



▶ *Instructions Given* ◀

GOD’S PLANS REQUIRE BELIEVERS TO ACT
ON THE INSTRUCTIONS HE GIVES.

NUMBERS 33:50-56; 34:13-15

We’ve all seen it. The “For Sale” sign is removed from the plot of land. Workers show up and conduct the survey. They put little orange marker flags in the ground. Trenches and holes are cut and dug. The ground is leveled. Concrete trucks show up. Construction crews arrive at the site day after day. In a few months, the house, subdivision, or apartment complex is complete. Every step occurred according to a plan that someone developed beforehand.

 **Why is it important to follow the plan when doing construction?
What happens when we don’t?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

NUMBERS 26:1–36:13

When God first called Abraham, He promised that he would have offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky and sand on the shore. God also promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 13:14-17). He made the same promise to Isaac and Jacob (26:3; 28:13). The Lord, speaking through an angel, changed Jacob’s name to “Israel” at Peniel (32:24-28).

From Jacob’s twelve sons would come the twelve tribes of Israel, with the exception of Levi and Joseph. From Levi would come the Levites, those who would serve as the priests of God’s people. Rather than inherit property in the promised land, they would be given a place in each tribal territory.

Concerning Joseph, recall he had been sold into slavery by his brothers. He became second in command in Egypt through God’s providence. God used him to save his brothers from starvation when famine hit their homeland. Joseph eventually brought his entire family, including his father, Jacob, to live in Egypt. Scripture refers to Joseph as “the prince of his brothers” (Deut. 33:16). Joseph’s inherited property was divided between his two sons who were born in Egypt—Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 48:3-6).

Each tribe was made up of several “clans.” A clan consisted of individual families that were related by blood or marriage. The head of each family was considered an elder; they helped guide and govern the family and thus the clan.

The social structure was therefore like a series of concentric circles. The smallest unit was the family, which was led by the elder. Families that were kin formed clans. The related clans formed the tribe. The twelve tribes made up the nation of Israel, both as a people and a land.



Read through Numbers 33:50-56 and 34:13-15, paying close attention to the text mentioning a family, clan, or tribe. What was the advantage of organizing the Israelites by these groups?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

THE LAND (NUM. 33:50-53)

⁵⁰ **The LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho,** ⁵¹ **“Tell the Israelites: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, ⁵² you must drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you, destroy all their stone images and cast images, and demolish all their high places.** ⁵³ **You are to take possession of the land and settle in it because I have given you the land to possess.”**

VERSES 50-52

God’s people had camped in *the plains of •Moab* (see also v. 48), from which they could look across the Jordan Valley to the land they would possess. They were a short distance from the Jordan River that separated them from Canaan. The **Jordan** River was the dividing line for the Israelites. On the east was their past; on the other side was their future, the land that God had promised His people since the days of Abraham.

Again, God told Moses what he was to say to His people. God had a message; Moses was to deliver it. This showed that God was not finished with Moses, despite how Moses disobeyed Him by striking the rock rather than speaking to it (20:11). This reminds us that God can still use us, even when we have failed Him. Our past does not always define our future.

The Lord did not say, “If you cross” or “In the event you cross.” He spoke with absolute certainty: **when you cross**. The time of God’s judgment and the people’s wandering was over.

What were they to do when they came **into the land of Canaan**? God’s instructions were two-fold. First, they were to **drive out** the inhabitants. Right after God had given Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, He promised what He would do when His people reached the promised land. He said, “I am going to drive out . . .” (Ex. 34:11). The command in this verse (Num. 33:52) does not contradict God’s earlier promise. He would drive out the inhabitants of the land, but He would use His people to accomplish this.

