

A certain confidence

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[0 : 00] The first reading for today is from Numbers chapter 31, and we're going to be reading from verses 1 to 20. You can find this on page 166 in the Church Bibles.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterwards you shall be gathered to your people. So Moses spoke to the people, saying, Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the Lord's vengeance on Midian.

You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war. So there were provided, out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war.

And Moses sent them to the war, a thousand from each tribe, together with Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the priest, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand.

They warred against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every male. They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of their slain, Evi, Rechem, Zer, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian.

[1 : 19] And they also killed Balaam, the son of Beor, with the sword. And the people of Israel took captive the women of Midian and their little ones, and they took as plunder all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods.

All their cities and the places where they lived, and all their encampments, they burned with fire.

And took all the spoil and all the plunder, both of man and of beast.

Then they brought the captives and the plunder and the spoil to Moses and to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the people of Israel, at the camp on the plains of Moab, by the Jordan at Jericho.

Moses and Eleazar the priest, and all the chiefs of the congregation, went to meet them outside the camp. And Moses was angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands, the commanders of hundreds, and who would come from service in the war.

Moses said to them, Have you let all the women live? Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor.

[2 : 25] And so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. Now, therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him.

But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves. In camp, outside the camp for 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.

You shall purify every garment, every article of skin, all work of goat's hair, and every article of wood. Good morning. Our second reading is from Numbers chapter 32.

And we'll be reading verses 1 to 15. That's on page 167. Numbers 32, starting at verse 1.

Now the people of Reuben and the people of Gad had a very great number of livestock. And they saw the land of Jazir and the land of Gilead.

[3 : 34] And behold, the place was a place for livestock. So the people of Gad and the people of Reuben came and said to Moses and to Eleazar the priest, and to the chiefs of the congregation.

Ataroth, Dibon, Jazir, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elielah, Sebum, Nebo, and Beon. The land that the Lord struck down before the congregation of Israel is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.

And they said, If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession. Do not take us across the Jordan. But Moses said to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben, Shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here?

Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land that the Lord has given them? Your fathers did this when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to see the land.

For when they went up to the valley of Eshkol and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the people of Israel from going into the land that the Lord had given them. And the Lord's anger was kindled on that day, and he swore, saying, Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt from twenty years old and upwards shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not wholly followed me, none except Caleb, the son of Jephunneh, the Kenizzite, and Joshua, the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the Lord.

[5 : 07] And the Lord's anger was kindled 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. And behold, you have risen on your father's place a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the Lord against Israel.

For if you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all this people. Thank you. Katie, thanks very much for reading.

Let me add my welcome to Benji's earlier. It's lovely to have you with us this morning. Can I say, I'm conscious it's hot, and therefore if you need to, there's lots of water on the table at the back, so if you need some water, then feel free to wander around.

That's absolutely fine. Well, we continue our series in the book of Numbers, so please do keep numbers open. We're in Numbers 31 and 32 this morning, but first of all, why don't I lead us in prayer?

Let's pray together. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

[6 : 23] Heavenly Father, thank you for the enormous privilege we have of hearing your voice, the voice of the living God, as we open the Bible together, and we're conscious too, it is an enormous responsibility, and we pray, therefore, please would you grant us soft hearts this morning, rather than hard hearts, and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, as Adrian reminded us earlier, the holiday season is almost upon us, and with it, I guess, the familiar cry, are we nearly there yet?

And, of course, for most of the journey, the answer is generally no. You know, yes, no, you know, we've still got X number of hours to go, we've still got X number of miles to go.

But, of course, there does always come the point in the journey when wonderfully the answer is yes. And if you have been asking that question about the Book of Numbers, which we started back at the beginning of January, then we are almost there, and God's people are now at the very edge of the promised land.

You'll remember, and we reminded this last week, how the Book of Numbers is written in two halves, each half structured around a census. So the first census, the first generation of God's people, those who God had rescued from slavery in Egypt, but who then disobeyed him in the wilderness, they refused to go into the land that he had promised, and so they died in the desert.

