

### NUMBERS

#### Lesson 32 - Chapters 30 and 31

This week, in Numbers chapter 30, we take up the matter of making vows and oaths to the Lord. I suppose that every Believer, Jewish or gentile, has at some time in their walk made a promise to God; some folks make vows and oaths quite regularly and among Eastern Orthodox Christianity making vows are a regular part of worship. Every religion that I've ever studied and examined, from Hinduism to Baha'ism, and from Judaism to Islam and all the others have some inherent understanding of making promises to their god in return for something important. Atheists that find themselves in life-threatening situations have been known to look upward and make a promise to any spiritual deity that might be listening, in exchange for being rescued (just in case God might actually exist).

When we get married we exchange wedding vows.....promises to one another invoking the name of Yehoveh. When we testify in a court of law we swear or take an oath to tell the entire truth as best we know it ("so help us God"). And the Bible is positively overflowing with men (and women) making vows to the Lord. What we need to understand is that these vows and oaths were completely real and valid (they were not superstition); and the Lord expects these promises to be kept. Even so, there are rules and regulations and laws established by precedent on who could, or should, make vows and oaths; under what kind of circumstances; who could legitimately void a vow; and at times a caution is raised against making vows in the heat of the moment due to the seriousness of making promises and bargains with the Lord.

Let's read Numbers chapter 30.

#### READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 30 all

Before we get too deep into this chapter let me point out that there is a distinct difference in the bible between an oath and a vow. An oath imposes an obligation upon the one making the oath. A vow is by definition a conditional promise. That is, IF Jacob returns home safely, IF Israel is victorious over the Canaanites, IF Jephthah defeats the Ammonites, then they will respond with some predetermined action to complete the bargain

Oaths tend to come in two flavors: the kind that is a promise and the kind that makes some kind of assertion (like asserting that you didn't steal that camel). A covenant, by definition, is a promissory oath. In Hebrew this kind of oath is labeled a ***shevu'at 'issar***.

Oaths usually are made in the name of some god or another; in the case of the Hebrews it was of course in the name of ***YHWH***. Thus we'll see the Hebrew term ***nishba 'be-YHWH*** used,

which means, "swear by Yehoveh". This is used when one person is making an oath to another person but is invoking God's name to seal that oath.

But when an oath is made directly to God (an oath that is between a person and God), the Hebrew term is *nishba 'le-YHWH*, which means, "swear TO YHWH".

These Hebrews of ancient bible times were no different than we are: often in moments of crisis we will plead with God and make a vow to Him, often unthinking and rash: "Oh, Lord, I'll to church (or synagogue) every week", or "I promise never to use swear words again", or "I'll never ask you for anything ever again". You can probably recall some doozies that you've either heard or actually uttered yourself.

The problem is that verse 3 says this: if a person makes an oath or a vow he is not to break it; he is to carry out EVERYTHING that he has said he would do. Yikes. I think sometimes we make so many promises to the Lord we can't even remember what we said. The problem is: the Lord has a photographic memory and perfect recall.

In reality verse 3 says that "if a MAN" makes a vow; this is referring to a male specifically because verse 4 then begins "If a woman" makes a vow. So instantly we see that the Lord looks upon the vows of a woman differently than He looks upon the vows of a man. Before we examine the particulars of this interesting (and I'm sure to some of you ladies a bit uncomfortable) distinction between vows of men versus women, let's see exactly WHY this difference exists in the first place.

The principles from which the laws about vows come, and how each sex is obligated to those vows or not, are already well established in the Torah: and it is that just as a child is to submit to their parent, and man to the Lord, so is a wife to submit to her husband. Put in a way that is a little less irritating to the modern western woman, a wife is under the covering and authority of her husband, just as a husband is under the covering and authority of God. So the idea of the ordinances set up in Numbers 30 is that neither a child NOR a wife is given permission by Yehoveh to substitute self-imposed, self-created obligations to God in addition to or in place of standard God-ordained duties. Further, a child or a wife cannot make a vow to the Lord, the keeping of which affects the parent or husband in such a way as to make that vow offensive to them.

