



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

BIBLE SURVEY

THE UN-DEVOTIONAL

NUMBERS

Week 4

Bending the Rules

Numbers 25:1-18

OPENING
up to the Word

DIGGING
into the Word

How many sexual scandals can you count that have hurt the leadership of a family, church or nation?

1. Which parties were held responsible for Israel's sin of sexual immorality and national apostasy (25:3-5, 14-15, 17-18; also 31:7-18; see notes)?
2. Why did God get so angry with the Israelites? What was to be their punishment?
3. Note the stark parallels: (a) between the blessing of Israel by Balaam and the sin of the Israelites (also by Balaam; see notes), (b) between their flagrant sin and its radical solution, (c) between the leaders' idolatrous contempt for God's name and Phinehas' single-minded zeal for God's honor. Would Phineas' response be rewarded in the New Testament? Why or why not?

LIVING
out the Word

1. God killed 24,000 people to punish Israel for the sins of a few, in addition to those who were guilty. Do you think that did any lasting good? How?
2. Would you tend to react like Phineas or like Jesus (Jn 8:1-11)?
2. Do you think God's wrath needs appeasement in New Testament times? Bear in mind that Jesus is God. Consider the significance of the cross of Christ—did Jesus have to die because we offend God and tarnish his honor?

WINDOW
on the Word

*Israel is led into **sexual sin with Moabite and Midianite women**, which results in worship of Canaanite fertility gods. Only later is the ringleader identified as "Balaam son of Beor" (25:1-3; see 31:8, 16; Rev 2:14), the same person who had just blessed Israel (see Nu 23-24). Pagan religious systems often incorporated prostitution as a way to please the gods. Cult prostitutes assisted in the worship of Baal, the god of rain and harvest and the most popular deity in the region.*

*“So Israel
joined in
worshiping
the Baal of
Peor. And
the Lord’s
anger burned
against
them.”*

Numbers 25:3



Storm-god Baal from Ugarit, Syria, The Louvre, Paris

Stand Up and Be Counted

Numbers 26:1-65

OPENING
up to the Word

Is there a bean-counter in your family—always adding up numbers and checking each list twice? What do you count most often? Why are the numbers so important?

DIGGING
into the Word

1. Why did God want Moses to take another census?
2. Which tribe experienced the greatest loss in numbers since the last census? Why do you suppose that was (see 25:9, 14)?
3. Which tribe experienced the greatest gain in the intervening 38 years? Any reason why?
4. Note that the total number of men remained roughly the same after God chose a new generation (26:51-54, 63-65)? What is the significance of these relative numbers?

LIVING
out the Word

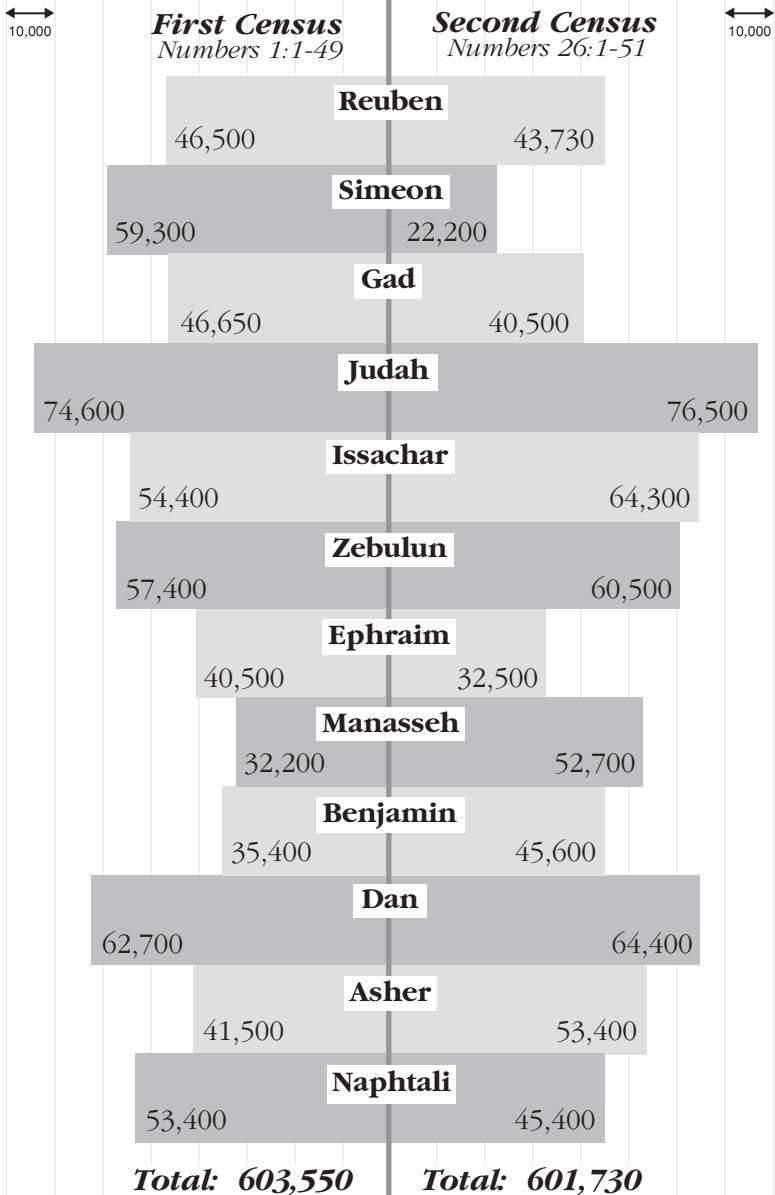
1. Can you remember acts of rebellion in your life?
2. Can you trust God to redeem all your sins?
3. Does your family come from a long line of Christ-followers—or are you the first generation as far as you know?