[8 : 02] And then last week, we saw the second census in Numbers chapter 26. Forty years later, the census of the next generation, those who would go on to enter the land and inherit God's promises.

We were reminded as well last week of God's faithfulness to his promises, his provision for his people, and how just as Joshua was appointed by God to lead them into the land, so today it is Jesus Christ who, as the leader of God's people, will bring those who belong to him, not into a physical land, the land of Canaan, but instead to the new creation, the new heavens, and the new earth.

But the second half of the book also contains warnings, warnings that we are not to give up in the spiritual battle. I must say that if you're here this morning and you are looking in on the Christian faith, one of the things you may not know is that the Bible describes the Christian life as a battle, and part of the cost of following Jesus is that we engage in the battle.

Well, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, it seems to me it's very easy to forget that actually the Christian life is a battle. Hymns such as Onward Christian Soldiers, which many years ago would have been regularly sung, are rarely sung.

I guess we are uncomfortable about the kind of militaristic overtones or the imperialism or whatever it is. And yet the reality is that each one of us, if we belong to Jesus, each one of us is in a spiritual battle.

[9 : 54] And the great danger that we see in these two chapters this morning, in Numbers 31 and 32, is that we give up engaging in the battle. And each of these two chapters sheds light on a

particular temptation relating to that.

Firstly, chapter 31, don't give up fighting for holiness. Don't give up fighting for holiness. Let me read again verses 1 to 4 of Numbers 31.

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterwards you shall be gathered to your people.

So Moses spoke to the people saying, Arme men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the Lord's vengeance on Midian. You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war.

Now, as we read through the chapter earlier, I guess all of us will have picked up on the fact that this is a horrific chapter.

[10:58] I'm sure I'm not the only one who listened to it being read with a sense of unease. I guess it raises questions such as, is this defensible?

Should it even be in the Bible? So let's just try and get our bearings a little bit first. At the heart of Numbers 31 is the fact that God is holy.

God is holy and his people are holy. I've stuck that there on the outline. Firstly, God is holy. God is completely set apart. He's pure. He's always good in everything he does.

He's always just in everything that he does. He's always right in everything that he does. And it's a wonderful thing given how many rulers and leaders we have who are not those things all the time and many of them hardly any of the time.

It is wonderful to know that the one who controls the world we live in is always like that. He is always right, always good, and always just in all that he does.

[12:02] And Numbers chapter 31 is not so much about one nation declaring war on another nation. It is really about God bringing his righteous judgment on his enemies.

Just flip back to Numbers chapter 25 because there's unfinished business from Numbers 25. You may remember in Numbers 25 in verse 1 how God's people had been led astray by the daughters of Moab.

They had sexual relations with them which in turn, verse 2, led them to worshipping their false gods. And that in turn, verse 3, led to the Lord's anger against his people.

But we see the unfinished business in verses 16 and 17 because the Moabites who are part of the Midianite nation haven't yet faced God's judgment for what they have done to God's people.

Until that is, we get to chapter 31 where we are today where the Lord goes into battle against them. We see that in a number of ways.

[13:20] In verses 1 and 2 of chapter 31, we see that it's the Lord himself who gives the order to go into battle. The word avenge in verse 2 has the sense of God's honour being vindicated.

In other words, so that the Midianites might know that God is God, that he is Lord. And then verse 5, you may have noticed that just 1,000 people from each tribe, a kind of token number really, are chosen to fight in the battle to make the point that actually this battle is going to be won by God rather than by a force of numbers.

And then in verse 6, Phinehas the priest goes with them into battle because this is God's battle. And after the fighting is over, verse 49, which we didn't read, but verse 49, we're told that not one of the Israelites died.

Have you ever heard of a battle like that? Not one died. This is a completely miraculous battle. In other words, there's no justification in this chapter for the Crusades or for any kind of holy war today.

Rather, what we're seeing here is part of God's bigger battle, his bigger conflicts, his bigger war on sin and evil and all that has spoiled his world.

[14:45] God is, if you like, bringing into the presence for these Moabites the final judgment that everyone faces who lives their lives having turned their back on God because he is holy and he will put to right everything that is wrong in our world.

