

Journeying home

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Preacher: Peter Lau

[0 : 00] Peter Lau My name is Peter Lau, L-A-U.

I was actually born in Hong Kong, but because my surname is Lau, I'll just pretend I'm from Kuching. I have one wife and three children. Unfortunately, they're back in Sydney at the moment. From about 2010, OMF International sent us to Malaysia, where I was teaching at STM, Seminary Theology in Malaysia.

Thank you. Oh, yeah, thanks. Oh, thanks.

So this morning we'll be looking at chapters 31 to 35. There's been a few readings that we've had this morning. They're sort of from different chapters. I'm just hoping we'll be able to bring them all together as we look at it this morning.

But you'll need to concentrate a little bit. I need to warn you. So please keep your Bibles open. And it might be helpful for you also to have your outline as well, which is in your bulletin.

[1 : 09] So if you want to write any notes in there or any thoughts, you can do that as well. So let's pray before we start. Let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Final preparations before returning home. Now, my family and I returned back to Sydney back in December last year.

We had spent eight years in Malaysia. There were many things we needed to do before we returned back home. So three things in particular. Firstly, we had to take care of unfinished business.

We had to pay our water and electricity bills. We had to go down to TM and close our internet connection. We had to pack up the whole house. And then we had to clean the house.

That's number one. Secondly, we had to get the new home ready. So we asked the tenants to move out. We changed the carpets. We put a fresh coat of paint on the walls.

[2 : 14] Third, we wanted to keep our home safe and clean. So we asked the real estate agent to inspect our home. Are the floors clean?

Does the roof leak? Are the smoke detectors working? Are there any electrical wires that are sticking out in our home? In Numbers 31 to 35, God is preparing Israel to return home.

It won't feel like home because they haven't been there before. It would be something like my nine-year-old daughter. She spent her whole life in Malaysia except for one year. And for her, it wasn't really like, it didn't feel for her like going home.

And even after she'd been back in Sydney for six months, she kept on asking, can I go back to my old school back in Malaysia? Now, Sydney would become her home. The land of Canaan would become home for Israel's new generation.

Today, we'll look at three things before going home. And we can see this on the slide, which is already up there. So firstly, take care of unfinished business, chapter 31.

[3 : 25] Secondly, get the new home ready, verse chapters 32 to 34. And number three, you can see, make sure the new home stays clean and safe in chapter 35.

As we look at these chapters, I want you to keep two questions in the back of your mind. Firstly, why does God care so much about Israel's purity?

Why does God care so much about Israel's purity? And the second thing I want you to keep in the back of your mind is, does God care about our purity? Does God care about our purity?

So, to Numbers chapter 31. Take care of unfinished business. Before Israel leaves the wilderness, God wants them to take care of unfinished business.

Take a look at chapter 31, verse 1 with me. Chapter 31, verse 1. The Lord said to Moses, take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people.

[4 : 27] So, Moses said to the people, arm some of your men to go to war against the Midianites, so that they may carry out the Lord's vengeance on them. Now, what do you think about God asking Israel to go to war?

Isn't God meant to be a God of love? And aren't we meant to forgive people? Now, in Malaysia, we might be quite sensitive to this idea of holy war.

We've just gotten over the threat of Islamic State, but the threat somehow seems to be always bubbling below the surface, even here in Malaysia. So, we're horrified that anything like holy war could be in the Bible.

But we must try to understand this chapter, how the Israelites would have understood it. First, holy war was restricted to the Exodus and then entry into the Promised Land.

It wasn't throughout the whole history of Israel. Second, it is not ethnic cleansing, not ethnic cleansing. Verse 3 says that the war is God's vengeance.

[5 : 38] Why was God's vengeance on Midian needed? Now, the Midianites had seduced Israel to sin in Numbers 25. And Pastor Brian looked at this passage a couple of weeks ago.

In Numbers 25, verse 17, God told Moses to, Numbers 25, 17, In other words, God asked Israel to take care of unfinished business.