WINDOW
on the Word

*In this **second major census** (ch. 26), God turns from the first generation to the second. The new generation, enumerated here (see chart on facing page), are the children of those who participated in the first major census, taken 38 years earlier (ch. 1–2). Despite their repeated sin and rebellion, God will again bless Israel and complete his plan of salvation through his chosen people.*

The Numbers Game

*Comparison of the two major censuses—38 years apart.
Number of men 20 years or older, capable of military service.**



* Levites counted separately: 3:14-39

Transition Team

Numbers 27:1-23

OPENING
up to the Word

Have you experienced a transition in leadership?
Were you willing to accept the change?

DIGGING
into the Word

1. Suppose you were a lawyer representing the daughters of Zelophehad (27:1-11). How would you state your case before Moses?
2. The rule about daughters inheriting land was unprecedented. How come? (a) women didn't count for much, (b) women were not fiscally responsible, (c) there was no land to divide until then.
3. Disenfranchised women were included, but Moses himself was excluded (27:12-14). Why? What happened at the "waters of Meribah" (see 20:1-13)?
4. How did Moses take this news (27:15-17; compare Dt 3:23-28)?
5. Why and how was Joshua chosen as Moses' successor (27:18-23; see ch. 13-14)?

LIVING
out the Word

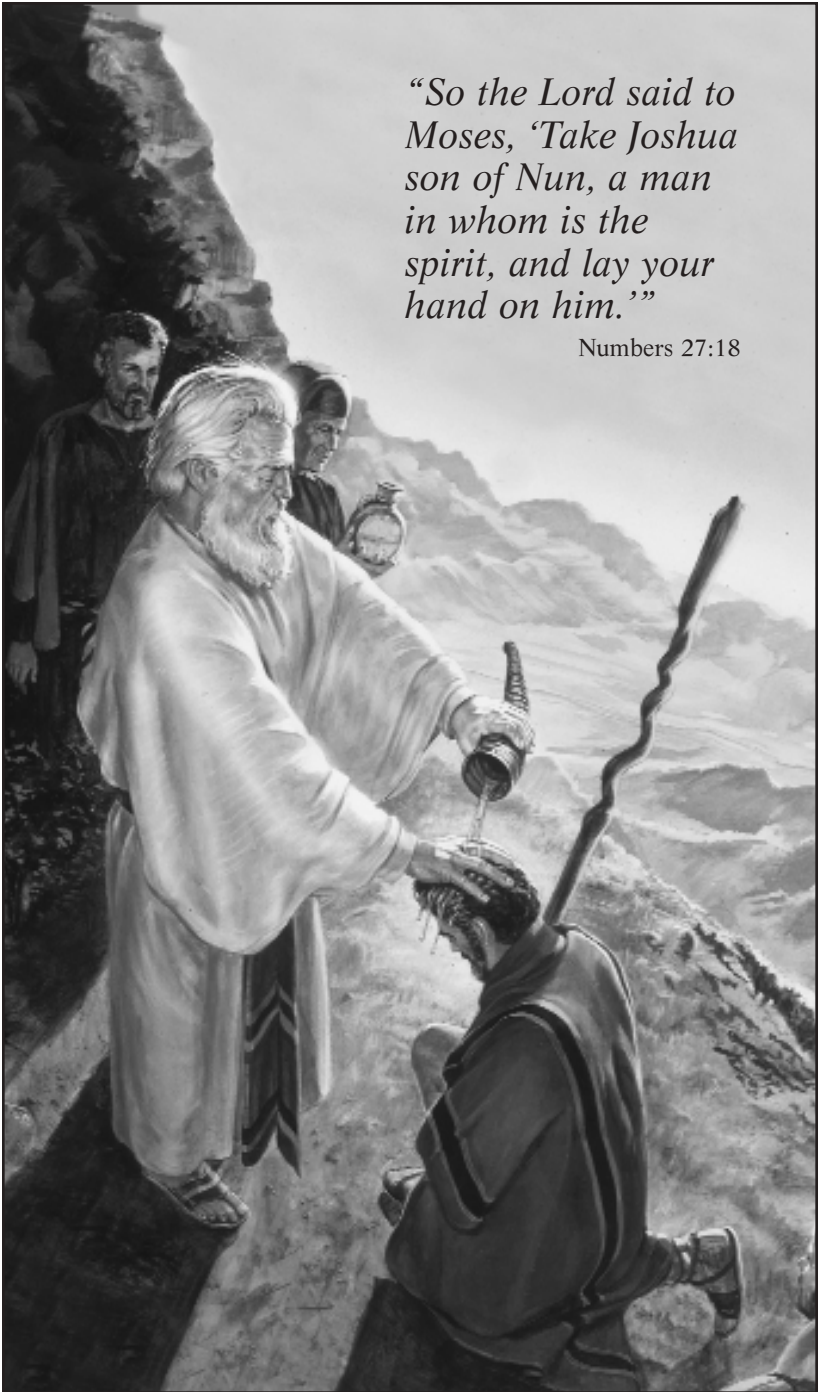
1. Chapter 27 puts apparent unfairness in divine perspective. What in your life seems unfair?
2. Has God given you a leadership position? Do you have a planned successor? Are you praying for that person?
3. Do you see God at work in that transition?

