

Instructions Given

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

For many people whitewater rafting is one of the great adventures of life. It offers the participant both the most exhilarating and the most terrifying experience ever. A person is having the most fun of a lifetime while experiencing the greatest fear of a lifetime! What a rush!

With every whitewater rafting adventure, the trip begins with the rafting guide meticulously going over the safety instructions: wear proper clothing. Life jackets are to be worn at all times. The same is true for the protective helmet: keep it on always. Obey the commands of the guide. Learn to hold and use the paddle properly. Stay in the boat! Repeat—stay in the boat! If you fall out of the boat, don't panic. Listen for the guide's instructions. Learn the proper swimming techniques. Don't stand up in the river.

Each of these instructions is given to ensure that you have the time of your life, and that you protect your life! Even the best swimmers can find themselves in trouble if they don't use the proper swimming techniques in whitewater rapids. The proper technique of floating on your back, feet downstream and knees slightly bent, head-up looking downstream is designed to protect a person from the hidden rocks that could seriously injure them. The same is true for the rule of not trying to stand up in the river. The rapid water can quickly force a foot into a position of being wedged in underwater rocks that can lead to fatal disaster. Above all else—listen to the guide. Their guidance comes from hours of training and weeks, months, and years of experience in whitewater rafting. Following the instructions of the guide is essential! These rules are designed to provide maximum safety and maximum enjoyment while on the river.

The same is true of navigating the river of life. God's instructions are designed to bring the blessings of God into our lives. But they are also there to provide protection from all the things that can pull us down. God's instructions are not suggestions. Rather His laws and commandments are essentials for living life to the fullest. Following God's instructions is a constant part of God's plan for our lives as we live out the great adventure of following Him!

Numbers 26:1–36:13

Numbers 26 chronicles the start of a new beginning for the nation of Israel. Gone was the first generation of Israelites who left Egypt. Their numbers were recorded in the census contained in Numbers 1. Forty years had passed since that first census. A new census of the men of fighting age, twenty years of age and older, took place in Numbers 26.

This second census was for military purposes, but it also served as guidelines for assigning territory in Canaan. The allotment to each tribe of Israel was based on the tribe's population size. While the allotment would be assigned by the casting of lots, God was precise in His instruction that larger tribes would receive larger portions of land (33:53-54). Special instruction was given concerning the tribe of Levi which did not receive an allotment of land (26:57-62). Instead, they were assigned to forty-eight cities throughout the land in which they were to live (35:1-8).

Of the previous generation of Israelites, only three were still alive—Moses, Joshua, and Caleb (26:63-66). Moses was not permitted to enter the promised land (Num. 27:12-21; Deut. 34:1-7). Joshua and Caleb were rewarded for their faithfulness to God. They had been the two spies who stood against the evil report of the other ten spies after the twelve returned from exploring the promised land (chap. 13-14). Joshua had been Moses's assistant and was God's choice for succeeding Moses as leader of the nation. In Numbers 27:15-23 the ordination of Joshua and the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua is highlighted.

Sandwiched in between this narrative concerning the counting of the people and the allotment of the land is a section of regulations regarding eight different offerings the people were to make to God (chap. 28-29). This section gives to the reader a glimpse into the enormous amount of work of those in the priesthood of Israel. No doubt it was included in the narrative because of the upcoming transition of leadership. This would serve as a reminder to the new generation of the importance of the prescribed worship practices of Israel.

At the end of the description of the sacrifices, instructions concerning vows made to the Lord are mentioned (30:1-16). The keeping of these vows was essential. Interestingly, most of these instructions are related to vows made by women, either single women or married women. While vows made by any member of the Israelite community were considered binding, special exemptions were made for women based on their life circumstances. This section focuses on those exceptions.

In Numbers 31 the narrative concerning the preparation for entering the promised land continues with war against the Midianites because they had led the Israelites into the sins of idolatry and immorality (31:1-54; see 25:1-3,16-18). This is followed by an explanation of the request of the tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of the tribe of Manasseh to be allowed to take their allotted portion of the land from the fertile region east of the Jordan River (chap. 32).

