

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 15

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

CHAPTER 25

INTRODUCTION

In the previous three chapters, we read with delight how Balaam failed in cursing the people of Israel, because God would not let him. King Balak, who engaged him to curse Israel, was so furious with him that he sent Balaam packing home without paying him. But it is sad to read in this chapter that Israel once again incurred the wrath of God because they succumbed to the temptation to sin. In order to get back at Israel, Balaam advised Balak how they could make the children of Israel fall out of favour with God. Balaam advised him to use the Moabites to entice the men of Israel to commit sexual immorality with their women and lead them to worship Baal their god.

This is the final account of Israel's sin and rebellion against God in their wilderness experience prior to entering the Promised Land. Although the chapter makes sad reading, it teaches valuable truths about God and man. We ought to learn these spiritual lessons for they are written for us that we might know of the dangers and the pitfalls in the path of life on earth so that we sin not against God.

The chapter falls into five parts: (1) Israel's sin, (2) God's judgement, (3) Phinehas' brave act, (4) God's

commendation of Phinehas, and (5) God's judgement on the Midianites.

OUTLINE

A. Israel Sinned In Sexual Immorality and Idolatry (25:1-3).

1. Israel camped in Shittim (25:1a).
2. Israel committed sexual immorality with the Moabite women (25:1b).
3. Israel enticed by the Moabites joined in their idolatrous worship (25:2).
4. Israel worshipped Baal-peor (25:3a).
5. The LORD's anger was upon Israel (25:3b).

B. The LORD Punished Israel (25:4-5).

1. The LORD instructed Moses (25:4a).
2. The LORD commanded Moses to hang the chiefs of the people (25b).
3. The wrath of the LORD might be turned away from the people (25:4c).
4. Moses instructed the judges to slay those who were guilty of worshipping Baal-peor (25:5).

C. Phinehas Killed an Israelite and a Midianite Woman Because They Sinned (25:6-9).

1. An Israelite brought a Midianite woman into the camp insensitive to the weeping congregation (25:6).
2. Phinehas saw and took a spear in his hand (25:7).
3. Phinehas killed the Israelite and the Midianite woman (25:8a).
4. The plague stopped (25:8b).
5. The total number of people that died was 24,000 (25:9).

D. The LORD Commended Phinehas and Rewarded Him (25:10-15).

1. The LORD commended Phinehas' zeal for His sake (25:10-11).
 - a) The LORD told Moses (10).
 - b) Phinehas had turned the wrath of God away from Israel (11a).
 - c) Phinehas' act displayed the jealousy of the LORD (11b).
2. The LORD rewarded Phinehas (10:12-13).
 - a) The LORD rewarded him with the covenant of peace (12).
 - b) The covenant was the permanent appointment of priesthood for him and his descendants (13a).
 - c) The reason was that he made an atonement for the children of Israel (13b).
3. Zimri was the name of the Israelite from the tribe of Simeon who committed the sin (25:14).
4. Cozbi was the name of the Midianite woman who enticed Zimri (25:15).

E. The LORD Instructed Moses Concerning the Midianites (25:16-18).

1. The LORD told Moses to vex and smite the Midianites (25:16-17).
2. The reason was because the Midianites enticed the children of Israel that caused many to die (25:18).

COMMENTARY

THE LORD IS ANGRY

Israel had much to rejoice at this point of time. They had fought two battles against their enemies, king Sihon and king Og. They were now encamped in Shittim, the last location before they crossed the River Jordan to claim the Promised Land. The name "Shittim" means "acacia trees". The site is probably the modern Tell Kefrein, which is on the eastern side of Jordan; It is about ten miles east of Jericho on the west bank.

Victories are good but they can cause one to be overconfident. This happened to Israel. King Balak failed to curse Israel through the Gentile diviner, Balaam. But Balaam, being one who would divine for money, advised Balak how he could have the advantage over Israel. He counseled Balak to make a plan that would cause Israel to sin against the LORD (Yahweh). Consequently, the women of Moab enticed the men of Israel to commit sexual immorality. That was a breach of the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14): "Thou shalt not commit adultery." This immorality led them to commit another sin. The women of Moab invited the Israelite men to their religious feasts and led them to worship their gods. The men joined in the meal fellowship and also bowed down to their gods (2). The nation Israel was being corrupted and they joined (yoked) themselves in worshipping Baal-peor, the local heathen god that was worshipped in Peor. Israel broke another commandment (Exodus 20:3, 5): "Thou shalt have no other gods before me . . . Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve

them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God.”

