

Numbers 32:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the LORD: and be sure your sin will find you out.

Analysis

Moses warns the tribes of Reuben and Gad who wish to settle east of the Jordan: 'be sure your sin will find you out.' This principle establishes that sin inevitably faces exposure and consequences. The context was their request to remain in the conquered Transjordan rather than crossing over to help conquer western Canaan. Moses initially feared they were repeating the Kadesh-barnea rebellion, refusing to enter the Promised Land and discouraging others. After they promised to fight alongside the other tribes before settling their own land, Moses conditionally approved but warned that failing to fulfill this promise would be sin that would 'find them out.' The Hebrew 'timtsa etkhem' (תִּמְצָא אֶתְכֶם, 'will find you out') suggests sin actively pursuing its perpetrator like a hunter tracking prey. Sin creates consequences that inexorably catch up with sinners. This isn't merely judicial punishment but the inherent nature of moral cause-and-effect in God's universe. The principle warns against presuming hidden sin remains hidden—God sees all, and sin's consequences eventually manifest. For believers, this warns toward holiness; for evangelism, it reminds that all sin faces judgment unless covered by Christ's atonement.

Historical Context

This occurred on the plains of Moab after Israel conquered the Amorite kingdoms of Sihon and Og in the Transjordan (east of the Jordan River). The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh recognized this land's suitability for their large livestock herds and requested to settle there rather than crossing into Canaan

proper (Numbers 32:1-5). Moses initially feared this request repeated the faithless spies' pattern (32:6-15), but after they promised to fight alongside the other tribes until Canaan was fully conquered (32:16-19), he conditionally approved (32:20-32). The warning 'your sin will find you out' addressed the possibility that they might break their promise and abandon their brothers. The tribes kept their word, fighting through the conquest period before returning to their Transjordan inheritance (Joshua 22:1-9). The principle Moses articulated became proverbial in Israel: hidden sin doesn't remain hidden—God exposes it, and consequences follow. This truth appears throughout Scripture (Psalm 90:8; Luke 12:2-3) and finds ultimate expression in the final judgment when all secrets are revealed (Romans 2:16; Revelation 20:12).

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does the principle 'your sin will find you out' warn against presuming hidden sin remains hidden from consequences?
2. What does the imagery of sin actively pursuing its perpetrator ('find you out') teach about sin's inherent nature to produce consequences?

Interlinear Text

וְאֵם לֹא תְּשַׁלֵּח | תְּבִנֵּה מִבְּשָׁרֶת
H518 H3808 But if ye will not do so H3651 H2009 behold ye have sinned H2398

לִיהְיוֹת אֶתְּנָשָׁן וְדַעַת אֲשֶׁר תְּפַתַּח מִן תְּמִימָץ אֲתָּכֶם
against the LORD and be sure your sin will find you out H853
H3068 H3045 H2403 H834 H4672 H853

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 59:12 (Sin): For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us: for our transgressions are with us; and as for our iniquities, we know them;

Proverbs 13:21 (Sin): Evil pursueth sinners: but to the righteous good shall be repayed.

Genesis 44:16 (Sin): And Judah said, What shall we say unto my lord? what shall we speak? or how shall we clear ourselves? God hath found out the iniquity of thy servants: behold, we are my lord's servants, both we, and he also with whom the cup is found.

Psalms 90:8 (Sin): Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.

1 Corinthians 4:5 (References Lord): Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

Genesis 4:7 (Sin): If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

Isaiah 3:11 (Parallel theme): Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him: for the reward of his hands shall be given him.

Romans 2:9 (Parallel theme): Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile;

Psalms 140:11 (Parallel theme): Let not an evil speaker be established in the earth: evil shall hunt the violent man to overthrow him.

Psalms 139:11 (Parallel theme): If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.