Following a summary of the stops along the journey from Egypt (33:1-49), the instructions for dividing the promised land among the tribes are detailed (33:50-35:34). This was to be done by leaders selected from each tribe. Select cities were designated for the Levites to live in. In addition, six cities were to be designated as cities of refuge to protect those who committed unintentional manslaughter. Numbers closes with more regulations regarding special inheritance situations (chap. 36).



The Land (Num. 33:50-53)

God spoke to Moses while the Israelites were still camped on the Plains of Moab, just east of Jericho. He instructed Moses to tell the Israelites they would have to drive out the land's current inhabitants and destroy the idols and high places devoted to the worship of false gods. The land would belong to them, given to them by God.

VERSE 50

The Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho,

The setting for these instructions was **the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho**. This fertile strip of land lay on the east side of the Jordan River Valley opposite the city of Jericho, which was located on the west side of the river valley. These plains extended southward to where the Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea. This area was well-watered by abundant rain and would have been much more fertile than the land on the other side of the river. This territory became the allotment for the tribes of Reuben and Gad who owned many flocks and herds that required adequate grazing land (32:1-5).

VERSE 51

“Tell the Israelites: When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan,”

Throughout the book of Numbers, the phrase **“Tell the Israelites”** is used as a formal way to introduce instructions from the Lord God to the people (5:6; 9:10; 27:8). Through Moses, God gave the nation instructions concerning their responsibilities upon entering the promised land. This moment had been forty years in the making, but God’s promise of the land had not changed. The period of delay had not changed God’s plans nor rendered His promises null and void. This land had been promised to the descendants of Abraham centuries before (Gen. 13:14-16). The time had finally arrived for Abraham’s descendants to inherit the land.

VERSE 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.”

The instructions that the Lord God gave to Israel were specific. Notice the cadence in this verse: **drive out . . . destroy . . . demolish**. Every remnant of the Canaanites’ religious system was to be removed. They were to *drive out* all the people living in the land of Canaan. They were to *destroy* all their idols and *demolish* all their places of idol worship.

The term *drive out* speaks of dispossessing, expelling, driving out completely. As a part of the conquest of Canaan, the Israelites were to rid the land of every semblance of pagan worship. God’s instruction was to *destroy* all **stone images** and **cast images**. The word *destroy* means to annihilate, make vanish, to cause to perish, while *demolish* means to exterminate, obliterate. All idols and places where idolatry was practiced were to be removed completely from the land so that no temptation to idolatry would remain for the Israelites.

Stone images were instruments of worship carved out of rock (see Lev. 26:1). *Cast images*—sometimes called “molten images”—were anything worshiped that had been created by casting metal (Ex. 34:17). **High places** were shrines for worship at the tops of hills or mountains throughout the land. High places usually contained such things as a stone altar for animal sacrifice, a carved wooden pole that represented Asherah (the goddess of fertility), a stone pillar that represented the male deity (most often the god Baal), various other idols, and a small incense altar.

“You are to take possession of the land and settle in it because I have given you the land to possess.”

There are two fundamental questions concerning God’s command to drive the inhabitants from the land. First, *What right did the Israelites have to do this?* God answered that with His statement, **“because I have given you the land to possess”** (see Lev. 20:24). Perhaps a more basic question is, *why? Why would God order the expulsion and destruction of these people groups living in the land?* This has always been a sticking point for many people. Why would a loving God order such a thing? In Deuteronomy 7:2, God commanded Israel to “completely destroy them.” Now why?

Begin by realizing that God is a sovereign as well as holy and loving God.¹ Realize also that God does not operate under the same prohibitions that we do. God is the Giver and Taker of life (1 Sam. 2:6; Luke 12:20). For us to take an innocent life would be murder. But God can give and take any life He chooses, and it is certainly not murder. We would all agree that if God wanted to take our lives this very minute, He is the sovereign Lord over all His creation and certainly has that right.

With that in mind, recognize that God rightfully could take the lives of the people groups living in the promised land using whatever means He chose and whenever He chose. Why were their deaths necessary? Because of the wickedness of the people living in the land. Remember, God never punishes innocent people because there are none! All are sinful, then and now. The inhabitants of Canaan rightfully fell under the judgment of God because they were sinful people. God told Abraham centuries before this event that “Your offspring will be resident aliens for four hundred years in a land that does not belong to them and will be enslaved and oppressed. . . . In the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen. 15:13,16).