Adultery carried the death penalty. Midian caused Israel to commit adultery against God. And remember that Israel was punished as well.

24,000 Israelites died by the plague. Remember also that Finiah has turned back God's wrath then. He plunged the spear through Zimri and the Midianite woman.

And he is now involved in the war against Midian. Now, the full instructions for holy war are found in Deuteronomy 20. Deuteronomy 20.

[7 : 02] The peoples living in the land of Canaan, the Israelites were to wipe out, annihilate the people, men, women, and children, and then destroy all their property.

But those living outside the land of Canaan, they could offer peace. If they rejected the offer of peace, the men would be annihilated, but the women and children would be spared.

And their property could be taken as plunder. So do you guys understand? Deuteronomy 20. Two different aspects to holy war. For those inside the land, and also those outside the land of Canaan. What we have in Numbers chapter 31 is somewhere in between the outside and the inside regulations. So the Israelite army kill all the men. They kill the Midianite kings.

They kill Balaam the prophet. They burn down the cities, but they spare the women. And they take the goods and livestock as plunder.

[8 : 11] We see this in verses 8 to 11. But Moses is furious with the army officers in verse 13. Why is he so angry?

Take a look at verse 15. Have you allowed all the women to live? He asked them. They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord's people.

Now, kill all the boys, and kill every woman who has slept with a man. But save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man.

Now, Moses is angry because the women were to blame for Israel's sin in Numbers 25. They followed the prophet Balaam's advice.

So the Israelites should kill all the women. Only girls who were innocent in the sin of Baal Peor are spared. Now, this sounds very harsh to us, doesn't it?

[9 : 16] But even here, we still find God's grace in the midst of his judgment. These girls who were spared could eventually marry Israelites and become part of God's people.

The next part of the chapter deals with ritual cleansing, verses 19 to 24. Now, this was a holy war, but holy war involved killing.

Killing or contact with the dead made people unclean. So the people and the plunder had to be purified. The plunder is then distributed in verses 25 to 47.

Those who fought get the largest share. Those who stayed behind also get a share. And the priests and the Levites receive a small share.

Right. So let's pause for a minute. You can either turn to the person next to you or just think by yourself. Think about the question that we had from the beginning of today's talk.

[10 : 22] Why does God care so much about his people's purity? So much that he asked them to wipe out Midianites and also to cleanse, purify their plunder.

So just think about this. We'll talk to the person next to you just for a minute. Why does God care so much about his people's purity? Okay.

Everybody got some thoughts? Yeah. Why does God care so much about his people's purity? Well, firstly, because God is a holy God. God is a holy God. And ritual impurity is not appropriate for God's people.

God is a holy God. Ritual impurity is not appropriate for God's people. And so the stain of death can't coexist with a holy living God. Stain of death cannot coexist with a holy living God.

Right. Now, did you notice the army officer's response at the end of this chapter? In verse 49, the army officers, Your servants have counted the soldiers under our command.

[12:06] And not one is missing. So we have brought as an offering to the Lord the gold articles each of us acquired. Armllets, bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and necklaces.

To make atonement for ourselves before the Lord. What do the officers bring here? What do they bring? An offering of gold objects from their plunder.

But did they have to bring an offering? Did they have to bring an offering? No. No. It's a free will offering. What motivated their offering? They realized that not one of the soldiers had died in war.

Their hearts were moved by God's grace. So they gave back to God. And what was the aim of the offering as we see here?

What was the aim of the offering? To make atonement for ourselves before the Lord. Ah, interesting, right? They knew that their lives belonged to God.

[13:08] Perhaps as they killed the Midianites, they realized that they too were rebels against God. As they cleansed themselves after the battle, maybe it sunk in that they also needed cleansing.

Maybe the penny dropped that they deserve God's judgment just as much as the Midianites. As much as those who died from the plague at Peor.

So in response to God's mercy to them, they made an offering to make atonement for their lives. Well, what about us?