Second, His people were to remove from the land any remnant of idolatry that had been embraced by the generations who lived there before the Israelites’ arrival. The **stone images** were

carvings on the face of a stone, like a three-dimensional picture. These typically depicted the people’s gods or pagan religious symbols. The **cast images** were typically made by pouring molten fine metal (sometimes gold) over a wooden form. Artisans would then carve the fine details with engraving tools. **High places** referred to the hills and mountains on which the Canaanites built pagan sanctuaries. For example, for hundreds of years before the Israelites arrived, the people in the region recognized Mount Carmel as a place for worship. This may explain why Elijah chose this location for his confrontation with the prophets of Baal (see 1 Kings 18:20-39). He knew they would be comfortable worshiping their so-called god there. God’s decisive victory would show His power over the local, man-made deities.



DID YOU KNOW?

Israel’s history revealed that they failed to follow the Lord’s commands in these verses. Their exile in Assyria and Babylonia was largely due to their persistence in pursuing the gods of the nations that surrounded them. (See Isa. 2:5-22; Jer. 9:12-16; Ezek. 5:5–6:14; Hos. 4:12-14; Zeph. 1:4-6.)

VERSE 53

After ridding the land of its current inhabitants and destroying all vestiges of their pagan worship practices, only then could the Israelites take possession of the land. This meant the land they would inhabit would not be the same as what was there now. It may have been the same regarding its geography and climate, but little else. Its culture, belief systems, religious practices, values, government, and social organization were to be transformed.

The only reason the Israelites could inhabit the land was because God had given it to them (see Deut. 9:5).



Why was it important to destroy the idols and high places devoted to false gods?



KEY DOCTRINE: God

To God we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.
(See Deuteronomy 6:14-15; James 1:22.)

THE TASK (NUM. 33:54-56)

⁵⁴ **“You are to receive the land as an inheritance by lot according to your clans. Increase the inheritance for a large clan and decrease it for a small one. Whatever place the lot indicates for someone will be his. You will receive an inheritance according to your ancestral tribes. ⁵⁵ But if you don’t drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, those you allow to remain will become barbs for your eyes and thorns for your sides; they will harass you in the land where you will live. ⁵⁶ And what I had planned to do to them, I will do to you.”**

VERSE 54

The land was an *inheritance*. God had told Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would live in this land. People of this generation, who had never met the patriarchs, were to be the recipients and the beneficiaries of the promise God made centuries earlier.

God could give them the land because it was His. “The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the LORD” (Ps. 24:1; see also Ex. 9:29; Deut. 10:14). Each of us is merely a steward, a caretaker, who dwells here for a limited number of days.

The apportionment of land would be decided by casting lots. The Israelites did not see this as leaving it to chance; they understood God could work through that process. “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Prov. 16:33).

The book of Numbers carries its name because the numbers mattered. The book opens with the Israelites conducting a census (1:1-46). The book closes with a second census, taken on the Plains of Moab forty years later (26:1-63). The purpose of the censuses was two-fold. First, the numbers gave the leaders an idea of how many military-age men would be available to lead in the conquest of the land. Second, the larger clans would receive the larger territories, meaning more inhabitable space. Having all of the clans or family units living together in the space apportioned according to their forefather’s tribe gave greater importance to the tribe. No family or clan would be unimportant or excluded.

VERSES 55-56

The Lord warned what would happen if His people did not **drive out** the land's current **inhabitants**. The word translated **barbs** referred to small but sharp objects that could splinter someone's eyes. The result would be discomfort, infection, and maybe even blindness. The lesson was that even the smallest remnant could inflict unbelievable damage. The **thorns** in their sides could cause discomfort, pain, and even an infection. God's purpose was not just to run the people out but also to remove their idolatrous beliefs and pagan practices. God knew the damage these traditions would do.

Verse 56 carried a powerful warning. As mentioned earlier, God had said He would drive out the people of the land (Ex. 34:11). In this verse, He was saying that just as He promised to drive the people out of Canaan, He would do the same to His people if they did not obey Him. He would drive them out of the promised land.

How serious was God's command in this verse? The people's lack of compliance and how they embraced the pagan worship beliefs and practices led to the Assyrians and Babylonians overtaking the people and conquering the land centuries later.



What principles do you glean from these verses that can help you live a life of obedience to God?