This does NOT necessarily speak to the nature or intent of the vow; that is, it's not that the vow might be an evil vow or an irresponsible vow that cannot possibly be kept. Rather, the vows of a child or a woman come FIRST under her earthly authority BEFORE they are considered valid to her Heavenly authority, Yehoveh.

Now, as we go about delving into the rules about vow-making in Torah, especially as concerns women, keep in mind that in the New Testament vows and promises to the Lord continued and were considered completely acceptable, usual, and generally a good thing. In the Gospels and the Epistles we will read of Believers (even Apostles) making vows as a normal course of life. However, Yeshua warned about the downside of vow making and said that a vow cannot be used to abrogate or avoid an otherwise lawful expectation of a person. Jesus specifically

addressed this practice of making a vow that allowed a person to evade proper care for their parents because it was a real problem in His era.

**NAS Matthew 15:3 And He (Yeshua) answered and said to them, "And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 "For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.' 5 "But you say, 'Whoever shall say to his father or mother, "Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God (a vow)," 6 he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7 "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, 8 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. 9 'But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'"**

This is but one example of where a person selfishly or out of complete ignorance of scriptural truth would make a vow to give something to God INSTEAD of doing what has already been set down as a permanent God-ordained responsibility in Torah. In this instance it was that a man said that the money he would have used to care for his parents he has instead vowed it to the Lord; so, alas, he just cannot meet his obligation as a son to care for them. In other words he gave the money to the Priesthood instead of using it to see after his aged mother and father. And Yeshua blamed this incorrect mindset primarily on the teachings of doctrines of men, which He often refers to as "tradition". Understand, what Jesus was saying was: oh, you say you are studying the Holy Scriptures, and you claim to be doing what the Scriptures say; but in reality you're not. You probably don't even really know what the Scriptures say because you have chosen to accept a list of doctrines that men have told you is the truth; doctrines that are self-serving at times, rather than going by what the Word actually says. Folks, because the Jews have come to call their doctrines "Tradition", it is typically thought that Jesus was ONLY referring to the traditions that JEWS made; in fact, He is speaking to ALL manmade traditions and that includes the vast trove of traditions that Christians call "doctrine". And, Yeshua says that the result of this acceptance of doctrines over Scripture is that "their heart is far away from Me".

Basically the way chapter 30 works is that it organizes the issue of vow making into 4 cases or 4 examples. The instruction concerning males is NOT one these cases. For the man (meaning a man of an age of accountability, not a boy-child) it is a very straightforward matter: make a vow keep a vow. There is NO way out that does not end up being sin. No one else is held responsible for a man making a vow, and there is no winking and looking the other way by the Lord, regardless of how desperate the situation under which a man might have entered that vow.

Men, Yeshua did NOT change this! Absolutely no way did Yeshua say that the ordinances concerning vows are abolished. What He DID say was to be very careful what you vow and that it's better to just make your yes, yes and your no, no; and to follow the God-principles long established in the Word without thinking that somehow you can make a vow to avoid obedience to those principles.

Probably one of the most devastating examples in the entire Bible of rash vow making by a

man is the story of Jephthah in the Book of Judges. Jephthah was an Israelite, probably of the tribe of Gad as he was born in the territory called Gilead. Gilead was at first called Gad (one of the 12 tribes of Israel); and Gad was one of the 2 1/2 Hebrew tribes who chose to disavow themselves from the land that Yehoveh had set aside for His people, Canaan. The area of Gad, during the era of the Judges called Gilead, was on the east side of the Jordan River in an area generally called the Trans-Jordan.

