

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

PART SIX – CHAPTERS 26-36 – IS IT TIME FOR A CHECK UP?

Just as the book of Numbers began in chapter 1-10 with an outline of God's plan of salvation for the Israelites and a summary of their circumstances so it ends in chapters 26-36 with a review of the plan and how it was to be applied in the great adventure ahead. It is good for us also to stop at times and check where we have come to in our Christian lives and the path ahead as far as God has revealed it.

Q1. Why do we grow or fail to grow over periods in our Christian lives? How can we measure our growth?

Chapter 26 is a recount of each tribe. It is interesting that some had grown and others had shrunk. The mistakes of the past 40 years had taken a greater toll on some families than others. Only two of that original group of over 600,000 men would have survived to enter the Promised Land so it was now up to a new generation. As every man is contemplating his inheritance there is one family where there are only 5 daughters and no sons. What happens to us they ask? They too are to receive an inheritance. Women too are heirs of Christ.

Q2. If our growth as Christians is stunted where and how should we begin to fix the problem? How often should we review where we stand in God's plan?

In chapters 28 and 29 there is a review of all the times when sacrifices are to be made, when the Israelites were to consider the cross again. It started with every morning and every evening, then every Sabbath and the beginning of every month. They were reminded of the three annual feasts, Passover, Pentecost and the feast of Tabernacles which foreshadow the cross and resurrection, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the Christian life until Christ returns. There is a reminder of the importance of vows to God in chapter 30 which are to be kept. Special consideration is given to married women and single girls who might have promised rashly without the support of husbands or fathers.

Q3. What does it mean to claim our inheritance in Christ? What is by far the greatest hindrance to doing so?

Other tribes had opposed Israel in battle but the Midianites, guided by Balaam, had been by far the greatest threat with the plan in chapter 25 to use their women and those of Moab as a means of drawing the Israelite men into idolatry. Idol worship which replaces the true God with something else was the Devil's deadliest weapon throughout their history – and ours. Consequently God's judgement is to be carried out on them and what they represented in chapter 31. If it seems harsh to us it is because we have not appreciated the devastating effect of displacing God. Chapter 32 returns to the plans for settling the tribes in the Promised Land. Israel have already captured a substantial area on the eastern side of the river Jordan. Two and a half tribes are to be allowed to have this as their inheritance with one essential condition. Before settling in they are to join in the campaign to claim the whole of Canaan for the remaining tribes. To this they willingly agree. Claiming all we have as our inheritance in Christ is a shared task for the whole body of Christ, not an individual experience only.

Q4. What is the connection between recognising the presence of Christ and enjoying His best?

Moses had kept a diary of the last 40 years of travel and making camp. Every time the pillar of cloud moved they moved. When the presence of God stayed in a certain place so did His people. This is still the way to live life. Chapter 33 ended with a further reminder that they were to claim their inheritance by expelling those already in their territory whose idols would otherwise lead them astray. This would be the challenge of the book of Judges. Our dependence on Jesus Christ must be whole-hearted.

Q5. How might God's plan for us be bigger by far than we have so far experienced? How do we commonly concentrate on unimportant measures of growth?

In chapter 34 the Lord spelled out to Moses exactly where the boundaries of their new land would be. Checking on a map shows that the Promised Land would be bigger than modern Israel including much of Lebanon and some of Syria in the north, some of modern Egypt in the south and all of what is now called the West Bank. The land was greater than Israel ever possessed even in the times of their most successful leaders. What we have been promised in Christ is far greater than any of us have ever claimed. Surveyors were appointed to decide on how to divide the land between the remaining nine and a half tribes. They would need the wisdom of God to fit the right inheritance to the right tribe. God alone decides how He will allot spiritual gifts to each of us.(I Cor.12:11)

Q6. How might God's plan for the Levites be a glimpse of the way He would use us today?

Having settled where everyone else would live, the Lord had not forgotten the Levites who were committed to serving Him. In chapter 35 Moses was instructed that they would have 48 cities scattered throughout the land together with enough area around them to support themselves. God means Christians to be scattered through society not hidden away together. Six of these cities were also to be places of refuge to which someone accused of murder could escape until the case was heard properly. This protected those who killed accidentally being executed in revenge by the family of the victim. Again as God's people we are to accept those the world hates, assuming innocence until guilt is proved. The difference between murder where a weapon is used in a premeditated attack, and accidental manslaughter is to be made clear. A verdict of murder could only be given if at least two witnesses were able to give evidence. The death penalty for murder was to be carried out by a member of the victim's family which always left the way open for forgiveness. We are to be guardians of justice and fairness and examples of mercy in our communities. No man could be ransom for a convicted murderer because only Christ can ransom us.(I Tim.2:6)

Q7. Does belonging to Jesus Christ mean that our families and cultures no longer matter?

The book of Numbers ends in chapter 36 with a seemingly trivial matter being resolved. Back in chapter 27, Moses had been approached by the 5 daughters of a man with no sons about their inheritance and he had ruled that they could inherit as sons did. Some men were still bothered by this decision and came back to Moses with their concern. What if these daughters married outside their tribe? Would that not allow part of a tribe's inheritance to end up a generation later in the hands of the husband's tribe? Moses' decision was that they would only keep their father's inheritance if they married within the tribe. He recognised how important culture and family identity is to men and women. Though we are citizens of the commonwealth of heaven,(Phil.3:20) we do not have to discard our earthly heritage. And we are to respect the cultural identity of others.

Q8. How will studying the book of Numbers have changed your Christian life?