THE PLAN (NUM. 34:13-15)

¹³ **So Moses commanded the Israelites, “This is the land you are to receive by lot as an inheritance, which the LORD commanded to be given to the nine and a half tribes. ¹⁴ For the tribe of Reuben’s descendants and the tribe of Gad’s descendants have received their inheritance according to their ancestral families, and half the tribe of Manasseh has received its inheritance.**

¹⁵ **The two and a half tribes have received their inheritance across the Jordan east of Jericho, toward the sunrise.”**

VERSE 13

The opening verses of this chapter delineate the geographical boundaries of the land the Israelites were to inhabit. Doubtless, the spies who scouted out the land gave information to Moses, information he used to describe the land to be inherited (Num. 13:1-33).

Verses 3-5 describe the southern border; verse 6, the western border; verses 7-9, the northern border; and verses 10-12, the eastern border. Verses 2 and 29 form a pair of bookends, using the phrase “the land of Canaan” to describe the land and the leaders who would direct the conquest.

The property divisions were not decided by human ingenuity or design. It was according to what ***the LORD commanded***. The land between the Jordan River Valley and the Mediterranean was to be home to ***nine and a half tribes***.

Followers of Christ are beneficiaries of a spiritual inheritance.

VERSES 14-15

The two and a half tribes were the descendants of ***Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh***. They earlier asked if they could live on the east side of the Jordan (Num. 32:1-24). This region is known as the Transjordan.

The ***two and a half tribes*** promised that, despite their location, they would support the tribes on the west side of the Jordan as they fought for the land. They vowed to not “return to [their] homes until each of the Israelites has taken possession of his inheritance” (32:18). Thus, these two and a half tribes would be separated physically from the other tribes but would be united in intent.

The tribes received these lands as an ***inheritance***. They understood that ultimately the land was a gift from God. After they entered Canaan, the Israelites continued to refer to the land as an ***inheritance*** (Josh. 13-15).

Verse 15 clarifies the location of the territory for the two and a half tribes. These lands were not “less than” those on the other side of the Jordan. Various rivers and tributaries ran through the Transjordan and flowed westward toward the Jordan River Valley. Much of the land was ideal for grazing.

God was fulfilling the promise He had made to His people. He promised Abraham that the land of Canaan would belong to him and his descendants. He made the same promise to Isaac and Jacob.

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, “God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Ex. 2:24). He later promised Moses, “I will

bring you to the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD” (6:8). God, ever faithful, was keeping that covenant promise. In front of the people was the Jordan River and just beyond to the west was Jericho. Here, God was proving that He was keeping His promise.

The New Testament explains that followers of Christ are beneficiaries of a spiritual inheritance (Col. 1:12; 3:24; Heb. 9:15). Because God always keeps His promises, we, centuries later, can also lift our voices and proclaim, “Great is thy faithfulness.”

 **How do God’s promises serve as a motivator to remain faithful to Him? Should they? Explain.**

 **BIBLE SKILL:** *Use a Bible dictionary to understand a Bible passage.*

Read about Canaan in a Bible dictionary—the land, people, and gods. Ultimately, the Israelites did not drive out all the land’s inhabitants, and God’s warning of Numbers 33:55 came true. Joshua records how the Israelites conquered the Canaanites physically; the book of Judges records how the Canaanites conquered the Israelites spiritually. What factors do you think led the Israelites to fail to obey completely God’s command to take the land and drive out its inhabitants? Why do Christians today sometimes stop short of keeping God’s commands fully?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Following God often requires believers to remove potential distractions.
- + Believers can expect to encounter challenges while following God.
- + We can trust God to keep His promises.



What promises have you seen God fulfill in your life? How does reflecting on those promises increase your faith? Be willing to share your thoughts with your Bible study group.



Examine your life for the things that might draw you away from remaining loyal to the Lord. What actions can you take to safeguard yourself from the influence of beliefs and practices that are contrary to what God has outlined in His Word?



Memorize Numbers 33:53.

Prayer Needs



Explore the Bible Prayer Guide
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