

Num 34-35 “Life in the Land: What to Do When You Start Killing Each Other” May 11, 2014

What do you do when you start killing each other?

Remember the beginning of Numbers?

10 chapters on the glory of the wilderness camp –

10 chapters where Israel was always doing as the LORD commanded Moses?

What a difference 40 years makes!

At the beginning of Numbers we heard a lot about the organization of the camp

as Israel prepared to leave Mt. Sinai and head for the Promised Land.

Now at the end of Numbers we are hearing about the organization for life in the land.

But at the beginning of Numbers,

we saw the holy people of God setting out with the glory of the LORD in their midst!

And here at the end of Numbers,

we hear God providing laws for what to do when Israel kills each other!

Then again, perhaps this is not all that surprising.

After all, in between the beginning of Numbers and now,

we have seen how Israel has sinned and falls short of the glory of God.

Israel has demonstrated that he is very much like Adam –

who refused to listen to the voice of the LORD,

and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And so the children of Israel will be like the children of Adam –

like Cain who killed his brother, Abel.

And likewise,

at the beginning of Numbers there were 12 tribes arrayed around the Holy of Holies –

and we saw the glory of a worship-centered life.

At the end of Numbers there are 9 ½ tribes entering the Promised Land –

with 2 ½ tribes remaining outside the land.

Why is this important?

A broken and humbled Israel will take possession of the land.

The church does not advance because of our wisdom, our wealth, and our power!

The church takes possession of the land in spite of her weakness and foolishness.

Christ has become for us wisdom from God, sanctification, righteousness, and redemption!

1. The Promised Land: Borders and Divisions (34:1-29)

So why does God give us chapter 34?

Why does God give us a detailed description of the borders of the promised land,
together with a list of the names of the men

who were charged with dividing the land among the tribes of Israel?

I will suggest two reasons:

1) remember –

remember what God has promised.

Israel will never fully possess this land.

The boundaries given here are the ideal
that Israel never quite attains.

So when Israel reads the book of Numbers,

they are to remember that they have fallen short of God's promise.

As 33:55-56 says –

“But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you,
then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes
and thorns in your sides,
and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell.

And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.”

2) don't repeat the mistakes of your fathers.

The borders of the Land are held forth before Israel

in order to encourage God's people to be fruitful and multiply,
to fill the earth and subdue it.

Will Israel succeed where Adam failed?

a. The Borders of the Land: This Is Your Inheritance (v1-15)

34 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Command the people of Israel, and say to them, When you enter the land of Canaan (this is the land that shall fall to you for an inheritance, the land of Canaan as defined by its borders), ³ your south side shall be from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom, and your southern border shall run from the end of the Salt Sea on the east. ⁴ And your border shall turn south of the ascent of Akrabbim, and cross to Zin, and its limit shall be south of Kadesh-barnea. Then it shall go on to Hazar-addar, and pass along to Azmon. ⁵ And the border shall turn from Azmon to the Brook of Egypt, and its limit shall be at the sea.

⁶ *“For the western border, you shall have the Great Sea and its^[a] coast. This shall be your western border.*

⁷ *“This shall be your northern border: from the Great Sea you shall draw a line to Mount Hor.*

⁸ *From Mount Hor you shall draw a line to Lebo-hamath, and the limit of the border shall be at Zedad. ⁹ Then the border shall extend to Ziphron, and its limit shall be at Hazar-enan. This shall be your northern border.*

¹⁰ *“You shall draw a line for your eastern border from Hazar-enan to Shepham. ¹¹ And the border shall go down from Shepham to Riblah on the east side of Ain. And the border shall go down and reach to the shoulder of the Sea of Chinnereth on the east. ¹² And the border shall go down to the Jordan, and its limit shall be at the Salt Sea. This shall be your land as defined by its borders all around.”*

Verses 1-15 set forth the borders of the inheritance.

Inheritance is a key theme in the scriptures.

Israel is the Son of God who inherits his Father's land.

In Romans 4, Paul will point out that this foreshadows the inheritance of the whole earth.

God's promise to Abraham –

the promise of the land, and of the seed, and of the blessing to the nations –
is fulfilled in Christ who is Lord over all the earth.

