

Numbers 25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 29 April 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 25 Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor.

And behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

When Phinehas the son of Eliezer, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them.

The man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. And the Lord said to Moses, Phinehas the son of Eliezer, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy.

Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.

[1 : 38] The name of the slain man of Israel, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, chief of a father's house belonging to the Simeonites. And the name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cosbi the daughter of Zer, who was the tribal head of a father's house in Midian.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Harass the Midianites and strike them down, for they have harassed you with their wives, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cosbi the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on the count of Peor.

In Numbers chapter 25, the men of Israel are sexually tempted by the pagan Moabite women. Pursuing these women, they are invited to their idolatrous feasts, and end up eating the sacrifices and bowing down to their gods.

Through their pursuit of these Moabite women, they end up serving their gods, and not just casually participating in sacrifices, but being yoked to Baal of Peor. All of this is reminiscent of Exodus chapter 32, and the incident with the golden calf.

In Exodus chapter 32 verse 6, Many people have observed that the language of play has sexual connotations.

[2 : 58] In the event with the golden calf then, they end up in sexual promiscuity on account of their idolatry. And at the end of the story of the golden calf, in Exodus chapter 34 verse 12 to 16, there's a warning given.

Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their asherim.

For you shall worship no other god. For the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous god. Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods, and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods.

Emmanuel Shalev observes that, on this first occasion, idolatry led to promiscuity. And on the second occasion, in the story of Baal-a-Peor, promiscuity leads to idolatry.

Both promiscuity or adultery and idolatry are perversions of appropriate intimacy. Intimacy with a righteous spouse, and intimacy in worship with the one true god.

[4 : 10] The most severe punishments in the law tend to be reserved for perversions of the covenant, and perversions of sexual union. These are the unions at the heart of society, and when these are perverted, everything is affected.

The sexual promiscuity and the idolatry in this story are expressions of the same fundamental thing, which is why the plague upon Israel for their idolatry can be stopped by Phinehas's piercing a man and a woman in sexual congress through with a spear.

As in the sin with the golden calf, this is a national-scale apostasy. Consequently, the Lord calls for the most severe penalty. To turn away the Lord's wrath against the people, the Lord declares that all the chiefs of the people would have to be killed, impaled, and their bodies left to rot in the sun.

This is a judgment of the very greatest severity. It reminds us of the Lord's intent to destroy Israel entirely after their sin with the golden calf. The chiefs are responsible for the people under them, and they will bear their people's sins if they do not prevent or punish those sins.

If the holiness of the people is not maintained through decisive judgment of offenses, then a sort of contagion of guilt will break out and afflict everyone connected with the offender.

[5 : 25] And the language of plague striking the people, I think, captures something of the nature of sin as it affects a people. It's not just individuals who sin, but it's all the people associated with them who are complicit or who fail to deal with their sin decisively.

Moses speaks to the judges of Israel, but he seems to tone down the Lord's instruction, saying that they must kill all of those men who yoked themselves to Baal of Peor. Is he changing the Lord's command here, or is he misrepresenting it?

No, I don't think he is. Rather, he's working within the fundamental logic of it. If a judge puts to death such offenders, he is freed from the contagion of their sin. But if he doesn't, he will not be, and he will be subject to the judgment that the Lord declares.

We see the same sort of logic in Leviticus 20, verses 2 to 5. Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech, shall surely be put to death.

The people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean, and to profane my holy name.

[6 : 40] And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man, when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man, and against his clan, and will cut them off from among the people, him and all who follow him, in whoring after Molech.

Then, however, there is the most flagrant act of high-handed rebellion. In front of Moses and the entire people, a Simeonite chief comes with a Midianite woman, to have sexual relations with her. The Midianites appear to be a mobile group, and to be associated with the Moabites in this and the previous chapter. At this point, Phineas, Aaron's grandson, grabs a spear and runs it through the couple.

This stops the plague that had broken out. In Numbers 18, the Levites and the priests are presented as the guardians of Israel. They're the lightning rods for judgment. They were those who approached the holiness of the Lord for the people.

God is a consuming fire, and those who come into his presence need to be prepared. And Israel felt that they would be destroyed if they came near to the Lord, but the Levites and the priests both guarded them and approached the Lord for them.

[7 : 52] The Levites and the priests were also those who would intervene to cover the iniquity of the people if a crisis occurred. We saw Aaron himself doing this in chapter 16, verses 43 to 50, in a parallel event to this of Phineas.

