**Vengeance on the Midianites**

The Foxfire Center in Mountain City, GA near Clayton is dedicated to preserving the pioneer heritage of Southern Appalachia, particularly the many crafts necessary to building and maintaining a homestead in the 1800’s. Their museum displays handmade items fashioned using period tools and also offers classes for people who are interested in skills such as blacksmithing, weaving and carpentry. I am amazed at the fit and finish of furniture and cabins made with crude tools rather than modern power tools. Often in older homes, modern additions will fail while the original structure remains intact. Early homesteaders had to master a variety of skills since store bought items were either not available or not affordable. The goal of the center is to educate the public about the culture and skills of the past so that they will be preserved for future generations. This is an example of the duty of the older generation to hand down not just skills but values for younger people. In our study of Numbers we see a stark difference in the values and traditions handed down by the Israelites and Canaanites.

The chapter opens with God telling Moses to take vengeance on the Midianites after which he would be gathered to his people which meant his death would follow afterward. Moses needed no explanation of the reason for God’s anger against the Midianites. The memory of the recent tragedy of 24,000 of his people dying as a result of joining the Midianites in idol worship would have been fresh on his mind (see chapter 25). Rather than sending the entire army which would have numbered about 600,000, Moses chose to send only 1,000 men from each of the 12 tribes. It is not known if he made this decision on his own or if God directed it. He also honored Phineas the son of Eleazer by sending him with the army carrying articles from the sanctuary and trumpets for signaling. Phineas had acted decisively in putting to death a man who brazenly brought a Midianite prostitute into the Israelite camp.

The battle with the Midianites was a rout with all the males being killed. Matthew Henry wrote that this does not mean all Midianite men were killed in this battle. The Midianites were a nomadic people who lived in various locations. The ones the Israelites fought would have been east of Canaan and had associated with the Moabites who were led by Balak (see chapters 22-24). Another large contingent lived south of Canaan which was the home of Jethro, the father in law of Moses. Even after this battle, the Midianites remained a formidable enemy of the Israelites, dominating them for 7 years as God’s punishment before Gideon defeated them (see Judges chapter 6). The Israelites also killed the 5 kings of Midian along with Balaam who had apparently stayed in the area to supervise the seduction of the Israelite men. All the Midianite towns were burned and the army took away much plunder and animals. They also took away all the Midianite women and children which brought a rebuke from Moses who asked “Have you allowed all the women to live?”. He was doubtless astonished that the army commanders failed to understand that it was the Midianite women who were to blame for causing the downfall of so many men. Moses ordered the commanders to kill all the women except for virgins who would have had no part in the seduction. He also ordered the execution of the boys. While this seems harsh, God knew that had they lived, those boys would have sought retribution against the Israelites when they matured.

Moses ordered the men who had been in battle to remain outside the camp for 7 days since they were ceremonially unclean because of the people they had killed even though their cause was just. In addition to purifying the soldiers, all plunder had to be cleansed as well since it had been associated with the Midianites. The plunder taken was equally divided between the soldiers and the community. It was a vast quantity consisting of 675,000 sheep, 72,000 cattle and 61,000 donkeys. There were also 32,000 virgins who were kept alive. The commanders of the army reported to Moses that the personal jewelry collected by the soldiers would be given up as a freewill offering so 16,750 shekels was given to Eleazer and Moses.

The practice of sorcery, idol worship and other detestable practices was rampant among the Midianites. Their lineage can be traced back to the generation following Abraham who remarried after the death of his wife Sarah. Keturah, the woman who married him, bore him 6 sons, one of whom was named Midian. The descendants of Moses by his wives Sarah, Hagar and Keturah followed separate paths resulting in generations of idol worshipers while Abraham’s descendants through Jacob became the nation of Israel which God considered a nation set apart. It is significant that God repeated His instructions for offerings, feasts and vows before He sent them into battle against the Midianites. As we discussed last week, God constantly reminded the Israelites to hand down to each generation all that He had ordained. While it seems that Israelites often strayed, God would send His leaders to bring them back (see Nehemiah chapter 13) and God has not stopped sending His chosen representatives to bring His people back to Him.