But here in Numbers,

the southern border stretches from the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean,
which functions as the western border.

The northern border stretches from Mount Hor far in the north,
almost to the Euphrates River,
and then south down the line of the desert.

Then the eastern border cuts back to the Sea of Galilee,
and then comes down the Jordan River to the Dead Sea.

This boundary plainly excludes Gilead –

where Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh now dwells.

And in fact, verses 13-15 explain why:

¹³ Moses commanded the people of Israel, saying, "This is the land that you shall inherit by lot, which the LORD has commanded to give to the nine tribes and to the half-tribe. ¹⁴ For the tribe of the people of Reuben by fathers' houses and the tribe of the people of Gad by their fathers' houses have received their inheritance, and also the half-tribe of Manasseh. ¹⁵ The two tribes and the half-tribe have received their inheritance beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, toward the sunrise."

The inheritance of Israel will now be divided among the 9 ½ tribes.

Even before they enter the Land, Israel is beginning to fragment.

Later the ten northern tribes will divide from Judah and Benjamin.

But here the east/west division takes precedence.

How often did Israel actually stay together?

Was "Israel" ever something more than a loose conglomeration of tribes?

They seem to stick together through the days of Joshua –

but once they get enough space to live in,

they split up, and in the days of the judges, there is no unity.

Then during the days of Saul and David and Solomon

there appears to be a unitary state –

held together by strong rulers for three generations.

We have no biblical reason to believe that the people called “Israel” ever really thought of *themselves* as one people for more than a generation or two (and even then, it’s not clear what that really meant to them!)

Why is this important?

In the OT Israel was divided.

In the NT the church has been divided.

That’s not a good thing.

Israel should have been one.

The church should be one.

But the messy and fragmented character of the people of God should not surprise us.

b. The Chiefs of the Division: The Importance of Community (v16-29)

¹⁶ *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ¹⁷ *“These are the names of the men who shall divide the land to you for inheritance: Eleazar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun. ¹⁸ You shall take one chief from every tribe to divide the land for inheritance. ¹⁹ These are the names of the men: Of the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jephunneh. ²⁰ Of the tribe of the people of Simeon, Shemuel the son of Ammihud. ²¹ Of the tribe of Benjamin, Elidad the son of Chislon. ²² Of the tribe of the people of Dan a chief, Bukki the son of Jogli. ²³ Of the people of Joseph: of the tribe of the people of Manasseh a chief, Hanniel the son of Ephod. ²⁴ And of the tribe of the people of Ephraim a chief, Kemuel the son of Shiphtan. ²⁵ Of the tribe of the people of Zebulun a chief, Elizaphan the son of Parnach. ²⁶ Of the tribe of the people of Issachar a chief, Paltiel the son of Azzan. ²⁷ And of the tribe of the people of Asher a chief, Ahihud the son of Shelomi. ²⁸ Of the tribe of the people of Naphtali a chief, Pedahel the son of Ammihud. ²⁹ These are the men whom the LORD commanded to divide the inheritance for the people of Israel in the land of Canaan.”*

And verses 16-29 set forth the names of the men who are to oversee the division of the land.

Notice that it is not a matter of individual preference.

They are to cast lots (v13).

The chiefs of the division are there to make sure that everything is done fairly.

I’ve called this “the importance of community”

because God does not leave Israel to their own devices in dividing the land.

Notice that Reuben and Gad are omitted from the list of those overseeing the division.

They already have their inheritance,

so they should not meddle in the division of the rest of the land.

The Promised Land is a diverse place.

Some will get good land.

Some will get mediocre land.

This is not supposed to be a land grab.

This is supposed to be done with the tribal leaders overseeing the division.

But there is a reason why the next chapter
deals with what to do when you start killing each other.

Israel, after all, is the new Adam – entering the new Eden.
In the days of Cain and Abel, there was plenty of good land –
and Cain still found a reason to kill Abel!

When you enter the land, and you realize that your neighbor got a better deal than you did...