We might have experienced something similar. This chapter shows us that God hates sin. And we have all sinned.

Like the Midianites, we too deserve God's judgment. In a sense, God should make holy war against us. We need an atonement offering for our sin.

[14:14] Praise God that Jesus took our punishment. Praise God that he sacrificed Jesus. Gold doesn't make atonement for our lives.

It is the precious blood of Jesus. His blood also cleanses us. It removes the stain of death.

So, we can praise God for his wonderful mercy. And praise God for Jesus. And if we understand God's mercy and grace in Christ, we too will want to make an offering.

We want to make an offering of praise to God like we did this morning. We'll want to do good and share with others. Be involved in mercy ministries. We want to present our whole lives as living sacrifices.

So, what I'll do now is I'll give you a minute to think. Thanks. In response to God's sacrifice for you, how are you going to devote yourself to God?

[15:19] As a church, KEC, how can you do good and share with others? How can you present your life as a living sacrifice to God?

So, just 30 seconds or so, I'll give you to think about those things. In response to God's sacrifice, how will you devote yourself to God? As a church, how will you do good and share with others? And how will you present your life as a living sacrifice?

So, just reflect by yourself for about 30 seconds. Thank you. Thank you. Okay.

Everybody got some thoughts? Right. Let's continue on to our next step of preparations. So, number two, get the new home ready. Chapters 32 to 34. Right.

Get new home ready. But wait. There is a problem. Not all the family want to move back home. Two of the tribes we see, Reuben and Gad, have a lot of cattle.

[16:48] They see that the lands of Jezar and Gilead are cattle country. So, this is what they ask in verse 5. Take a look at verse 5. If we have found favor in our eyes, let this land be given to your servants as our possession.

Do not make us cross the Jordan. So, these tribes want the land for their cattle. But what is the problem? The problem is that this land is on the other side of the Jordan River.

That is, it is outside the promised land. Numbers chapter 34 describes the boundaries. And we might see it on the next slide.

It's a bit hard to see. So, you can see on this slide, the Jordan River. Maybe I should walk there. So, this is the east side.

So, the brown patch, the purple patch, and the orange patch on the right-hand side is on the other side, the outside. Okay. So, these tribes want their inheritance to be east of the boundary of the promised land.

[18 : 08] But what does Moses say? Well, Moses sees the heart of Reuben and Gad, the Reuben and Gad tribes, and he says in verse 14, Wow. Wow.

That's a stinging response from Moses, isn't it? But why is he so, why is such a strong response? Why does he say that they are like their fathers?

Well, Moses first accuses them of focusing on their own comfort in verse 6. Then he points out what will happen if they settle down outside the promised land in verse 7.

Moses sees history repeating itself in verses 8 to 12. The spies didn't trust God. They gave a bad report about the land.

And the Israelites were discouraged. Like the spies, Reuben and Gad didn't trust God. Their settling outside the promised land will discourage the rest of Israel.

[19 : 27] And we can imagine the rest of Israel saying, Why should we fight the Canaanites in the land? Look, our brothers, they're out there relaxing, not even lifting a finger.

But then God will be angry again, and he'll destroy the people, as it says in verses 13 to 15. Well, let's just think about why the tribes make this request.

Why do they make such a request? Now, if they only had a few cattle, do you think they would make this request? If they just had a few cattle?

No, I don't think so. It seems like their possessions are driving their decision. As Jesus would put it, It's the same for us, isn't it?

Sometimes our possessions weigh us down and stop us from doing God's will. And our possessions can also make us selfish. We cling on to our possessions even though we have more than we can hold.

[20 : 36] But our decisions affect more than ourselves. It also affects our family. It affects our friends. Our decisions also affect our church family.

Our church family sees us hoarding houses, hoarding cars, and so they become discouraged to follow God with all their heart. Do we believe God's promise of a better life than the one we have now?