THE LORD CHASTISES

Israel had committed spiritual adultery in worshipping Baal-peor. They had broken the commandments that God gave to them to obey. God’s anger was kindled against Israel. The LORD commanded Moses to execute the leaders of the people and “to hang them up against the sun” (4a). Moses then commanded the judges of Israel to kill all the men who had yoked themselves in worshipping Baal-peor. The text did not say whether Moses carried out the first commandment to hang all the leaders of the people. This was to be carried out so that the wrath of the LORD might be turned away from Israel (4b). Moses then instructed the killing of all the men who yoked themselves unto Baal-peor (5).

The passage presents a problem. There is a controversy whether the first commandment to execute “all the leaders of the people and hang them” were those who yoked themselves with the Moabites and worshipped their gods. Some interpret that all the leaders means what it says even though they might not be guilty of the sin of idolatry. Whereas, others understand “all the leaders” to mean those who were guilty of sexual immorality and idolatry. The basis of the first group’s understanding is that the text is plain and clear. Whereas, the second group argues that those who were guilty were to be punished.

It is a difficult problem to resolve for the simple reason that we tend to judge according to our standard of justice and holiness. The injunction to execute all the leaders is also based on the representative principle—leaders have a moral

responsibility to check and correct those under their charge. In this sense they were equally liable for the sins of the people. Then a plague broke out and killed 24,000 people! The reasoning that these leaders were to be executed was to atone for the children of Israel just like the animal sacrifices. The injunction to execute these leaders so that “the fierce anger of the LORD may be turned away from Israel” was specifically given by the LORD (4). We can safely assume that Moses did carry out this commandment. Then Moses further instructed the judges to kill all those who committed the sins of idolatry and sexual immorality. Is it not a serious and grave responsibility to be a leader?

THE LORD REWARDS

The execution of the leaders and those who committed the sins of idolatry and immorality drew the people to congregate at the door of the Tabernacle. They were weeping and sorrowing. In the midst of this weeping and sorrowing by the people, Zimri, the son of Salu, the prince of a chief house among the Simeonites, brought a Midianite princess by the name of Cozbi to his tent to commit fornication. Zimri’s behaviour is appalling. He showed no thought and feeling for what was happening before his eyes. He did what he did openly, unashamedly. He was arrogant and insensitive. His behaviour was in defiance against the LORD God and His commandments.

Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, saw what Zimri did. He took a spear and went to Zimri’s tent. He found them together and he speared right through Zimri and Cozbi. A plague had already broken out. The nature of the plague is not given. Many were dying. The

children of Israel were crying and mourning. And when Phinehas had slain the unequally yoked offending couple, the plague suddenly stayed (8). Israel lost altogether 24,000. Not a few of them were young and able men of war, for many of them were leaders of the people. It was a very sad day for Israel. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians warned of the dire consequences of sexual immorality by referring to this historical incident (1 Corinthians 10:8).¹

Phinehas' action was criticized as being too harsh and extreme. Their sin should not merit that kind of treatment. But the overriding factor is that God vindicated it. God also commended and rewarded Phinehas. The LORD gave His reason why He approved of Phinehas' action. The LORD remarked that Phinehas "was zealous for my sake among them that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy"—literally, "he was jealous for my jealousy in the midst of them, that I destroy not the sons of Israel" (11). It means that Phinehas jealousy matched that of the LORD for His people. And in order that the children of Israel would not be destroyed because of sin in the camp, Phinehas slayed the offending party. God's jealousy is aroused when His children flirt and worship other gods!

The harshness of Phinehas' treatment on the couple must be considered in the seriousness of the situation. The couple had blatantly

rebelled and disobeyed God. They did it openly and unashamedly when the people were sorrowing over the very sin they were committing. If the views of these critics are different from that of God, who not only approved of Phinehas' action but also rewarded him, these critics must realize that their judgement is in error. James Philip aptly comments, "It is a question of calling some ugly things by their proper names and dealing with them accordingly. In this permissive and morally decadent age, we could certainly do with some of this spirit" [*Mastering the Old Testament—Numbers*, 268].

Here is another revelation that is given to correct some misconception about the love of God. Many have held to the view that the God of love will always forgive and be merciful and will not destroy people. The revelation given here, and many other passages, is that God's righteousness is as great as His love. God is love as much as God is righteous and holy. God makes a covenant with His people and He has the right to jealously maintain that covenant by expecting His people to worship Him and obey His commandments and laws. In doing so, He may bless His people. If the sin of the people were not stopped at that point in time, the situation would go out of control. It would result in chaos and destruction.

Why was the punishment so severe? It was because the sin was very severe. The people of Israel bore the name of God, the only nation given this privilege. Their sin was an abomination to God as they had made the LORD God to become like the gods of Canaan. It was a grievous sin which resulted in a very grievous punishment. 24,000 Israelites who were on the brink of entering the Promised Land died

¹ Some critics quickly point out that there is a mistake in the two texts. The number of the dead given by Moses and that given by Paul were different. This is easily resolved by the text itself. Moses gave the TOTAL number who died, whereas Paul gave the number who died IN ONE DAY, (*Nelson's Parallel Bible Commentary*).

because they failed to finish well the race they had started, even though they might have begun well.