In fact, the whole of chapter 31 is about God's holiness. So in verse 19 we read, didn't we, that those who had fought in the battle or those who had even touched a dead body needed to be purified.

In verses 20 to 24, the plunder that had been taken from the Midianite army from the forces needed to be purified before it is then distributed amongst God's people.

So God is holy and because God is holy then God's people are also to be holy. They are to be set apart.

They are to be distinctive from the people around them. And that explains the problem that lies at the heart of this chapter. It explains Moses' anger at the heart of this chapter.

[15:58] Let me read verses 14 to 17 again. And Moses was angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds who had come from service in the war.

Moses said to them, Have you let all the women live? Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor.

Think Numbers 25. And so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. Now, therefore, kill every male among the little ones and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him.

Moses is angry. Why? Simply because they haven't finished the job. After all, these are the very women who, back in Numbers chapter 25, had caused the Lord's people to turn away from the Lord and to worship idols.

these are the very boys who, when they grow up and are of military age, will be a threat to God's people. No, they need to finish the job.

[17:09] God's people, in other words, need to keep on fighting for holiness. They need to keep on fighting such that they will be a distinctive people, lest once again they are ensnared and turn away from the Lord.

Now, you and I need to remember that we live in a completely different part of Bible history.

God's people today is no longer a nation state. God's kingdom is no longer a nation state with physical boundaries as it was going to be then. God's kingdom is the church.

Our battles as Christians are not and should not be the battles of Numbers chapter 31. Jesus has won the decisive battle when he died on the cross, defeating our enemies of sin and death and judgment.

He died for the forgiveness of sins such that those who trust in him might know the forgiveness of sins and peace with him both in this life and in the next.

[18:19] And yet, if we belong to Jesus, the New Testament is abundantly clear that we are to be absolutely ruthless in fighting for holiness and putting sin to death just as they were ruthless in Numbers chapter 31.

I put some verses from Colossians chapter 3 on the outline there on the screen there. Let me read them to us. Colossians chapter 3. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness which is idolatry.

On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these too you once walked when you were living in them but now you must put them all away anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk from your mouth.

If we belong to Jesus we are to fight sin, we are to fight for holiness with exactly the same ruthlessness that God's people fought here in Numbers chapter 31.

I just want to ask the question, is that something you take seriously? Is that something you take seriously?

[19:47] I was talking to someone in their early twenties a couple of weeks ago, they're not part of Grace Church, I doubt any of us will ever have met him, but I asked him when he got going as a Christian and he said to me, back in the autumn, he said when he ended a relationship with someone who wasn't a Christian.

And it was wonderful, completely wonderful to hear as he kind of explained the way which he had been brought up in a Christian family and yet he had got to the point where he recognised he faced a choice and he was at the point of a fork in the road and he could either stick with his girlfriend and he recognised that one fork would mean that he'd grantfully drift away from the Lord Jesus or he could end that relationship and he could pursue the Lord Jesus and follow him wholeheartedly. And it's wonderful to hear him speak with such clarity about putting sin to death. Well I wonder where you need to do that.

In surveys of Christian men in the UK 42% say they have an addiction with pornography.

42%. In surveys of women who are Christian in the UK only 13% have never watched porn.

[21:23] Now my assumption is that those statistics will be replicated here at Grace Church. And yet of course the odd thing is we never talk about it.

Why is that? What would it look like for you to put sexual sin to death? Or perhaps it's one of the other things which are mentioned in Colossians chapter 3.

Perhaps it's covetousness that actually you need to put to death. the sins of wealth, the sins of affluence, what in a sense we might call the more respectable sins and yet spiritually just as dangerous.

The house, the lifestyle, the perfect colour scheme, the promotion, the pay deals that fund it all. In 18 years at Grace Church I've seen all these things take people away from the Lord Jesus even though they are respectable sins.

Let me ask, where have you given up being ruthless with sin? Where have you given up fighting for holiness?

[22 : 34] What did it look like for you to live distinctively as part of God's people? Well that's Numbers 31, don't give up fighting for holiness.

