

“If God is Good ...”

Numbers 31

We’ve all heard the question and perhaps wrestle with it ourselves: “If God is a good God why did He order the deaths of ‘innocent’ people in the Bible?” This passage deals with this question and we are going to get some very clear answers about this troubling question.

Of course, these are the kinds of questions that people who don’t know God like to ask to explain why they won’t believe in God. But let’s not forget what the apostle Paul said about spiritual matters like this in 1 Cor. 2:12-14.

¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. ¹⁴ The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

People who do not know God cannot understand Him unless the Spirit of God reveals truth to them. But if we have the Spirit of God we can understand the answer to this question and other hard questions that we all have when it comes to God’s ways. Let’s pray that we will be open to the Spirit to understand these things this morning.

The first step to answering our question is the most basic question we should ask: what does the text say?

The Lord said to Moses, ² “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people.” ³ So Moses said to the people, “Arm some of your men to go to war against the Midianites and to carry out the Lord’s vengeance on them. ⁴ Send into battle a thousand men from each of the tribes of Israel.”

The word vengeance means retribution for harm done to you. So God was responding to a great harm that was done to Him by the Midianites. What was that? We read about this in Num. 22-25. Israel was travelling north along the east side of the Dead Sea, after having defeated in a battle the Amorite kings, Sihon and Og. The reason they engaged them in battle was because Moab refused to allow Israel to pass through even after Moses requested a peaceful journey whereby he promised they would stick to the 401 and not eat any of their grain or drink any water. Sihon refused to let Moses pass and instead attacked them. A big mistake. Israel defeated the Amorites and captured their land.

The land of Moab was next in Israel’s journey and Balak the King of Moab and leaders of Midian were afraid that Israel would do the same to them. In his fear he called for Balaam, a demonic prophet, to cast a curse on Israel so they would be weakened and allow them to attack them and defeat them. God thwarted Balaam’s attempts to curse Israel. Why? Because God made promises to Israel way back when He called Abraham to be the Father of this people He was creating:

Gen. 1:22 “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

God's Holiness Requires Him to be Just **(31:1-13)**

If God makes a promise, then because He is holy and sinless, he is bound to His own promises. Therefore, He will act with justice towards those who seek to curse/harm His people. This is retribution on people who desired to harm and even wipe out God's people without provocation. Israel had not harmed Moab or Midian. They never even engaged in conversation with Moses. They just saw them as a threat to their existence.

Balaam's curse failed but he had a backup plan which we read about in Ch. 25 and explained here in 31:16, that Balaam convinced Moabite or Midianite women to seduce Israelite men so that they would turn away from the Lord and follow their false gods. God ordered retribution

Against sinful acts initiated against God's people (vv.1-2)

He clearly explained to Moses why He was enacting justice against Midian. We're told exactly why in 31:15-16 because of Balaam's plot. He has to defend His Word since Balak desired to curse God's people for no reason, other than that they are interfering with his life.

That God will enact justice should be encouraging to God's people, since we know He sees all iniquities against us and will bring justice one day. But God has a different method than our plan to seek retribution. In the book of Habakkuk, the prophet Habakkuk is complaining to God that Israel is not living for God and why isn't God disciplining His own people. God says to Habakkuk, don't worry, I will. I'm going to send the nation of Babylon to do it for Me. At this Habakkuk complains again saying, 'Why would you do that? Are you going to wipe us all out? These people worship strange gods, not You are the real God.' Then God replies to Habakkuk:

² Then the Lord replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. ³ For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.

In other words, write this down as a record that My words always come true. It will 'linger' – in other words, it won't come when we want it to come – but when it comes Babylon also will experience My justice if they don't turn to me.

God orders Moses to gather an army to do His bidding. We need to be careful with regard to thinking we are God's hands of justice because God

Uses His people occasionally to carry out justice (vv.3-12)

Part of this will be a warm-up for when they get in the land. There is no other way than to remove their enemies except through war. But this is not God's ideal for His people. Because He will say through Moses in Deut. 32,

³⁵ It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them."

⁴³ Rejoice, O nations, with his people; for he will avenge the blood of his servants; he will take vengeance on his enemies and make atonement for his land and people.

But God will do it the way He chooses, occasionally calling on Israel in the Old Testament to do this. But they were a political reality to whom God was giving land to that required this type of justice. We, Jesus' body the church, are not a political entity who have to fight for our enemies for land. The apostle Paul takes Moses' words from Deut. 32 to apply them to us to remind us vengeance isn't ours. It's God's job.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

And Jesus assured us violent retaliation is not His way.

Matt. 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

As much as we would like sometimes to get our pound of flesh from others, it's very hard on us when we do that. I don't think God made us for that thankfully. And we see this here in the passage. God has a different perspective on retribution. Yes, He disciplines us for sins we commit as well as bring justice on those who reject Him for what they've done to God's people, but

God Enacts Justice to Prevent Greater Sin **(31:13-24)**

In vv.13-14 the commanders come back from carrying out God's command but Moses is angry because they didn't fully do it. What did they fail to do?

¹⁵ "Have you allowed all the women to live?" he asked them. ¹⁶ "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people. ¹⁷ Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, ¹⁸ but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man.

