the cattle; as for the plate, and jewels, and other goods, every man kept what he took, as is intimated, v. 50-53. That only was distributed which would be of use for the stocking of that good land into which they were going. Now observe,

1. That the one half of the prey was given to the whole congregation, Moses allotting to each tribe its share, and then leaving it to the heads of the tribes to divide their respective shares among themselves, according to their families. The war was undertaken on the behalf of the whole congregation; they would all have been ready to *go to the help of the Lord against the mighty*, if they had been so ordered, and they did help, it is likely, by their prayers; and therefore God appoints that those that *tarried at home should divide the spoil*, ~~GENES~~ Psalm 68:12. David, in his time, made it a *statute and an ordinance for Israel*, that, as his part is that *goes down to the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff*, ~~GENES~~ 1 Samuel 30:24, 25. Those that are employed in public trusts must not think to benefit themselves only by their toils and hazards, but must aim at the advantage of the community.

2. That yet the 12,000 that went to the battle had as much for their share as the whole congregation (which were fifty times as many) had for theirs; so that the particular persons of the soldiery had a much better share than any

of their brethren that tarried at home: and good reason they should. The greater pains we take, and the greater hazards we run, in the service of God and our generation, the greater will our recompence be at last; for *God is not unrighteous to forget the work and labour of love.*

II. God was to have a tribute out of it, as an acknowledgment of his sovereignty over them in general, and that he was their king to whom *tribute was due*, and particularly of his interest in this war and the gains of it, he having given them their success; and that the priests, the Lord's receivers, might have something added to the provision made for their maintenance. Note, Whatever we have, God must have his dues out of it. And here (as before) the soldiers are favoured above the rest of the congregation, for out of the people's share God required one in fifty, but out of the soldier's share only one in 500, because the people got theirs easily, without any peril or fatigue. The less opportunity we have of honouring God with our personal services the more it is expected we should honour him with our substance. The tribute out of the soldiers' half was given to the priests (v. 29), that out of the people's half was given to the Levites, v. 30. For the priests were taken from among the Levites, as these soldiers from among the people, for special and hazardous service, and their pay was proportioned accordingly.

~~GEN~~ NUMBERS 31:48-54

DISTRIBUTION OF THE SPOIL

Here is a great example of piety and devotion in the officers of the army, the colonels, that are called *captains of thousands*, and the inferior officers that were *captains of hundreds*; they came to Moses as their general and commander-in-chief, and, though he was now going off the stage they very humbly and respectfully addressed themselves to him, calling themselves his *servants*; the honours they had won did not puff them up, so as to make them forget their duty to him. Observe in their address to them,

1. The pious notice they take of God's wonderful goodness to them in this late expedition, in preserving not only their own lives, but the lives of all the men of war that they had under their charge; so that, upon the review of their muster-roll, it appeared there was not one missing, v. 49. This was very extraordinary, and perhaps cannot be paralleled in any history. So

many thousands of lives jeopardated in the high places of the field, and not one lost, either by the sword of the enemy or by any disease or disaster. This was *the Lord's doing*, and cannot but be marvellous in the eyes of those that consider how the lives of all men, especially soldiers, are continually in their hands. It is an evidence of the tender feeling which these commanders had for their soldiers, and that their lives were very precious to them, that they looked upon it as a mercy to themselves that none of those under their charge miscarried. *Of all that were given them they had lost none*; so precious also is the blood of Christ's subjects and soldiers to him, ^{<1974>}Psalm 72:14.

2. The pious acknowledgment they make for this favour: *Therefore we have brought an oblation to the Lord*, v. 50. The oblation they brought was out of that which *every man had gotten*, and it was gotten honestly by a divine warrant. Thus every man should lay by *according as God has prospered him*, ^{<4312>}1 Corinthians 16:2. For where God sows plentifully in the gifts of his bounty he expects to reap accordingly in the fruits of our piety and charity. The tabernacle first, and the temple afterwards, were beautified and enriched with the spoils taken from the enemies of Israel; as by David (^{<3081>}2 Samuel 8:11, 12), and his captains, ^{<4335>}1 Chronicles 26:26, 27. We should never take any thing to ourselves, in war or trade, which we cannot in faith consecrate a part of to God, who *hates robbery for burnt-offerings*; but, when God has remarkably preserved and prospered us, he expects that we should make some particular return of gratitude to him. As to this oblation,

(1.) The captains offered it to *make an atonement for their souls*, v. 50. Instead of coming to Moses to demand a recompence for the good service they had done in *avenging the Lord of Midian*, or to set up trophies of their victory for the immortalizing of their own names, they bring an oblation to *make atonement for their souls*, being conscious to themselves, as the best men must be even in their best services, that they had been defective in their duty, not only in that instance for which they were reprov'd (v. 14), but in many others; *for there is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not*.

(2.) Moses accepted it, and laid it up in the tabernacle *as a memorial for the children of Israel* (v. 54), that is, a monument of God's goodness to them, that they might be encouraged to trust in him in their further wars, and a monument of their gratitude to God (sacrifices are said to be

memorials), that he, being well pleased with this thankful acknowledgment of favours bestowed, might continue and repeat his mercies to them.