If so, we need to make sure we don't settle down here and invest ourselves in this world. We keep giving to others in need in Malaysia and around the world.

We keep setting our hearts on things above, not only on earthly things. So back to our story. How will the Reuben and Gad tribes respond to Moses' rebuke?

Will they come up with an approach to make both sides happy, as we see in verse 16? Have a look at verse 16. We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children.

[21 : 48] But we will arm ourselves for battle and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place. So they will build sheepfolds and cities to keep their livestock and women and children safe.

And then they're going to send their troops to spearhead the battle in the promised land. And they will not return to their land until every Israelite has their inheritance.

Verse 18. Well, what do you think? Does this sound good to you? Is this a good offer to you?

Sounds good, right? Well, at least it sounded good to Moses.

He accepts their compromise. But he also says in verse 23, if you don't follow through, God will find you out. The book of Joshua tells us that the Reuben and Gad tribes do keep their word.

They, with the half-tribe of Manasseh, receive their share of inheritance east of the Jordan River, as described in verses 33 to 42.

[22 : 56] So that is why the two and a half tribes end up outside the promised land. Now, the next chapter, number 33, continues preparations.

Remove the tenants. But first, a travel diary. Now, when you go on holidays, do you keep a travel diary? Do you write down, you know, every place that you go to?

Not many people saying yes, I see. Because these days, we don't really keep travel diaries, right? What do we do? We take selfies at all the different places that we go to.

Now, Israel didn't have cameras back then in the wilderness. But verses 1 to 49 of chapter 33 recounts their journey from place to place. From Egypt, in verse 1, all the way to the plains of Moab on the east side of the Jordan River, in verse 49.

We'll see this in the next slide. Next slide. Oh. So those numbers aren't exactly the same, but you can see generally that the journey that Israel took from Exodus to Moab.

[24 : 12] Now, we're not going to go through this in detail because this is what you've been doing in church for the past, I don't know how many weeks, going through the book of Numbers. So let's just think a little bit about why this travel diary is put here.

Why is it put here? It reminds Israel of the obstacles that they've overcome to get to where they are now. There's been many trials along the way, but God has brought them all the way from Exodus to Moab.

He will bring them into Canaan. Wow. What an encouragement for them. And it's like that with our lives too, isn't it? Often we can look back on our life journey, and in my life there's been many trials. I'm sure if you look at your travel diaries, it's also been dotted with struggles and trials. But when we look back, we also see that God has brought us to where we are now.

He's still with us, and God will bring us home. What a great encouragement for us. So God will bring his people into Canaan, but they also have a part to play.

[25 : 31] They must remove the tenants of the land. As God says to Israel in verse 51, when you cross the Jordan into Canaan, drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you, destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places.

Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess. So God gives them the land to possess, but they also need to drive out the inhabitants.

Then they must demolish their idols and all their worship places. When the land is cleared, they can distribute the land among the tribes, verse 54. Now, why can't they just move into the land alongside the Canaanites?

Why? Why can't they just live alongside them? Verse 55. Take a look at verse 55. But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sight.

They'll give you trouble in the land where you live. The Canaanites will be like a thorn in your eye. The Israelites could see the promised land.

[26 : 58] They're looking forward to entering their rest. But first, they needed to work hard. Battle in holy war to remove false worship.

Cleanse the land of temptation to follow idols. Remove the thorns. Now, why does God care so much about his people's purity?

Why does God care so much about his people's purity? Remember that question from before? Verse 56. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them.

Ah. Now, you might be wondering if Israel obeyed God.

Did they? Sadly, no. He brings them into the promised land, but they do not remove the tenants. They don't destroy their idols in high places.

[28 : 14] Israel's heart is turned away to follow and worship false gods. And sadly, at the end of Israel's history, we see God removes his people from the promised land.

Well, what about us as Christians? Do we live with idols in our lives? Are we tempted to compromise like the Israelites?

How do we even know which idols we have that need to be driven out of our lives? How can we work out what are idols in our hearts? We can find out by asking a few questions.