They struggled to kill women but God said they were the problem because they obeyed Balaam's evil plan. They intentionally lured Israelite men to have sex with them in order to worship other gods. But why their boys? Because boys are the men of the future, the ones who are often taught early on to hate. Can you think of anything viler and more wicked then to train little boys to hate and kill God's people for no reason? This is the point God was making. It's about preventing more future evil. Listen to what God said in Deut. 9 before they went into Canaan to do battle:

³ But be assured today that the Lord your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the Lord has promised you. ⁴ After the Lord your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you. ⁵ It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In 1 Samuel 15:1-3 Samuel tells King Saul that God wants him to wipe out the Amalekites completely because of their wicked treatment of Israel. But Saul doesn't. He chooses those who should die and shouldn't. Because he doesn't carry out God's order, a future evil returns in the book of Esther, the vile Haman tricks King Xerxes into allowing a day to wipe out every Jew. We learn that Haman is an Amalekite.

God knows what He's doing. He is infinite we are not.

He sees what we can't see (vv.13-18)

In Is. 55 God invites Jews & Gentiles to come to Him so they can be satisfied by him. No doubt this was a surprise to the Jewish people, but God reads their minds and says:

⁶ *Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

⁸ *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.*

⁹ *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

God wants all people saved but many don't want Him. Many undermine His work and seek to do evil in the world. God judges to prevent future evil. If God sees the heart (like a David) does He not also see the hearts of the Hamans and Hitlers and so many others whose sole purpose is to bring death to the world, especially on God's people? Hell is real and it is the final future judgment of God because it prevents evil from ever coming back so that we who place our faith in Jesus according to God's Word will enjoy sinlessness forever. If God doesn't wipe out sin once and for all how can He offer is eternal life of joy and peace forever? But watch this:

He shows us that justice is not easy (vv.19-24)

¹⁹ *"All of you who have killed anyone or touched anyone who was killed must stay outside the camp seven days. On the third and seventh days you must purify yourselves and your captives. ²⁰ Purify every garment as well as everything made of leather, goat hair or wood."*

God requires this to be done because all of them have been affected by shed blood. Contact with death temporarily separates you from God because death is the natural consequence of sin. It separated one from their family for a week. There needs to be cleansing.

It's a message from God that taking life is unnatural. That death is hard. It is not surprising that soldiers suffer from PTSD. The suicide rate of those in the military is high. They see things we were not equipped to see. And if we think its easy on God, let's see a passage we should all have memorized for the subject we are dealing with this morning.

In the book of Ezekiel God is warning Judah to turn back to God from their disobedience or they will die when the armies of Babylon knock down the walls of Jerusalem. Many did not heed God's words yet this is what He said in 18:30,

^{18:30} *"Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. ³¹ Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!*

The apostle Peter writes this about God who is purposely delaying Jesus' return which will ultimately result in the world being judged and unbelievers tossed into the lake of fire forever.

2 Pet. 3:7 By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. ⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

And if we still think God doesn't really care about people dying and going into eternity without Him, listen to Rom. 3

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

We don't deserve God's grace but God sent Jesus His one and Only Son to die for us a horrible death because of our sins.

2 Cor. 5:20 ... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He even sent His own Son Jesus to die for everyone's sins, wanting them to come to faith and repentance. Why?

God Wants to Reward Those Who Follow Him **(31:25-54)**

The rest of Ch. 31 is about how God rewards those who follow His word. Eliezer the priest is involved in the distribution to remind them that these are God's rewards. The cleansing process reminds everyone that it all is God's and must be cleansed. Some of it is returned to God as an offering and some of it is divided among the soldiers and people. But God rewards His people because this is what He wants to do.

He wants us to recognize everything we have ultimately comes from Him. Especially our life. He gave us life. We didn't deserve to be given a life. To love a spouse, to have children and grandchildren. Yes, not everything goes perfectly but that's because we live in a sin-impacted world. Which should cause us to look beyond this life to the eternity God has in store for us with Himself when sin is completely removed. This is the certain hope of the person who has confessed they are a sinner, not right with God and in need of saving. That they must do as we have done and accept what Jesus has done for us on the cross, believing that our future is secure because He rose from the

dead and that He will return one day, establish His rule on the earth to show the world once and for all He is Lord.

So is God good? Yes He is. This is His world, He made it and He made us. We allowed sin to enter the world so we suffer for all its affects. But God will right every wrong and will bring us into His presence one day to experience His sinless goodness for all eternity through faith in Jesus. And if you still question the fairness of God, let me close with these words

Ps. 103:10 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our guilty deeds. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him.

¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our wrongdoings from us. ¹³ Just as a father has compassion on his children, So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. Father in heaven, creator of the world, all-knowing and all-seeing God, we thank You that because of Your goodness we live and move and have our being. Rom. 11:36 says that everything is from You for You and to You, while so many people in the world think everything is about them and for them. Thank you for Your mercy and grace to put all our sin on Jesus, who willingly suffered and died for what our sins deserve, death, yet rose from the dead because He Himself had never sinned. Thanks You that eternal life is a gift and not by our own works because none of us can save ourselves. I pray for those who have not grasped this yet, that they would realize You are good, You have made a path to Yourself if anyone confesses they are a sinner in need of salvation and accepts Jesus Christ as their Saviour. May they do that today or very soon.

Father, we don't understand how You work all things for Your ultimate purpose but help us to continue to trust You and Your Word, knowing that in them we have life and in You true joy.

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If you have any comments or questions please contact us at
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