The backdrop for the story of Jephthah was that the nation of Ammon was making trouble with Gilead, and it was necessary for Gilead to do battle with the forces of Ammon. But, they lacked the military leader necessary to rally the people of Gilead to victory. Jephthah had been kicked out of Gilead some years earlier because his mother was a prostitute, and so Jephthah was considered as illegitimate. However, Jephthah was known as a fierce and effective warrior leader and so representatives of Gilead went to him and asked him to return and lead Gilead in battle in return for reinstatement to the tribe; he agreed.

But, before he went to war, Jephthah approached Yehoveh and made a vow in order to seek God's favor for the coming battle. That is, that if the Lord would give Jephthah victory, he would do something specific in return; this is the typical format for making a vow.

### **READ JUDGES 11:29 - 40**

Imagine, this man Jephthah, having NO idea that it would be his only daughter who would, by chance, become the object of the sacrificial vow he had made to the Lord, followed through and sacrificed this girl. Now in no way does the Lord condone or ask for or accept human sacrifice. Yet so clear is His mandate that a man who makes a vow (no matter what it is) is to perform that vow, the Jephthah felt he had little choice but to commit this horror upon his own child. Now as an aside I have heard many Christians AND Jews try to make a case that Jephthah's daughter was NOT offered up as a burnt offering to God (as a way around this unsavory and disgusting act that, on the surface, seems to meet God's approval); but the Scripture is VERY clear that not only did Jephthah do exactly as he had vowed, but that there was a regular day of sad commemoration established for that event in Israel.

Jephthah made what appeared to all around him a VERY pious and reasonable offering to the Lord (at least at the time he made the vow it seemed that way). He never dreamed what the result would be. But that's the problem with making vows in the first place; they are dangerous. We have NO idea all the possible outcomes. I would also like to note that Jephthah could have made a different decision. He could have chosen to BREAK his vow with the Lord and bear his own sin for his rashness, couldn't he? But he didn't. Instead in a terribly false sense of piety and apparently not even understanding that the Lord does NOT want human sacrifice, Jephthah went through with the terms of the vow that HE established and killed his own innocent child.

So men, beware. Our vows have power and they have consequences and once they are made there are only a couple of possible outcomes: that we fulfill our vow, no matter how unintentionally painful, or we break our vow and then live in our sin. Jephthah may have fulfilled his vow to the Lord but the Lord would not have been pleased with this.

We have our first of the 4 cases of vow making in Numbers 30: the case of a virgin (meaning a girl who was unmarried), who was still living at home. This means she was under the authority of her parents, her father in particular. And the rule is that if this young girl makes a vow, and her father hears of it but does not respond, and then the vow stands no matter what the vow is. However, if her father hears of the vow and disapproves of it, the vow is annulled. Further, the Lord will not consider her unfulfilled vow a sin BECAUSE it was her father who told her she could not fulfill it.

In other words, in a case of two opposing wrongs (so to speak), one of making an unauthorized or rash vow, and another of not completing that vow, it was better to be obedient to the authority of her father (an authority that is a foundational God-principle), than to fulfill the vow to God that the girl's father disagreed with. And, by the way, the girl would have fully known that she had no place making a vow to Yehoveh without her father's prior approval.

A second case is proposed starting in verse 7, and it kind of builds on the first case. This is the case of an unmarried girl who, while still living at home, makes a vow that her father finds out about but does NOT annul. The girl is therefore bound to the terms of that vow.

Later, however, she marries; and her husband hears of this vow that was made prior to their marriage; a completely legitimate and in-force vow. He now has the option of allowing the terms of the vow to be brought to fruition OR annulling the vow. And, just as if the girl's father had annulled the vow and she would not be held responsible by God for not fulfilling it, it is the same for her husband: he can agree with or annul his wife's vows. Why? Because authority over this girl, now a woman, was transferred from her father to her husband when she was wed.

In verse 10 begins the 3rd case: the case of a woman who is widowed or divorced and makes a vow. And, since she is NOT under the authority of a father or a husband at this time, whatever she vows stands and no one can annul it. In essence, in this case of a divorcee or widow, the status of her vow and her obligation is similar to that of a full-grown male.