What is pictured in those two verses is the God of mercy and grace. Regardless of the wickedness of the Canaanites (called “Amorites” in this verse), God granted them four hundred years of mercy to repent. This is not a God of capricious wrath, inflicting death on innocent people. In fact, God allowed His chosen people to suffer in slavery in Egypt for four hundred years because He was being patient and long-suffering with the current inhabitants of Canaan.

Repentance on the part of the Canaanites never happened. In fact, they became more and more wicked. Hence God called on the Israelites

to drive them out of the land to prevent Israel from falling into the same sins of idolatry.



Explore Further

Read the article “Idol” on page 788 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. While there are still places in our world where people worshiping images of stone or metal continues, in our culture most idolatry today is of a different sort. What sort of things are idols in our society?

The Task (Num. 33:54-56)

The land would be divided out by the ancestral tribes, each tribe possessing its own land. If the Israelites failed to drive out the current inhabitants, the people would remain in the land and become problems for them.

VERSE 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.”

As noted earlier, all the earth belongs to the Lord (Ps. 24:1; 1 Cor. 10:26); therefore, it is His to do with whatever He chooses. In His sovereign will, the Lord God made the decision to give the land of Canaan to His chosen people Israel as **an inheritance**. They were to view the land always as a gift from the Lord God.

At this point, the census of the people taken earlier in Numbers 26 comes into play. Each tribe would receive a portion of the land based on their population size. **A large clan** would receive a larger share of the land; **a small one** would receive a smaller portion of the land.

The distribution of the land was accomplished by the casting of lots. Because the Israelites knew that the casting of lots was under divine guidance, they would have recognized that it was the Lord God who was

guiding the selection process. Thus, because the allotment was from the hand of God, there could be no room for jealousy or complaint of unfairness among the tribes of Israel. The sentence **“Whatever place the lot indicates for someone will be his”** does not refer to individual Israelites, but to each tribe of Israel. Within the tribal leadership, subdividing of the allotment would take place over time.

Mention is made of **“your ancestral tribes.”** This was simply a way of pointing back to the origins of the tribes of Israel—each had been named for one of the sons of Jacob with the exception of the two tribes that came from Joseph—Manasseh and Ephraim. In many of the listings of the twelve tribes, these two tribes take the place of the original brothers Levi and Joseph. The tribe of Levi did not receive an allotment of the land because they were assigned the task of assisting Israel with worship in the tabernacle. To accommodate them, forty-eight different towns scattered throughout Canaan were given to them to live in (Num. 35:1-8).

VERSES 55-56

“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. And what I had planned to do to them, I will do to you.”

God expected obedience from the people of Israel. That theme resonated throughout the exodus event. Sometimes they obeyed the Lord God’s instructions; sometimes they did not. Each time they failed to act on the instructions that God gave them, there were consequences. Here in verses 55-56 is a stern warning of the consequences of disobedience to the instructions of the Lord God. The warning begins by describing the situation Israel would face from any of the people they didn’t drive out of the land. Allowing the various people groups to remain in the land wouldn’t just be an inconvenience; it would result in those groups being **barbs** and **thorns** to torment the Israelites. The word *barbs* paints the picture of a splinter in the eye. A splinter is small, but its sharpness can create great discomfort and even result in infection if not dealt with. If left unattended it might even lead to blindness.

The word *thorns* translates a different Hebrew term but carries the same thought. Those people left in the land would be thorns in the sides of the Israelites and a constant source of harassment. This warning about allowing these pagan groups to remain in the land echoes other warnings given to the Israelites (Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:1-6). The book of

Judges gives a vivid picture of the harassment of Israel by the pagan peoples left in the land.

Not only would consequences for disobedience come from the people not driven out of the land; they would also come from the hand of God Himself. God warned that **“what I planned to do to them, I will do to you.”** Instead of the people of the land being driven out and dispossessed from the land, the tribes of Israel would be driven out and lose their possession. Later Joshua would warn the Israelites using similar language (Josh. 23:12-13). Sadly, the tribes of Israel failed to fully drive out and destroy the prior inhabitants in Canaan (see Judg. 1:21,27-36). Soon Israel was infected with idolatry that characterized the nation for centuries. Eventually their idolatry and disobedience led to the exile and disappearance from history of the ten northern tribes of Israel in 722 BC (see 2 Kings 17). The Southern Kingdom of Judah fell in 586 BC and the people were sent into exile in Babylon (chap. 25). The children of Israel would learn the hard way through the years that failure to follow the Lord God’s instructions leads to disaster.