2. The City and the Land: Longing for the New Jerusalem (35:1-34)

a. Levitical Cities and Cities of Refuge (v1-8)

*35 The LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying,
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. And you shall give to the Levites pasturelands around the cities.
3 The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and their pasturelands shall be for their cattle and for
their livestock and for all their beasts. 4 The pasturelands of the cities, which you shall give to the
Levites, shall reach from the wall of the city outward a thousand cubits^[b] all around. 5 And you
shall measure, outside the city, on the east side two thousand cubits, and on the south side two
thousand cubits, and on the west side two thousand cubits, and on the north side two thousand
cubits, the city being in the middle. This shall belong to them as pastureland for their cities.*

Verses 2-5 explain the principle of the Levitical cities.

The Levites have no inheritance – there is no ‘land of Levi.’

They are to serve the sanctuary –

except there are too many Levites to serve one tent.

So Levi is to be scattered through all the tribes of Israel

as a reminder of the unity of the people of God.

There are to be Levites in the midst of Gad and Reuben on the east side of the Jordan.

There are to be Levites in the midst of Dan and Naphtali far in the north.

There are to be Levites in the midst of Judah and Simeon far in the south.

In every tribe, the Levitical cities are to signify that Israel is one.

Each city has pasture lands extending 1500 feet in every direction,
so that each Levitical city is around ½ mile square.

In theory the Levites were supposed to teach Israel God’s law –
but Judges and Kings do not provide much evidence for Levi’s fidelity in this!

*6 “The cities that you give to the Levites shall be the six cities of refuge, where you shall permit
the manslayer to flee, and in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities. 7 All the cities that
you give to the Levites shall be forty-eight, with their pasturelands. 8 And as for the cities that*

you shall give from the possession of the people of Israel, from the larger tribes you shall take many, and from the smaller tribes you shall take few; each, in proportion to the inheritance that it inherits, shall give of its cities to the Levites.”

42 cities are given to the Levites (7x6).

6 more cities are cities of refuge.

So 48 cities are established as Levitical cities.

Earlier in Numbers 3-4 we heard about the arrangement of the camp:

Israel camped around the tabernacle – an outer ring of 3 tribes on each side.

But the tents of the Levites provided an inner ring around the tabernacle,

and Aaron and his sons – the priests – camped at the entrance to the tent.

So what’s missing in the description of the Levitical cities?

A priestly city.

The 49th city.

[As a California boy, I can only say that I had never before thought of San Francisco as such a holy city – but it is the city of the 49’ers...]

In Numbers there is no 49th city – there is no city of the priests.

And there is no reference to where the priests should go.

The tabernacle awaits the word of the LORD.

Where is the holy city?

Only in Samuel and Kings will we finally hear of the priestly city –

the city where the house of the LORD will be built.

But even the 49th city – Jerusalem – the 7x7 city – is only the completion of the old covenant.

The greater city – the 50th city – 7x7 + 1 – is the heavenly Jerusalem!

b. The Manslayer and the Cities of Refuge (v9-34)

⁹ *And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ¹⁰ *“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, ¹¹ then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. ¹² The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment. ¹³ And the cities that you give shall be your six cities of refuge. ¹⁴ You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge. ¹⁵ These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there.*

At the beginning of Numbers we heard about the arrangement of the wilderness camp –
with the high priest dwelling at the entrance to the tabernacle.
Now, at the end of Numbers, we hear about the cities of refuge scattered around Israel –
places where the holiness of the sanctuary provides a refuge for the manslayer.

I want you to think about what this tells us about the holiness of God.
The holiness of God takes thought for those in distress –
for those who did something terrible – but not intentionally!

To understand the principle behind the cities of refuge we need to hear Genesis 9:6 –
“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image.”

Blood pollutes the ground.
If you kill someone, you deserve to die.
Life for life – death for death.
When you strike down the image of God,
you are striking at God himself.

But what if it was an accident?
The principle remains: if you killed someone, you deserve to die.
And if the dead man’s relative finds you and kills you,
he will simply be making things right.

Do you see the point?
The point of Genesis 9:6 is that *motive* is irrelevant.
If you kill someone, your life is forfeit.
You took an innocent life – therefore you must die –
and the one who kills *you* is *not* guilty.
The one who kills you is simply bringing order and balance to the land.

So the principle of the cities of refuge is that motive *does matter!*
But that does not undo Genesis 9:6!
If you kill someone, you deserve to die.
Even if it was an accident, your life is forfeit.
You took an innocent life.