WINDOW
on the Word

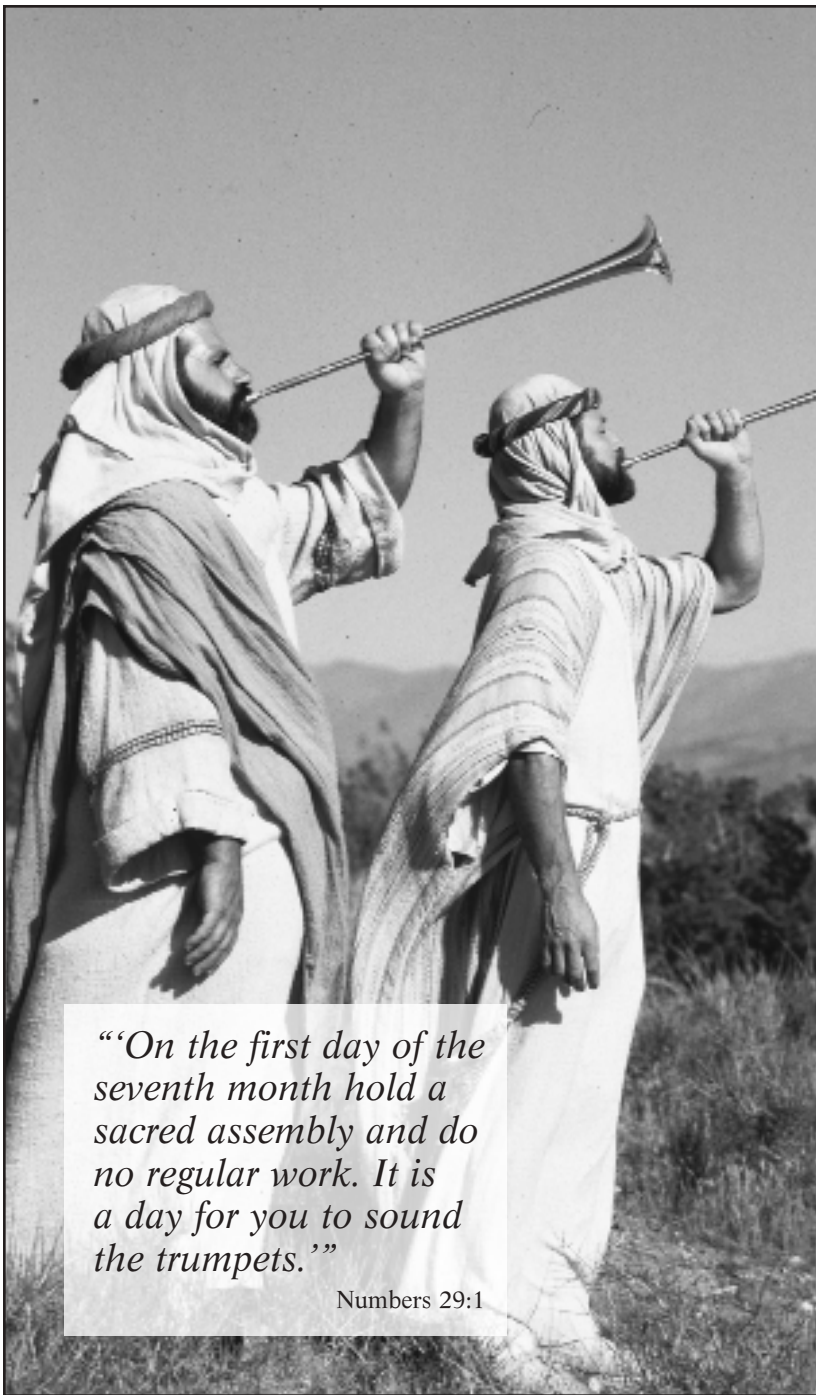
*Chapter 27 represents a transition in the social structure and leadership of early Israel. Until this time, Hebrew law permitted only sons to inherit land. The **daughters of Zelophehad** presented their claim to Moses and won their share of the land. The importance of this case is underscored by its repetition (see 36:1-12). While an exception in the inheritance laws was made for the women, none was found for Moses. Excluded from the Promised Land, Moses asked God to **appoint a successor**, to be commissioned by Eleazar, Aaron's successor. With a smooth transition, no one of the new generation would lose their share in the Promised Land and spiritual destiny of Israel.*

“So the Lord said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him.’”

Numbers 27:18



Artwork by C. Winston Taylor



“On the first day of the seventh month hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work. It is a day for you to sound the trumpets.”

Numbers 29:1

The Perfect Gift

DAY 25

Numbers 28:1–29:40

What person means a lot to you? If money were unlimited, what gift would you give that person?

1. Why did God insist on no “defects” in the animals?
2. Which offerings were most frequent or regular? Which holy days were annual events? Which month was almost all worship and no work?
3. Which offerings “made atonement” for sin?