And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment. And they fell on their faces. And Moses said to Aaron, Take your censer and put fire on it from off the altar, and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation, and make atonement for them.

For wrath has gone out from the Lord, the plague has begun. So Aaron took it, as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly. And behold, the plague had already begun among the people. And he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped. Now those who died in the plague were 14,700, besides those who died in the affair of Korah.

[8 : 53] And Aaron returned to Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting, when the plague was stopped. Note also how similar this is to the events of Exodus chapter 32, where the Levites killed 3,000 men after the golden calf, and are set apart for a blessing afterwards.

The story of chapter 16 of Numbers is immediately followed by Aaron being set apart, and the setting apart of the Levites and the priests more generally. And then in chapter 32 of Exodus, it's the Levites being set apart.

And in this chapter, it's Phineas being set apart. All of these people marked out by their zeal for the Lord. After Phineas' action, the Lord declares to Moses that he is going to give a covenant of peace to Phineas, a perpetual priesthood.

This was because Phineas was jealous with the Lord's own jealousy for his people. The Lord repeatedly describes himself as a jealous God, demanding the undivided loyalty and faithfulness of his people, to the point of even being called jealous.

It seems strange that he is rewarded with a covenant of peace for such a violent act. However, Phineas is performing the priestly duty here as the guardian of Israel.

[10 : 06] He's protecting Israel from the wrath of the Lord. Israel is in extreme jeopardy of having all their leaders wiped out. But one priest's zealous action decisively rejects the spiritual adultery of Israel in a way that maintains its holiness.

Just as the anger of Moses and the zeal of the Levites after the golden calf saved Israel from being wiped out, so Phineas delivers them here. Phineas made atonement or covering for the people.

By his act of zeal, the sin stood utterly and decisively condemned, and the holiness of the people could be maintained. The priest represents the people to God and God to the people.

Like Moses, Phineas faithfully represented the Lord's wrath to the people so that the Lord didn't have to exercise his wrath in a far more devastating and final form himself.

Phineas also represented the people to the Lord and his faithfulness was a reason for blessing. On account of his action, the high priesthood would be given to Phineas' line in time and would remain in his line.

[11 : 12] This event is later recalled in Psalm 106 verses 28 to 31. Then they yoked themselves to Baal of Peor and eight sacrifices offered to the dead.

They provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds and a plague broke out among them. Then Phineas stood up and intervened and the plague was stayed and that was counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever.

The expression counted to him as righteousness is much the same as we see used of Abraham in Genesis chapter 15 verse 6. It seems to be referring to something more than personal justification. Rather, the counting of righteousness seems to be the same sort of thing as the giving of a perpetual covenant of peace to Phineas and his descendants. Those things are paralleled in the original statement to Numbers 25 and then in the statement as it's represented in Psalm 106.

The point, I would suggest, is that Phineas, on account of his zeal, is exalted as a faithful covenant partner, his righteousness having ramifications for his descendants after him.

[12 : 18] In the same way, Abraham's righteousness is not just about his own personal status relative to God, but on account of his faith, his descendants are blessed with him.

It should probably be noted at this point that we have now had key rebellions in the book of Numbers in which Reuben, Dathan and Abiram, Simeon, Zimri, and Levi, Korah, were all involved. These are the three sons that were judged in Genesis chapter 49. It might also be worth reflecting upon the way in which this event and the aftermath might hearken back to the events of Genesis chapter 34, where again we see Levi and Simeon involved.

Here, Levi judges Simeon for his unfaithfulness, and Levi is blessed. At the end of this event, Moses instructs the Israelites to judge the Midianites for their part in the affair.

Numbers 25 comes after the story of Balaam and Balak, and it seems to be a different story. Yet, we later discover that the actions of the women here were instigated by Balaam.

[13 : 24] In Numbers chapter 31, verse 16, we read, Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came upon the congregation of the Lord.

This suggests that since Balaam couldn't curse Israel directly, he cunningly contrived to get Israel to bring a curse upon itself. In much the same way in our struggles with sin, we can be so concerned about the work of Satan external to ourselves that we fail to appreciate the way in which the fifth column within, our own flesh and its susceptibility to temptation and sin, is that which really gives him his greatest power.

A question to consider. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, verses 2 to 3, the Apostle Paul declares, For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. The notion of a divine jealousy reminds us strongly of the Lord's statement that Phineas was jealous with his jealousy among Israel.

What can Phineas teach us about faithful Christian leadership? How might this challenge some of our preconceptions in this area?