But Numbers 35 expands in one area.
It’s not that *you* must die.
It’s that *someone* must die.

First, notice that when you flee to a city of refuge,

you do not escape trial.

Rather, the point is that the city of refuge provides a safe place (a neutral place) for a trial.

This principle of legal conduct has been taken over into American law.

If a judge determines that a man cannot receive a fair trial in his home town,
then the case may be moved to a different location.

1) How to Distinguish Manslaughter from Murder (v16-24)

¹⁶ “But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁷ And if he struck him down with a stone tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁸ Or if he struck him down with a wooden tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. ¹⁹ The avenger of blood shall himself put the murderer to death; when he meets him, he shall put him to death. ²⁰ And if he pushed him out of hatred or hurled something at him, lying in wait, so that he died, ²¹ or in enmity struck him down with his hand, so that he died, then he who struck the blow shall be put to death. He is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.

Verses 16-21 provide guidelines for proving murderous intent.

If you hit someone with an iron object, or a stone tool, or a heavy wooden tool –
basically, if you hit someone with something
that could be reasonably supposed to cause death
then you are a murderer.

And particularly, if there was hatred or enmity – or if you are lying in wait for someone –
that demonstrates intent, and therefore that is murder.

²² “But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait ²³ or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm, ²⁴ then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood, in accordance with these rules.

But verses 22-24 provide guidelines for distinguishing manslaughter from murder.

If you tripped, and accidentally bumped someone into the path of an oncoming bus,
then you are not guilty of murder.

2) The City of Refuge and the Death of the High Priest (v25-29)

²⁵ And the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he had fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. ²⁶ But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, ²⁷ and the avenger of blood finds him outside the boundaries of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood. ²⁸ For he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest, but after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return

to the land of his possession. ²⁹ And these things shall be for a statute and rule for you throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.

Verse 24 gives “the congregation” (the town assembly) the task of judging the case.

Verse 25 shows that this is ordinarily the home town of the man-slayer.

If the congregation determines that it was murder,
then the man shall die.

But if they determine that it was an accident,
the man-slayer does not get to go home.

He must remain in the city of refuge.

If he leaves this little ½ mile square of land,
then the avenger of blood may kill him.

(The avenger of blood is a kinsman of the deceased
who was tasked with obtaining justice by executing the killer)

If you accidentally kill someone, you are restricted to a ½ mile square of land
until the high priest died.

Why the high priest?

The high priest was the one who bore the unintentional sins of Israel (Numbers 15).

Blood pollutes the land.

The high priest who enters the holy of holies –
who was anointed with the holy oil –

he bears the unintentional sins of Israel,

and his death represents the death of the manslayer.

The high priest is the one who represents Israel before God.

So when he dies, all the manslayers from all the cities of refuge
may return to their homes.

3) Do Not Defile the Land (v30-34)

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. ³¹ Moreover, you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death, but he shall be put to death. ³² And you shall accept no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the high priest. ³³ You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. ³⁴ You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.”

Verses 30-34 then explain why this is so serious.

First, you need witnesses – and at least two witnesses!

But also – v 31 – no ransom for a murderer,
And v32 – no ransom to allow a manslayer to return early.

Oh but come on!

The high priest may be a young guy – only 40 – he may not die for 50 years!
You shall not accept a ransom!
For 50 years you will live in this ½ mile square,
or else, if you are found outside – the avenger of blood may kill you.

(How often was the high priest assassinated...?)

But before you ask that question, you need to ask first:
How often did Israel obey *this* law?
Given Israel's track record on obedience, we should not assume much.

Besides, what we need to learn from Numbers 35 is not a history lesson.
The point is not “this is what Israel *did*”
The point is that *blood pollutes the land*.
No atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed
except by the blood of the one who shed it.

The wages of sin is death.
Even an accident.

If you accidentally kill someone – that blood is on your hands.
You hear about people who are haunted by an accident.
There's a reason for that.
Innocent blood is on their hands.

Numbers 35 provides for a way to acknowledge the seriousness of this
without calling it “murder.”

But even better, you see the glory of Christ Jesus – our great high priest – revealed here.
Because the death of the high priest covers not only our intentional sins,
but even our accidents.