4. Which offerings created an “aroma pleasing to the Lord” (28:6, 8, 13, 24, 27; 29:2, 6, 8, 36)? What actually pleased God so much? (a) the smell of quality meat, (b) the obedience of faith, (c) the priority of worship over work.
5. Why was celebration a part of the sacrifices? (a) celebration equals thankfulness, (b) God’s people celebrate forgiveness, (c) praise is fitting for worship.

1. What are your offerings to God like—in terms of their substance, their frequency, their spiritual effect, your motivation and God’s pleasure?
2. How much time do you spend celebrating your relationship with God?

*Israel experienced a **transition** in leadership (Moses to Joshua) and in generation (old to new). But their patterns of worship, especially the sacrificial system, remained the same from one generation to the next (see Lev 6 and Lev 23 and related notes). These continual **offerings** were perpetual reminders that the Israelites were an extraordinary people, that there is no god like the God of Israel. In later Jewish tradition, the old covenant **Feast of Trumpets** (29:1-6) became better known as Rosh Hashanah—the time of the New Year. Also, the **Day of Atonement** (29:7-11) became known as Yom Kippur—a traditional time of confession and celebration.*

OPENING
up to the Word

DIGGING
into the Word

LIVING
out the Word

WINDOW
on the Word

I Solemnly Vow

Numbers 30:1-16

OPENING
up to the Word

Has a solemn pledge of yours had a “no-regrets, no-turning-back” impact on your life? Have you made any rash promises you regret?

