



LEARNING FROM THE LEADERSHIP OF MOSES

Numbers 32–36

Too many people fail to heed the lessons of the past, are consumed with the concerns of the moment, and give little thought to the future. Moses is a commendable model of one who wisely learns from the past but is engaged in the present and focused on preparing for the future.

Moses is approaching the end of his life as we come to the last chapters in the book of Numbers. Here Moses provides for us a model of humble, godly leadership. We can observe three exemplary elements of his leadership in these closing chapters, and they relate to Israel's present, past, and future.

As we begin in chapter 32 of Numbers, we find Moses confronted with a *present* concern by way of an

unexpected request. The tribes of Reuben and Gad have found that the pasturelands east of the Jordan River are perfect for their large herds of livestock, so they come to Moses in verse 5 with an appeal: "Let this land be given to your servants for a possession. Do not take us across the Jordan."

Now Moses is concerned immediately that they might walk away from God if they don't cross over into the promised land with the other tribes. He's also concerned that the rest of the nation will suffer in battle without their help.

But these tribes promise Moses they will indeed cross over and go to war with the rest of Israel, until all the promised land is conquered and settled (verses 17-19). Moses agrees but then warns them here with words you may have heard, like I did, growing up (my mother often quoted it to me): "Be sure your sin will find you out" (verse 23). In other words, God will hold them accountable if they don't keep their promise.

And with that, Moses turns to the *past* and reviews Israel's history. In fact, in most of chapter 33—the first forty-nine verses—Moses talks about Israel's journey through the wilderness, and he highlights the grace



A figurine of a Hittite god



of God in bringing the people through these forty years to the front door of the promised land.

Then, in verse 50, the narrative shifts from Israel's past to Israel's *future*. In fact, the remainder of the book of Numbers focuses on Israel's future in the land.

First, in verse 52, Moses commands the nation as they enter the land, “Destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places.” That is, “Don’t leave anything lying around that will tempt you to walk away from God.”

Chapter 34 then looks ahead to the settlement of the land, and the Lord begins by giving Moses the outer boundaries of the land He has given Israel.

The western border is the Mediterranean, or Great Sea. The eastern border is the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee) and the Salt (Dead) Sea, along with the Jordan River that connects them. From the Sea of Galilee, the border extends farther to the east and northeast. The southern border extends from the southern tip of the Dead Sea to the “Brook of Egypt,” which connects with the Mediterranean. The northern border

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is difficult to define but apparently includes the Hermon Mountain range, modern-day Lebanon, and much of modern-day Syria.

Let me tell you, the land God promised Israel is a much larger area than they have *ever* possessed. But one day they will possess it all when they accept Jesus

as their Messiah and He reigns in the coming millennial kingdom!

Added to all this, of course, are the lands to the east that already have been given to Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh.

In the second half of Numbers 34, the Lord gives Moses the names of specific individuals who will assist Joshua and the high priest, Eleazar, in dividing the land among the various tribes.

What’s interesting about all these instructions is that they *assume* Israel’s possession of the land. The land is as good as theirs. The Lord said back in chapter 33, verse 53, “You shall take possession of the land . . . for I have given the land to you to possess it.” The land already has been *given* to them; they just need to act in faith and take possession of it.

Now in chapter 35 the Lord says to Moses here in verse 2, “Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in.” Once Israel is established in the land, the Levites are to be given forty-eight cities in which they can dwell. Unlike the other tribes, Levi is not given a land inheritance; they are going to be scattered throughout the land in these forty-eight cities so that everyone will be living near Levites, who can instruct them in God’s law and the requirements for worshipping the Lord.

In addition, six of these forty-eight Levitical cities are called cities of refuge. In verses 11–12 the Lord says:

*“You shall select cities to be cities
of refuge for you, that the man-
slayer who kills any person with-
out intent may flee there. . . .
that the manslayer may not die
until he stands before the congre-
gation for judgment.”*

If someone accidentally kills another person, he is to flee to one of these cities to be protected until he can stand trial. Now a murderer isn’t likely to flee to a city



of refuge since he won't be protected when he's found guilty. He's just going to be on the run and hoping he can outrun the "avenger" (verse 12). An avenger is someone designated by the murder victim's family to track down the murderer and deliver justice.

From verse 16 through the end of chapter 35, a number of scenarios are presented to help Israel determine whether a death was premeditated murder or accidental manslaughter. The guiding principle is set forth in verse 30:

"If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses. But no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness."

Justice must be served, but God wants Israel to make sure nobody is convicted of murder on the testimony of a single witness. There must be plenty of evidence, otherwise somebody might be wrongfully accused. There is to be no hasty judgment but careful examination of the evidence and the testimony of multiple witnesses.

Let's move on to chapter 36, where Moses is presented with a problem concerning the land. Back in chapter 27, the daughters of Zelophehad requested an inheritance in the promised land since their deceased father had no sons. And Moses agreed.

But now some tribal leaders from Manasseh raise the question about women who receive inheritances like this but then end up getting married to men from other tribes. That means the land will transfer to another tribe, creating confusion down the road about the true ownership of tribal lands.

Moses delivers a response from the Lord here in verse 6: "Let them marry whom they think best, only they shall marry within the clan of the tribe of their father." This restriction prevents the transfer of land from one tribe to another. And Zelophehad's daughters, we are told in verse 10, "did as the LORD commanded Moses."

So, throughout these closing chapters of the book of Numbers, the wise leadership of Moses is on display. He is dealing with problems in the present, while reminding people of God's faithfulness in the past, and preparing them to walk with God into the future. That is a great model for leaders to this very day.

How has this promise, "Be sure your sin will find you out" been fulfilled in your life? Why are wisely telling such stories useful to breakdown and unbeliever's resistance to trusting in the gospel? Who in your life might you wisely share your experience with to bring them closer to accepting Jesus as Savior?

What concerns of God are at the heart of the establishment of the Levitical cities and cities of refuge? How does your life reflect these same concerns? How might those concerns be used to share God's heart for people, to your yet to be saved friends and family?

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