

## **Numbers 31:1-24**

### **Our hope in the justice of God is the grace of Christ.**

“That’s not fair!” Parenting multiple children will bless you with hearing this phrase often. Even the youngest of kids seems to be equipped with a view of fairness and what they should experience as opposed to others (however wrong that might be!)

It’s a question of justice...

- Not fair that their friend went to Disneyland
- Not fair that their chore list is longer than a siblings
- Not fair when Dad gets more ice cream than them
- Not fair that their behavior jeopardizes screen time

Justice, in their mind, and mine, would be for me to have those things...

Silly examples illuminating a bigger picture. This sense of fairness, or justice, sticks with us... we may not verbalize it as much but we still think about it.

And maybe it matures a little - we gain a clearer sense of right and wrong, and how justice should be pursued in our lives. And we take this into every corner of our lives, especially into our walk through the wilderness of life with Jesus.

Every now and again we come across something true that unsettles us. That gives us pause and makes us say “that’s not fair.”

This is one of those stories for me. War, plunder, near genocide (the intentional elimination of a a people). It’s uncomfortable. And it should be. These things should give us pause and require healthy contemplation.

This morning I don’t desire to explain away the tension. At the same time I don’t want to second guess God’s way. A situation that will continue in Joshua as Israel enters the Promised Land.

Hold this posture then, we must gain something from this story, as we have all of them along the way.

Two acts: the Justice of God, and the Hope of Grace.

### **The Justice of God**

Context: What's going on? The story of Numbers is ramping to entering the land, this second generation gaining what God had promised. They have been given instructions on land use, offerings, keeping their word.

And we know there has also been a bit of tension because Moses, the prophet/leader who God used to bring his people out of slavery and through forty years in the wilderness, wouldn't enter the Promised Land with them. His disobedience was keeping him out.

Here is his last act as leader. To avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. To go to "holy war."

This is no arbitrary destruction of a people - it is also very delayed in the scheme of things. These are a nation that opposed God and Israel.

Maybe you remember the story that began in Numbers 22. The talking donkey! Moab and Midianite elders hire a seer to curse Israel but God won't let him. So Israel is protected from the destructive desires of other nations but it feels short-lived.

By chapter 25 Israel's own sin earns punishment - but it was Midian that inspired it... Israelites went "whoring" after Midianite women, "yoking" or aligning themselves to the worship of Baal of Peor, a pagan god. Phineas, one of the High Priest, spears one such couple in the middle of the act, stopping a plague that killed 24,000.

**Numbers 25:16–18** "And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [17] "Harass the Midianites and strike them down, [18] for they have harassed you with their wiles, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on account of Peor." (ESV)

In our text we get more of the story. Balaam, knowing he couldn't curse Israel, shifted his strategy and had Israel curse themselves. It was his idea to have the ladies entice God's people.

“The purpose of holy war was to eradicate impure elements, whether persons or property, from society.” “It is simply the continuation and completion of God's judgment on those who were involved in the sins of Numbers 25.”

By luring God's people into idolatry, they secured judgment on themselves.

Midian tried to destroy Israel, but the Lord in his justice determined that Midian be destroyed. (The Lord also executed severe punishments on his own people [14:35–37; 16:46–49; 25:9]; his justice shows no favoritism.) Those who lead God's people astray will be held accountable for their actions, as will those who are themselves led astray.

God's character has not changed. We have seen displays of his holiness throughout our study. He is so “other,” so pure, so unique that sin can't remain in his presence. And we have seen the significance of tainting, disturbing or outright rejecting Yahweh and his claim over Israel, a nation meant to be holy, “set apart,” as God is holy.

This is holy justice. Midian the God rejectors, guilty of leading a set apart people into sin face judgment. Swift and complete. This is the vengeance of the Lord, not of an individual or nation, but the God of the universe.

Continuing pattern in Scripture.

[Iona struck by the fact that there are conventions, rule of war while watching a history show.]

**Deuteronomy 20:10–18** “When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. [11] And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. [12] But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. [13] And when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, [14] but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for

yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. [15] Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. [16] But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, [17] but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, [18] that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.” (ESV)

“Such wars had a symbolic function: just as entry into the Promised Land formed a picture of receiving the blessings of Heaven, so too the comprehensive death of those opposed to God formed a graphic picture of the final judgment. It was designed to demonstrate to the Israelites (and to their neighbors) that the Lord is implacably opposed to evil. All those who set themselves against the Lord are doomed to destruction, especially those who lead his people into sin.”