DIGGING
into the Word

- 1.** What was the big deal about vows? (a) the entire social order depended on them, (b) broken vows meant broken relationships, (c) trust is the basis of our relationship with God, (d) God always keeps his promises.
- 2.** How binding was a vow to the Lord? How could a promise-maker be released from a rash promise?
- 3.** How binding was a vow of marriage? Or, how easy was it to break an engagement or to divorce? (a) 'til death do us part, (b) only the husband could nullify a vow, (c) mutual consent was required, (d) consent from the bride's father was required, (e) the woman was her own agent.
- 4.** As these case laws on vows became more complex (30:10-15), what did that portend for the future?
- 5.** What did Jesus say that overturned this case law and reinforced the simple power of one's word (see Mt 5:33-37)?

LIVING
out the Word

- 1.** Are you more of a promise-maker, promise-keeper or promise-breaker? What promises have you made to others, especially family members, that have not been fulfilled?
- 2.** What promises have you made to God? Which ones have you kept?

Cross My Heart and Hope to Die

*the cultural background
of oaths and vows*

Vows, oaths and pledges were important in ancient Israel. They did not have to be validated by a contract, signature or collateral. In this largely illiterate society, a person's spoken word was binding. Promises to God and to others had to be fulfilled, as breaking a promise meant a broken trust and a broken relationship.

A person might *swear* to another person, but *vows* were only made to God—always in the context of prayer. In the Bible, vows were generally (with the exception of the Nazirite vow) conditional promises to God. *If* God would fulfill a request, *then* the petitioner would do something in return—often involving a sacrifice or some other type of gift to God. Vows were often made in times of distress. They might involve a bargain (Ge 28:20-22), devotion (Ps 132:2-5) or abstinence (1Sa 14:24).

In the centuries leading up to Christ, Jewish case law concerning vows and oaths became more codified and complex. To make a promise even more binding, an offering or sworn pledge was given along with it. In some cases, people were making oaths and canceling other sworn pledges based solely on what authority was invoked (swearing “by heaven” or “by earth”) or what consequence might be incurred (excommunication or penalty of death). In this social climate, oaths and vows were often used as a convenient tool for avoiding responsibility.

In this cultural context, Jesus warned that all oaths—no matter what is being sworn upon—involve calling on God as a witness. Jesus commanded the kind of truthfulness and sincerity that doesn't need an oath to back it up. When a person's word is reliable, an oath is unnecessary (Mt 5:33-37). However, Jesus did not prohibit all swearing; he himself answered the high priest under oath (Mt 26:63-64).

In today's western culture, we give little thought to swearing—from mild oaths (“by [King] George” or “by golly”); to stronger statements (“Cross my heart and hope to die” and “I take you... for better or worse... 'til death do us part”); to invoking God as my witness (“I swear on a stack of Bibles”); to publicly taking the oath of office or speaking before a jury under oath, with liability for perjury.

Don't Get Mad —Get Even

Numbers 31:1–32:42

OPENING
up to the Word

Are you more likely to get mad with your enemies, or to get even?

DIGGING
into the Word

1. Why “take vengeance on the Midianites” (31:2-3; see notes)? (a) petty ethnic jealousy, (b) family feud, (c) to clear the land for Moses’ successors, (d) this was God’s holy war.

2. Why was Moses so angry with the army officers who came back victorious? (a) they took spoils of war, (b) they took POWs, (c) they took Midianite women for wives, (d) they spared women who seduced Israelite men, (e) they didn’t follow orders.

3. What did the army have to do with the women, children and spoils to remedy the situation?

4. What spoils were counted? Who got a 500th share? A 50th share? A half share? A fair share? Why this method of distributing spoils?