Explore Further

Read the article “Lots” on pages 1030–1031 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Today believers do not rely on the practice of casting lots to understand God’s will. We use such things as prayer, Bible study, and godly counsel from people we trust. Who could you turn to for guidance in seeking God’s will for your life?

The Plan (Num. 34:13-15)

Moses detailed the land each ancestral tribe would receive. Nine and a half tribes would live west of the Jordan River, while two and a half remained east of the Jordan. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh had already received their allotment of land (32:33).

VERSE 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.”

When Moses spoke to the people about **the land**, he was referring to all the land within the boundaries listed in verses 1-12. Moses reminded the people once more that this land was to be received **as an inheritance**. The land was a gift from God. This new generation of Israelites camped by faith on the edge of the land that the previous generation had rejected out of fear. The same inhabitants and fortified cities that had terrified Israel forty years earlier still stood. Yet this new generation, by faith, was on the verge of entering and conquering it. What a sharp contrast between this generation of Israel and that of their fathers!

VERSE 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.”

Mention is made in verse 13 of only “nine and a half tribes” receiving the command of the Lord God in dividing up the land by casting lots. This serves as a reminder that the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh had requested through Moses that they be allowed to receive their inheritance on the east side of the Jordan River (chap. 32).

Initially Moses objected to the request of these two and a half tribes based on the perception that they were trying to avoid fighting against the inhabitants of Canaan. An agreement was reached with Moses and these tribes that they could settle in the region east of the Jordan River if their troops would cross the Jordan with the other tribes and participate in conquering the land. They would leave their families and their flocks in the Transjordan region (meaning the land immediately east of the Jordan River in which their tribes would settle) and lead the attack along with the nine and a half other tribes (Num. 32:20-27; Josh. 4:12).

Because of their willingness to fight with their fellow Israelites, Moses granted their request. The tribe of Reuben was given the southern part of the Transjordan region, an area that used to belong to King Sihon of the Ammorites (Num. 21:21-31; 32:33-38). The tribe of Gad was allotted the central portion of the Transjordan region. This was perhaps the most fertile area in the region east of the Jordan.

The tribe of Manasseh would receive two portions of land—one west of the Jordan River and one in the northern part of the Transjordan region. The eastern location would be along the Sea of Chinnereth (Sea of Galilee) extending south into Gilead and north toward Mount Hermon.

VERSE 15

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

The relationship of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh with the nine and a half tribes on the western side of the Jordan River would be tested following the completion of the conquest of Canaan. In Joshua 22 is a fascinating story of the return of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh to their homes across the Jordan River after the conquest. Based on very good intentions, they built an altar—really a monument—beside the Jordan River. Their intent was that the monument would serve as a reminder between the tribes west of the Jordan and those east of the river that they were all fully members of the nation of Israel.

Unfortunately, the western tribes misinterpreted the monument and thought that the people of Reuben, Gad, and half-tribe of Manasseh had already abandoned the Lord God and had built a pagan altar. Because of this misunderstanding they mustered their armies to wage a destructive war against their wayward brothers. Only at the last minute were the two and a half tribes able to explain their rationale and a national disaster was averted.

Of the two and half tribes in the Transjordan region Manasseh became more prominent in the subsequent history of the early years in Canaan. For instance, Gideon from that tribe served as a deliverer from marauders who harassed Israel (Judg. 6). Little is heard from Gad and Reuben in the years following the conquest.



Explore Further

Read “Canaan” on pages 256–261 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The article notes that the usual practice of a people settling in a land was to adopt the gods and goddesses of that land. God called the Israelites to reject the religion and culture of the Canaanites. Why did the Israelites fail to do this? What were some of the factors that lead to this failure?

1. Parts of the next four paragraphs are excerpted from my book *Clearing the Fog: Gaining an Understanding and Appreciation of the Old Testament* (Xulon Press, 2021), 53–55.