The last case, the 4th, a married woman makes a vow, her husband knows of it, but he remains silent. The result is that her vow stands, and she is responsible to fulfill it. But, understand, there are vows that can affect the whole family. And, if her husband lets stand a vow by his wife that was terribly unwise, or perhaps even against the principles of God, then he bears at least some of the responsibility.

Verse 14 gives us some general direction about vows; but really, this is somewhat of a different TYPE of vow that is discussed here. This is a vow of self-denial; that is, it is a vow in which the terms are that the woman will deny herself something in return for the Lord granting her request. We see a vow like this in the case of Samuel, when his mother told God that she would deny herself the possession of her child if the Lord would allow her to become pregnant AND if the child was a son. That is, she would dedicate her son's entire life to service to the Lord, and thereby deny herself all the necessary duties and honors a son might normally confer upon his mother, like caring for her in her old age.

Let's wrap up this discussion of chapter 30 and the issue of vows (mainly as it concerns women and children) with examining two kinds of vows. Usually, these two different kinds of vows are given different names, but sometimes they are not translated that way. One kind is called, in Hebrew, **neder**. **Neder** SHOULD be translated as "vow"; it means to do something positive such as making a sacrificial offering of some kind.

The second kind is called **issar**. **Issar** would be better translated as "pledge". This pledge is generally associated with fasting or some form of abstinence. This is the kind associated, for instance, with a Nazarite vow (or pledge), which involves abstinence from drinking or eating any grape product, from cutting one's hair, and from touching a corpse even if it were their mother or father.

What is common among all vows and pledges is that an oath is taken to initiate these vows and pledges; and by definition an oath invokes the name of God. Even oaths are of two kinds: the first kind is a promise, and the second is the making of an assertion. An assertion type of oath is the kind a defendant on trial would make; under oath he asserts the facts of the case and thereby his innocence in the matter. A promissory type of oath says that the person making the oath takes an obligation upon himself to do something. A covenant is, by definition, a promissory oath; it is one or two parties promising to do something. This is important for us to remember: because the Lord has chosen to put Himself under the same law of oaths that He has put men. When the Lord made the covenants with Abraham and Moses, for instance, it was His promising to do something. It was Yehoveh taking an oath, upon His own name, to bring something about.

Vows, by definition, have conditions. Jephthah said IF God would give them victory; he would sacrifice the first thing through the door of his tent when he returned home from battle. Jacob said that IF God would bring Him back to Canaan, safely, then the Lord would be his God and he would build God a sanctuary.

Vows became so popular among ancient Israel that a system of redeeming a vow, rather than performing it, was developed. We see the basics of that redeeming-a-vow system in Leviticus 27, where it primarily concerns the matter of a PERSON being given AS A VOW for service to the Lord. In other words, a father may say if thus and so happens I will dedicate my son to the service of the Lord. However, by Law, full-time service to the Lord was the sole province of the Levites. So, if a parent dedicated their child to "service to the Lord" as a vow, or if a slave owner dedicated one of his slaves for "service to the Lord", since there was really no way for the vow to happen there was a way for the person who MADE the vow to redeem back that vow for a set price. The money was paid to the priesthood (as all vow money was); but it was all the more appropriate because this vow of "service to the Lord" could only truly be fulfilled by working at the Tabernacle, and later the Temple. And, as this was reserved by the Lord strictly for the Levites (and anyone else attempting it was to be put to death), then by definition this was but a symbolic offering of the one making the vow; a vow that could not possibly be fulfilled. So all along it was expected that the one making the vow would simply pay some money to the Temple.

Remember this when hearing Yeshua's words about vows and pledges; because it was around

this abusive backdrop of making unfulfillable vows (generally for the purpose of making that person look pious or godly to the public) that He spoke against making vows and pledges as being a generally fruitless activity because while it may have been frivolous to the worshipper, it was serious business to God.