Numbers 32, don't give up fighting together, don't give up fighting together. Because what is the appropriate response when we ask the question are we nearly there yet?

And the firm answer is yes. Well I take it the appropriate response is to keep going with your eyes firmly fixed on the destination.

You know the wrong response when you're kind of halfway down the M5 in Somerset and when your holiday destination is Devon and you think you're almost there, the wrong response is to think hey you know we're halfway through Somerset why don't we just stop here and have our holiday here instead?

Or the wrong response to the are we nearly there yet question yes we are once we've arrived at the airport is to think okay well why don't we just check into an airport hotel and actually we can spend our holiday here rather than heading on to the beach or whatever it is wherever we've booked in.

[23 : 45] Well that is the issue in Numbers chapter 32. God's people are now on the edge of the promised land. I think we're going to have a map very excitingly so it's a bit unclear to see but here's the map.

The river Jordan is here just going up there. The promised land is here on the west side of the river Jordan and at the moment where we are in Numbers 31 and 32 God's people are here on the east side of the river Jordan and the land that the two tribes of Ruben and Gad like the look of in chapter 32 is this area here on the east side of the river Jordan so that's where we are just to get our geographical bearings.

It's even coloured in. Did you notice for those I know geographers love their colouring in pens so it's even been coloured in as well. So let's just read chapter 32 verses 1 to 5 so we can see what's happening there.

Now the people of Ruben and the people of Gad had a very great number of livestock and they saw the land of Jezor and the land of Gilead and behold the place was a place for livestock.

So the people of Gad and the people of Ruben came and said to Moses and to Eliezer the priest and to the chiefs of the congregation I think we'll miss out those names they were read so well brilliantly.

[25 : 10] Verse 4 The land that the Lord struck down before the congregation of Israel is a land for livestock and your servants have livestock. And they said if we found favour in your sight let this land be given to your servants for a possession.

Do not take us across the Jordan. Now I wonder what you make of that request. Are we kind of thinking to ourselves well that makes sense that's a kind of sound farming decision or is it something a bit more sinister?

Well have a look at verse 1 because that word saw and they saw should be setting off alarm bells. It is never a good thing in the Bible to make decisions on the basis of sight and what we see.

It's just what Eve did in the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 3 verse 6 we're told so when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and there is a delight to the eyes she took it and ate it. Living by sight in other words rather than living by faith trusting in God's word of promise is the very heart of sin.

[26 : 25] Likewise in Genesis 13 Lot made a disastrous decision about where to live. It was based on sight and he ended up living in Sodom which was full of wickedness and from where he had to be rescued.

Now I take it that for all of us we face exactly the same temptation every single day of the week to make decisions which are based on sight rather than based on trusting God's word.

After all remember the Lord had promised these two tribes Reuben and Gad the land on the west side of the river Jordan along with all the other tribes and so yes at one level you might say this is a pragmatic farming sensible decision but actually in practice what are they doing?

It's a rejection of God's word of promise and that is why Moses is again so angry. Verse 6 said to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here? The word sit there means to settle. Moses in other words fears an exact repeat of the events of 40 years earlier. Do you remember what happened back in Numbers 13 and 14 when the spies were sent out into the land when they came back with a report about how brilliant the land was, how fantastic it was, full of milk and honey.

[27 : 58] One or two grumbled, one or two were saying but actually the inhabitants of the land are too big for us, we can't take the land and the effect of those spread to everyone else and they refused to enter the land and they faced the Lord's wrath.

In other words the effect of some discouraged the others. It's Moses' fear here isn't it again in verse 7 why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land the Lord has given them?

In other words they haven't given a second thought to the effect of their decision on everyone else. Moses is rightly angry, fearful there will be a repeat of what happened 40 years earlier.

Verse 14 and behold you have risen in your father's place a brood of sinful men to increase still more the fierce anger of the Lord against Israel. For if you turn away from following him he will again abandon them in the wilderness and he will destroy all his people.