What do you think about the most? What do you think about the most? How do you spend your money? What do you spend your money on? What do you live for? What gets you out of bed in the morning?

And what do I feel I must have to be fulfilled or to feel significant? So some of these questions are almost like diagnostic questions to work out what are some idols in our own hearts?

[29 : 19] What do you think about the most? What do you spend your money on? What do you live for? What do you feel you must have to feel fulfilled? Now once identified, these idols in our lives need to be replaced.

Not just removed, but replaced. If we uproot an idol and we don't replace it with our love for God, the idol is going to grow back again.

So repenting and rejoicing in God, saving us in Christ is crucial. So the third part of our preparations, make sure a new home stays clean and safe, chapter 35.

Chapter 4 outlined the inheritance of the tribes in the land. Numbers 35, 1 to 8 outlines the cities set aside for the Levites. The Levites minister in the tabernacle and temple and they are given cities, not whole portions of land.

The 48 cities and the surrounding pasture land is spread among the tribes, not all in one area, as it says in verse 8. And you might be wondering, why weren't the Levites given an inheritance just like all the other tribes?

[30 : 41] And you might be thinking, well, it doesn't seem fair, does it, that the Levites only are given cities? Well, the Levites were set apart.

They were devoted to God. The tribes give some houses and land to the Levites, but not enough for them to get comfortable. No earthly inheritance means that the Levites trust in God as their inheritance.

They also rely on the faithful offerings of the people. It's something like what happens here at KEC. Pastor Brian has an apartment to live in, but he also depends on the faithful offering of all of you, the people here.

And it's the same with me, as I serve with OMF International. If you stop putting money in the offering bag, Pastor Brian won't be able to feed his family, will he?

You see how the Levites are an illustration to Israel. The way they lived reminded Israel that they were a holy people, and their eyes fixed on a heavenly inheritance was an example for Israel.

[31 : 59] So Numbers 34, drive out the tenants. Clean the home. Numbers 35, Levite cities scattered in the land reminds people to be holy.

God wants his house to stay holy. God wants their home to stay clean. But these cities do something else to keep the land pure.

Six of the Levite cities are places of refuge. Verse 6. Three east of the Jordan, and then three in the land of Canaan.

Verse 14. No one needs to travel very far to reach one of these cities. But why is refuge needed? If a person killed another person, what they could do is they could flee to one of these cities. But refuge from who?

[33 : 01] Well, refuge from the Avenger of Blood. Avenger of Blood. I'm not talking here about a Marvel superhero like Iron Man or Captain America.

The word Avenger in Hebrew is also translated kinsman redeemer. You guys got that? So Avenger is the same word for kinsman redeemer.

You know, a kinsman redeemer was a relative who helped out others in need at their own cost. Someone like Boaz in the book of Ruth was a kinsman redeemer.

In Numbers 35, family blood has been shed, and it is the Avenger of Blood's role to kill the man responsible.

What happens is the Avenger restores wholeness to the clan from the rupture of killing. One death needs another death to atone for it.

[34 : 08] But not so fast. God gives guidelines to work out if this killing is manslaughter or murder. Premeditation and intent make it murder.

It doesn't matter if an iron, stone, or wood object, or even a fist is used to strike a person. Verses 16 to 21. But if the death is an accident or due to carelessness, it is manslaughter.

The assembly judges the case. More than one witness is needed for a fair trial in verse 30. If it is manslaughter, the person seeks refuge from the Avenger of Blood in one of the cities.

Verses 22 to 25. But if the manslaughter leaves the city of refuge, what happens? The Avenger of Blood can kill him.

Verses 26 to 27. Now if it is murder, the person is put to death. The punishment fits the crime. You cannot pay a ransom to get out of a death sentence.

[35 : 20] You cannot pay a ransom to release a manslaughter from a city of refuge. They can only be released when? When the high priest dies.