Let's move on to chapter 31.

### **READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 31 all**

This chapter concerns the holy war Yehoveh has ordered of Israel against Midian. Why war against Midian? It was because of the Midianites' allegiance with Moab, and therefore their participation in leading the Hebrews into idol worship of Chemosh, the chief god of Moab.

In some ways this is but an extension of the Balak and Balaam story, whereby Balak, the king of Moab, asked a Mesopotamian sorcerer named Balaam to come and put a curse on Israel so that Moab (and their ally Midian) could fight against Moses and his forces and defeat them in battle. Why did Moab want to fight Israel? Because Israel would, with its 3 million population and 600,000 strong army, be the biggest dog in the kennel and therefore able to dominate any other people group in the region. Almost all kings (King Balak included) assumed the throne with the goal of expanding their territory and influence. If Israel came into their area and survived, King Balak could kiss his hopes of regional domination good-bye.

The Lord God intervened in Balak's plan, had direct contact with Balaam (and his donkey), and Balaam conceded that a) even if he DID curse Israel it would have had no effect because whatever Yehoveh blessed cannot be cursed, and whatever Yehoveh cursed cannot be blessed; and b) God made it clear that if Balaam ever attempted to utter a curse to bolster Israel's enemy, Moab, that God would summarily kill Balaam. Balaam told King Balak; therefore, that he would not and could not curse Israel and so went back home to Carchemish without being paid.

However, immediately following the Balaam and Balak story we find out that Israel remained in the area of Moab and that Balaam suggested to Balak that Moab could infiltrate Israel and thus weaken them by getting the Midianite (and Moabite) women to sexually entice the Hebrew men, and in the process persuade Israel to worship Chemosh. It worked. And, as a result Yehoveh brought a plague upon Israel or its idolatry that killed 24,000 Hebrews. It ended only when a priest named Phinehas speared a Hebrew man having intercourse with a Moabite woman (while they were in his tent inside the camp of Israel), killing them both. The Lord considered this atonement for the national sin of apostasy and idolatry Israel had committed and so the plague ceased.

But, as often happens in the Bible, when Israel is led astray by someone FIRST Israel is punished for following and then there is retribution against those who did the leading. That is what is occurring here in Numbers 31 against Midian.

Now, before we begin studying this verse by verse, let me add some information. By reading this story it would appear that all of Midian was destroyed, brought to extinction. That after this

event there would not have existed a "Midian" anymore. But, as we move forward in our Torah study, and even later in the Bible, we'll find other encounters with Midian; and archaeology proves that Midian remained alive and well far beyond this era. So what gives?

Well, the answer is that Midian was much like Canaan in that era: there was no sovereign nation called Canaan. Canaan was just a general geographical area where several tribes resided that claimed Noah's grandson Canaan as an ancestor (as well as many other cultures that had no relation to Canaan). Midian (recall Midian was where Moses went when he fled Egypt; it was also where he met and married his Midianite wife, Tzipora; and it was where he met God at the Burning Bush, and therefore I claim that Midian was actually the location of Mt. Sinai), the land of Midian was also just a general geographical area, not a nation with defined boundaries. Midian was composed of several tribes, all ancestors of a man named Midian, who was the son of Abraham's second wife, Keturah. So, Midianites were Semites.....descendants of Abraham.....and distant cousins to Israel.

Various of the Midian tribes and clans were spread out over the western portion of the Arabian Peninsula, and ranging all the way north to Moab, and west to Edom and the Negev. In our Numbers 31 story Moses and the Hebrews **only** destroyed those Midianite clans who settled in the area of Moab.....not ALL Midianites of every tribe. Yet, what Israel did was quite significant in scope.

Our story begins, in verse 1, with the Lord telling Moses that this battle with Midian would be the last major assignment He would have for him. Because, soon thereafter, Moses would die.

We'll continue our study next week.