Now if you read through Numbers 32 later or if you've read through it the rest of the chapter already then you'll know that in the rest of the chapter the problem is resolved and these two tribes Reuben and Gad they give their assurances that yes they'll build settlements for their families and for their animals but then they will then join the other tribes west of the Jordan in getting the land, in defeating their enemies and getting God's inheritance.

[29 : 39] And only once the other tribes are in the Lord's inheritance will they then come back and settle east of the Jordan. But of course the fact they have to say it three times shows the danger.

I guess it's fair to say isn't it that in so many areas of life we all understand the importance of the team. Perhaps at school you're in a team and how discouraging it is when there's perhaps one or two and they completely lack any sense of team spirit and they're the ones who always want to be scoring the goals because it's all about them rather than about the team.

Or perhaps at work I guess some of us at work will know how brilliant it is to work in a really good team. Well I guess others are really frustrated because actually we're not in a team that works brilliantly.

We're conscious there are people in the team who actually are only ever looking out for themselves. And of course we see it don't we in politics all the time. The kind of self-destruct mode of the Conservative Party is essentially because they're not a team they're working as individuals. Well church life is no different. How discouraging it is when some rather than living by faith rather than living with our sights firmly fixed on our heavenly inheritance on the new creation instead settle down and make this world home.

[31 : 15] when they live not by faith in God's promises but by sight. When they're shaped not by the promises of God but instead by the prosperity and wealth of the world.

When they drop out of the spiritual battle. When they show little interest in striving together with others for the gospel. When they forget that the church is an army moving forward together to its heavenly inheritance.

Now I guess there are bound to be some of us given the number of us here this morning who in a sense have already opted out of the battle. I guess there will be others who are in danger of doing so.

And I just want to ask the question well could that be you? That actually in your heart of hearts you know you've opted out of fighting together with others in the battle that is the Christian life.

Settling down living for this world. It's not that you've kind of abandoned Jesus. You haven't completely turned your back on him. but you only really think in terms of yourself and your family.

[32 : 31] You rarely ask what's best for the interest of Jesus Christ. You rarely ask how can I strive together with others for the gospel most effectively more effectively.

In other words Numbers chapter 32 reminds us that if you are someone who is cool and half-hearted as a follower of Jesus Christ that is bound to discourage others. It is going to have a cooling effect on the temperature of Grace Church Dulles as a whole. You know when family commitments perhaps mean we're away on Sundays or when children's music and swimming lessons mean that we don't make growth groups midweek or when work schedules mean that we don't have the energy to serve at church or when we want lots of me time which means that we haven't really got the energy or there's no desire to reach friends and neighbors. It is profoundly discouraging for everyone else. But of course the flip side is also true. If you're someone who is wholeheartedly following the Lord Jesus what an encouragement that is. How that raises the spiritual temperature of Grace Church. I guess most of us in this room can think of people at Grace Church who are just such an encouragement movements because they do precisely that.

[33 : 55] Or think how encouraging it was at our last prayer gathering to hear of some of those dialogue events being organized. Someone organizing a talk at work for colleagues explaining the Christian faith.

Others putting on an event at the golf club doing the same thing the Scallywags events tomorrow. In other words Numbers chapter 32 is saying to us where you are at personally with the Lord has a huge impact on the rest of us as a church.

Either for good or for ill. Now let's put these two chapters numbers 31 and 32 together. Don't give up fighting for holiness.

Don't give up fighting together. Chapter 31 I guess we might say the focus is on sin which is more obvious. Sexual sin serving other things rather than serving Jesus.

If you're watching porn you'll know it. If your life and your decisions are essentially governed by your work then I guess you know it. But the sin of chapter 32 is much more subtle isn't it?

[35 : 06] It's self centeredness. It's settling down to enjoy life in this world. It's opting out of the spiritual battle. It's a spiritual coolness discouraging others.

I wonder which of those two sins, which of those two temptations chapter 31 or chapter 32 you need to be most ruthless in fighting because it's only when Jesus returns that we can actually settle down and enjoy our heavenly rest.

Let's have a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Heavenly Father, we pray for your mercy on us this morning, that we would indeed be those who, having been raised with Christ, would set our minds on things above, not on things on earth.

[36 : 38] And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.