LIVING
out the Word

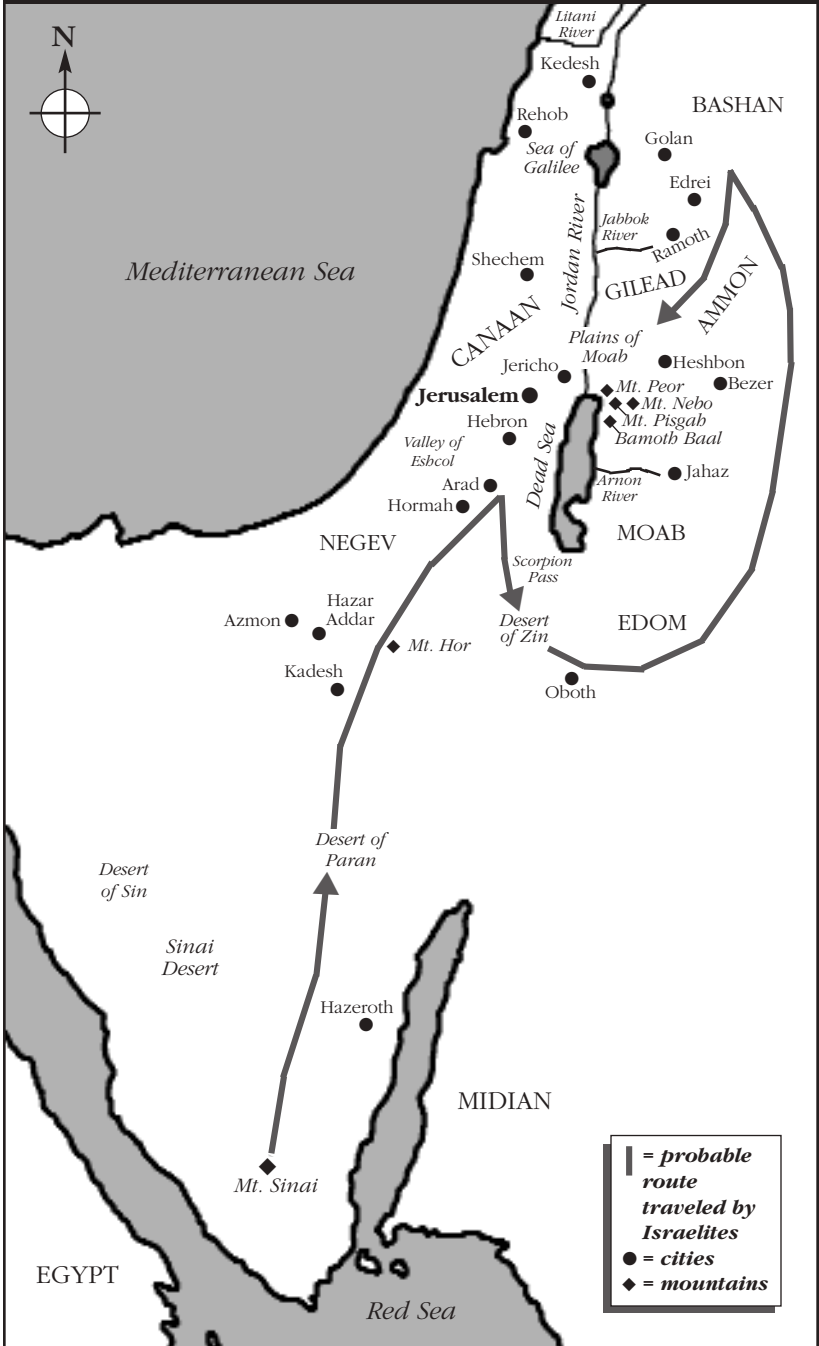
1. Moses underscored the importance of not shirking one’s duty. Are you ever tempted to shirk any particular responsibility?

2. Moses commanded the slaughter of thousands of thousands of women and innocent male children. Would Jesus have done the same? Consider this as but one example of the stark difference between the old and new covenants.

WINDOW
on the Word

The Midianites were descendants of Abraham and his second wife, Keturah. When Moses fled from Egypt (Ex 2), he went to Midian, where he met and married his first wife, Zipporah. Even so, the Midianites were bitter enemies of the Israelites. Since they had enticed Israel into Baal worship, God had told Moses to “treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them” (see Nu 25:16-18).

Important Places in the Book of Numbers



Travel Photos

DAY 28

Numbers 33:1-56

On vacation, do you take photos or videos—or both? Do you shoot more people, scenery or action shots? At Christmas or birthdays? Do your pictures come with captions or narrative?