Midian gets the worst of it. As they deserve it.

Being true does not make it easier. The reality of a fallen humanity doing violence to God’s way. Judgment and deserved punishment.

Even in Jesus’ ministry the same energy is reserved for the likes of Midian.

**Luke 17:1–2** “And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! [2] It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.” (ESV)

This story of judgment, of holy war, is more than a “look at them” account. This should give us pause thinking of our own lives and the justice of judgment before a holy God.

We have tried to soften and reason it away for ages, but death remains the wages of sin. For everyone.

**Ecclesiastes 7:20** “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” (ESV)

**Psalm 14:1–3** “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.

[2] The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

[3] They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” (ESV)

This story is meant to remind us how grave it is, to sin before God, to spur an urgency to warn others, to influence people away from the rejection of God to the only remedy that applies.

“The holy war of God against our sin has not by any means been abandoned: the charges are real, and someone must answer for them. However, Jesus has been our substitute, bearing in his body on the cross the full penalty of that warfare. There at the cross the Lord executed total warfare against sin in the person of Jesus, so that we might be spared the consequences of our unbelief, disobedience, and sin. Through his death, our lives are spared.”

### **The Hope of Grace**

This story dives back to a provision of being made clean. The Red Heifer - it's ash mixed with living water. The person making the potion would become unclean but this was the way of restoration, purification for God's people.

**Numbers 31:19–24** “Encamp outside the camp seven days. Whoever of you has killed any person and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves and your captives on the third day and on the seventh day. [20] You shall purify every garment, every article of skin, all work of goats' hair, and every article of wood.”

[21] Then Eleazar the priest said to the men in the army who had gone to battle: “This is the statute of the law that the LORD has commanded Moses: [22] only the gold, the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin, and the lead, [23] everything that can stand the fire, you shall pass through the fire, and it shall be clean. Nevertheless, it shall also be purified with the water for impurity. And whatever

cannot stand the fire, you shall pass through the water. [24] You must wash your clothes on the seventh day, and you shall be clean. And afterward you may come into the camp.” (ESV)

The wages of sin are death and death spoils those it touches. But the water for impurity gives us a glimpse of something, someone, greater.

That in mercy someone takes what we deserve and gives us by grace a righteousness we could never earn or keep ourselves.

**2 Corinthians 5:21** “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (ESV)

We are Midian, deserving to be wiped out but the picture God is painting of his Kingdom is that of unmerited favor for all who will come. We take hold of it in repentance, owning our sin and turning from it to Jesus.

Made his people, given the spoils of his sacrifice. Survivors of this holy war, by grace alone.

**Ephesians 2:4–7** “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—[6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (ESV)

Judgment is still the destination for all of humanity. But the atoning work of Jesus makes us clean. It changes everything... keep it before us as a reminder and truth that sparks our worship.

**Numbers 31:54** “And Moses and Eleazar the priest received the gold from the commanders of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the tent of meeting, as a memorial for the people of Israel before the LORD. (ESV)

“Now when we stand before God in the heavenly courtroom and Satan reads out the charges against us, the Father answers each charge with the ruling, “This one’s sin has all been paid for at the cross! There is no possible charge against

him for which he can be condemned.” The cross thus stands as our memorial before God, the testimony that constantly reminds both the Lord and our guilty consciences of our right of access into his presence through Christ.”

All the charges against me have been dropped! Now I can live.

**1 Corinthians 1:18** “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (ESV)

“When we look at the cross, our response will not simply be lips that praise the Lord and hands that serve others. The cross is a gift from God that demands in response the gift of everything we have and everything we are: our whole lives presented as living sacrifices, wholly devoted — or, rather, holy and devoted — to the service of the God who has loved us this much.” ID

In light of the cross:

- We give what we’ve gained in an act of worship
- We compel others to see, to believe and be covered by Christ
- We give grace along the way because that is what Jesus gives us

**Our hope in the justice of God is the grace of Christ.**

The hope of grace makes us people who say “that’s not fair” less and replace it more often with “there’s still time!” There is forgiveness in the name of Jesus. Repent and believe in him.

May it be so in us.