God did not only approve of Phinehas' action, He rewarded him. He gave Phinehas His "covenant of peace" which the LORD explained was "the covenant of an everlasting priesthood" (12, 13). Phinehas and his descendants were given the privilege and honour to serve God permanently as High Priest, performing the rite of making an atonement for the children of Israel. Phinehas was the grandson of Aaron, who had four sons, namely, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu were struck dead by the LORD because they offered "strange fire" (Leviticus 10:1-2). Later in the history of Israel, the high priest fell into the line of Ithamar—Eli and his sons. But in the reign of King David, the high priesthood was restored to Zadok, a descendant of Eleazar (2 Chronicles 24:3).

GOD REMEMBERS THE MIDIANITES

The Midianites colluded with the Moabites from the beginning. In this matter of enticing the men of Israel, they too were involved. One of the daughters of their chiefs, Cozbi, seduced Zimri. The commandment of the LORD to Moses was that the Midianites were to be treated as an enemy of Israel. They were bent on destroying Israel. Moses was told to vex them and destroy them. This directive to Moses was carried out later when God told Moses to execute it (Numbers 31:1-2).

SUMMARY

Balaam's counsel to Balak to use his womenfolk to entice the men of Israel to commit sexual immorality

and idolatry was undoubtedly satanically inspired. It was subtle. It achieved his purpose of weakening Israel militarily. Many of Israel's leaders were killed. We are reminded by Paul to put on the whole armour of God, so that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil (Ephesians 6:11). Many a Christian and pastor, has succumbed to the subtle temptations of the evil one and forsook their faith and dashed their hope of a rich and fulfilling Christian life. **The lesson we learn here is to deal firmly with our sins and put a stop to our wayward ways.**

On the other hand Phinehas sets a good example for us, almost proverbial—that is, to **be intensely jealous for God and for His people**. Not only are we to love God and our brethren, and others, but we must also be firm in our censure of all that is sinful and evil in the sight of God. While we practise love one for another, we must also deal firmly and squarely with everything that is abominable in the sight of God. We must be prepared to be criticized, condemned and even be excommunicated for obeying the commandments of God and His will. We must be inspired by the words of Peter, (Acts 5:29), "We ought to **obey God rather** than men." We can also take comfort and courage in the words of the apostle Paul who says (Romans 8:31), "If God *be* for us, who *can be* against us?"

We learn two very precious truths about God. God does not tolerate sin. Every sin is against Him and His Word. God punishes the sinner for his sins. There is no escape. There is no compromise. There is no discount. The sinner that sins shall surely die. God's holiness and righteousness are non-negotiable. On the other hand, God

loves to reward His people when they serve Him faithfully and are zealous of good works that honour and glorify Him. Phinehas is our example.

Lastly, we must be aware of people who are like Balaam. They would do wicked deeds as long as their self-importance and gain are achieved. Such people in the church bring divisions and schism. AMEN

2. What commandments of God did the Israelite men break? What was God's attitude towards Israel then?

DAILY READING & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MONDAY: Numbers 25:1-3; Colossians 3:5-10.²

1. What sin led to another as seen in verses 1-3? What do we learn about the subtlety of our adversary?

² Colossians 3:5 Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: 6 For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: 7 In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. 8 But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. 9 Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; 10 And have put on the new *man*, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:

TUESDAY: Numbers 25:4-5; Romans 8:5-9.³

3. Who were the people that were punished for the sins of the people?

³ Romans 8:5 For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. 6 For to be carnally minded *is* death; but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. 7 Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. 8 So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

4. What lessons can we learn from this punishment?

WEDNESDAY: Numbers 25:6-9; 1 Corinthians 10:6-8.⁴

5. What risk would you say Phinehas was taking for his action?

6. How would you respond to the criticism that Phinehas' treatment of Zimri was too harsh?

⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:6 Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. 7 Neither be ye idolaters, as *were* some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. 8 Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand.

THURSDAY: Numbers 25:10-15; Galatians 5:16-23.⁵

7. What were the results of Phinehas' action?

8. What specifically did God commend Phinehas for?

⁵ Galatians 5:16 *This* I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. 17 For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. 18 But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are *these*; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, 20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, 21 Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told *you* in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, 23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

**FRIDAY: Numbers 25:16-18;
Hebrews 10:30-31.⁶**

9. What can we learn from the example of Phinehas?

10. What does this chapter reveal about God's wrath?

⁶ Hebrews 10:30 For we know him that hath said, Vengeance *belongeth* unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. 31 *It is* a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.