1. Why retrace the Israelites' journey, beginning with their flight from Egypt (33:3)?
2. Try finding these 40 places named in this chapter on a Bible map. Don't worry, no one can find them all—most locations are uncertain.
3. How and why did God expect the second-generation Israelites to drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan (33:51-56)?

1. If your own spiritual adventure were condensed into a documentary, what scenes would you include? At what locations would you shoot?
2. What “inhabitants” (habitual sins) has God helped you drive out from your life? Which ones are still there, causing you trouble in your life? How can you get rid of them once and for all? Isn't Jesus the only one who can do the job? See Ro 8:31-39

Stages in the journey (33:1-2). *The travel narrative as stated here is a basic literary format found in ancient and modern writings. An Egyptian example is “The Journey of Wen-Amon to Phoenicia” (11th century B.C.). In a travel narrative, the journey sets the stage for the story. Numbers 33, like a “slide show,” depicts about 40 sites where the Israelites had been, but the sites have little geographic or archeological importance, except to remind the reader what happened there. Chapter 33 reviews the key characters, the conflicts, the spiritual developments and the works of God described in the rest of the book.*

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Find Me If You Can

Numbers 34:1–35:34

OPENING
up to the Word

Where did your ancestors settle when they first came to your country?

DIGGING
into the Word

1. Why do you think God set boundaries for each tribe? (a) to avoid conflict, (b) to fortify the land, (c) to outflank the enemies, (d) it was God's gift to each tribe.
2. Why put Levites in charge of the cities of refuge? (a) spiritual leaders are fair, (b) judging took spiritual wisdom, (c) part of their priestly job.
3. What was the difference between murder "with malice aforethought" and an accidental killing (35:16-24)?
4. What other legal requirements helped curb abuses of this provision of sanctuary and trial proceedings (35:25-34; see notes)?

LIVING
out the Word

1. Consider the "boundaries" God has set for you. Are they really of God—or humanly devised? Are you thankful or resentful? Feeling safe or confined?
2. What situation makes you feel like running? Who is your "city of refuge"? What outcome can you hope for with God as Judge and Comforter?

WINDOW
on the Word

*The ancient custom of justice called for revenge by death if a relative or loved one was killed (see 2Sa 14:7). Of the 48 cities given to the Levites in the division of the land, six were **cities of refuge** (35:6-15; see Jos 20:1-9). These designated safe havens were designed to protect the accused from the **avenger of blood** or family of the victim; only murder with malice aforethought could be avenged with capital punishment (35:16-24). To curb wild frontier justice, and assure a fair trial, this provision of temporary sanctuary bought time until a preliminary hearing could be held by the Levites. If the killing was judged accidental, the accused but innocent party stayed in the city of refuge until the **death of the high priest** (35:25-28), whose death accomplished some kind of atonement, cleansing or amnesty. If found guilty of murder, the indicted party was delivered to the dead person's avengers.*

All in the Family

DAY 30

Numbers 36:1-13

What's your most treasured possession? What do you plan on doing with it when you're no longer around?

1. Why did the disenfranchised reopen the inheritance case involving Zelophehad's daughters (36:2-4; see 27:1-11)?
2. How did the daughters of Zelophehad respond to the new ruling that they had to marry their distant cousins? (a) gladly, (b) reluctantly, (c) obediently, (d) yucch!
3. Why keep the land within its original tribe? (a) it was their Promised Land, (b) to avoid unequal inheritances, (c) to keep it all in the family, (d) to avoid tribal wars, (e) to limit marriage to outsiders.

1. What spiritual "heirloom" or family legacy do you want to keep in your family for their inheritance? (a) hope, (b) faith, (c) love, (d) peace, (e) savings.
2. Which inheritances need more development in your life before you pass them along to your kids or grandkids?
3. How do you think this passage might relate to us under the new covenant?

*The complaint here was not a grievance against women, but a concern for the continuity of the **inheritance of land** that it may not pass from tribe to tribe by marriage to outsiders (36:9). At the **Year of Jubilee**, when all problems of inheritance were resolved (36:4; see Lev 25:8-17), the problem with Zelophehad's daughters would remain if they had married outside their tribe. According to the old covenant, the destiny of the family in Israel was tied to the land, daughters who had inherited land had to marry within the tribal clan (36:6, 8). Compare our reward, given to us in Christ—consider how God's grace has nothing to do with real estate.*

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