Verse 28, verse 32. In other words, like for like. Deliberate death. That is, death penalty for a deliberate murder.

Deliberate death. Accidental death of the high priest for an accidental death. Manslaughter. You guys understand? Well, you might be thinking.

What is this chapter about killing doing here? And aren't we talking about preparations for returning home? Didn't you say something about the house being safe and clean?

What's all this killing got to do with anything? God answers these questions in the last two verses from verse 33. Take a look at verse 33. Do not pollute the land where you are.

[36 : 27] Bloodshed pollutes the land and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed except by the blood of the one who shed it.

Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell. For I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites. In worship, blood is a purifier. It is used to make atonement between man and God. But bloodshed pollutes the land.

The promised land is holy land. Why is it holy land? Is it holy just because God promised it to his people? Does that make it holy? No.

The land is made holy by God living among them. Verse 34. God's presence sanctifies the land. God deals with bloodshed in particular because the pollution it causes is the most serious.

[37 : 35] The people must keep the land pure by dealing properly with bloodshed. For God can't live in a polluted land without judging its people.

Wow. All this killing is a bit heavy for a Sunday morning, isn't it? But what we need to do is step back for a little bit and look at these chapters and we might see a pattern.

Now, back in chapter 31, we started with killing, vengeance on the Midian nights. Now we've come full circle with killing again. We have manslaughter and we have murder.

But can you see the bigger picture? Can you see the bigger picture? It's not to do with killing, but to do with purity. It's to do with God ensuring that the land stays clean.

The middle chapter that we looked at was chapter 33. There God told his people to drive out the inhabitants, destroy the idols to keep yourselves pure.

[38 : 45] God's people must be holy because their God is holy. God's people must stay holy, otherwise they're going to defile the land.

And then he's going to remove them from their home. The people's impurity is a threat to them staying in the land.

The people's impurity is a threat to them staying in the land. Well, what about us? As Christians, we are now God's people.

Does God still care about our purity? Does God care about our purity? Yes. Most definitely he does. The Apostle Paul says, as we can see in the next slide, he gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, Titus 2.

[39 : 53] And the Apostle Peter says, we are a chosen people and a holy nation, 1 Peter 2 verse 9. But there's a problem.

If we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we don't always meet God's standard of holiness. We find it a struggle to destroy the idols in our hearts.

We find it a... We might remove the idols in our hearts, but soon these idols return. Or sometimes I get rid of one idol and then another idol springs up in its place.

We are impure. Can we ever hope to enter our rest? And we might not have killed anyone, but do you meet this standard of holiness that Jesus sets in the next slide?

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, you shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

[41 : 12] We raise our voices. We look daggers at other people. We even raise our fists to strike. I'm not sure about you, but I don't meet God's standard.

We are murderers in our hearts, if not with our hands. The avenger of blood should be coming after us. Where is our city of refuge?

But God is gracious in his provision. The avenger is our redeemer. Jesus is our kinsman who makes atonement for our sins at the ultimate cost to himself.

Life for life. Jesus' life was sacrificed for our accidental as well as deliberate sins.

Jesus is our refuge from God's judgment. Jesus also answers the problem of our idolatry.

[42 : 22] Jesus did not compromise. God's perfect standards of purity and holiness were met in him. He bore the punishment for our idolatry.

He took the barbs on his head and the spear in his side. Christ's blood purifies us and so he ensures our promised inheritance.

I'm not talking about inheritance as a piece of land in the Middle East. No, we look forward to inheriting a new heavens and a new earth. We come to Jesus because we are weary and we are burdened and he gives us rest.

As Christians, he has prepared a home for us. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Come and take us home. Let's pray. Amen. Dear Heavenly Father, we confess that too often we are impure.

[43 : 38] We don't deserve to enter our heavenly rest. But we are so thankful for Jesus. Thank you that in Jesus we are purified. Thank you that in Jesus we have atonement.

Thank you that in Jesus we can come home to you. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.