

Israel Worships Baal of Peor; A Second Census is Taken

Numbers 25-26

Numbers 25: *“Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. ² They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel. ⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before the LORD, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.” ⁵ So Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor.” ⁶ And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. ⁷ Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; ⁸ and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. ⁹ And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand. ¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹¹ “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. ¹² Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace;’ ¹³ and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.” ¹⁴ Now the name of the Israelite who was killed, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, a leader of a father’s house among the Simeonites. ¹⁵ And the name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi the daughter of Zur; he was head of the people of a father’s house in Midian. ¹⁶ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁷ “Harass the Midianites, and attack them; ¹⁸ for they harassed you with their schemes by which they seduced you in the matter of Peor and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister, who was killed in the day of the plague because of Peor.”*

Background Notes

Numbers 23-24 record the “oracles” of Balaam. Pagan King Balak of Moab hired Balaam, the soothsayer from Mesopotamia, to curse Israel. However, under the sovereign control of God, Balaam blessed Israel instead.

One of the most interesting points about Balaam’s oracles is that they indirectly **affirm a high view of the inspiration of Scripture!** Here’s the point. How did Moses know the details of Balaam’s oracles, and where did Moses get the details of the interaction between Balak and Balaam? How did he know the details of God’s dealings with Balaam, including what the donkey said? Where did Moses get that material? When you think it through, most likely the answer is that **Moses received all these details by revelation from the Lord** Himself, including the very words of Balaam’s oracles!

In Numbers 25 Israel once more fell into sin -- gross sin. They became involved in the idolatrous worship of Baal of Peor, one of the gods of the Moabites, and the pagan worship of Baal involved sexual immorality. In verse 2, the pronoun *"they"* is feminine in the Hebrew language, indicating that the women of Moab invited the Israeli men to a religious celebration that included idolatry and immorality. The Israeli men were ensnared - and they paid the consequences.

Who gave the Moabites the idea of dealing with Israel in this way? It was Balaam, the "diviner"! Balaam returned to Mesopotamia (Numbers 34), but evidently he returned to offer this new strategy to Balak, because Balaam was killed with the Midianites *"after he had given counsel to cause Israel to sin against the Lord in the worship of Baal"* (Numbers 31:8).

Doctrinal Points

1. Divine justice requires firm and timely discipline.

The Lord was angry because of Israel's idolatry, and He told Moses to carry out swift and firm discipline (v3-4). The leaders who were involved in this gross sin were to be executed in broad daylight, and 24,000 Israeli people died of a plague (23,000 in one day alone 1 Corinthians 10:8). At this point that Zimri, a leader in the tribe of Simeon, defiantly, in

the sight of all Israel, brought a woman from one of the leading families of the Midianites into the camp of Israel for the express purpose of sexual immorality. Phinehas the priest took quick and firm disciplinary action, and killed them both in the very act. This was righteous discipline, and the plague was checked. Because of his willingness to carry out divine justice, the Lord honored Phinehas, and promised that the priesthood in Israel would come from his line.

Church leaders today must carry out divine justice by exercising firm and timely discipline. The highest form of discipline in the church is excommunication. The problem with church discipline today is that many times it is not carried out when divine justice is needed. Often sin is swept under the rug or ignored. Obviously we're not advocating a "witch hunt" or excessive concentration on sin and discipline, but when there is obvious sin, there must be discipline. If discipline is to bring repentance, and restore the offender to the Lord, and serve as a warning to the rest of the Lord's people, the discipline must be firm and timely.

Divine justice requires firm and timely discipline.

2. Divine justice includes the discipline of death.

The book of Numbers is called "Numbers" because there are two "numberings" in this book. The first census is in chapter 1, and the second census in Numbers 26.

Numbers 26:1-11 - *"And it came to pass, after the plague, that the LORD spoke to Moses and Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, saying: ² 'Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel from twenty years old and above, by their fathers' houses, all who are able to go to war in Israel.' ³ So Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho, saying: ⁴ 'Take a census of the people from twenty years old and*

above, just as the LORD commanded Moses and the children of Israel who came out of the land of Egypt.”

⁵ Reuben was the firstborn of Israel. The children of Reuben were: of Hanoch, the family of the Hanochites; of Pallu, the family of the Palluites; ⁶ of Hezron, the family of the Hezronites; of Carmi, the family of the Carmites. ⁷ These are the families of the Reubenites: those who were numbered of them were forty-three thousand seven hundred and thirty. ⁸ And the son of Pallu was Eliab. ⁹ The sons of Eliab were Nemuel, Dathan, and Abiram. These are the Dathan and Abiram, representatives of the congregation, who contended against Moses and Aaron in the company of Korah, when they contended against the LORD; ¹⁰ and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up together with Korah when that company died, when the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men; and they became a sign. ¹¹ Nevertheless the children of Korah did not die.”

Verses 1-50 give us the totals of the tribes, and verse 51 gives the grand total of 601,730 Israeli men who were 20 years and older. The second census had two purposes: military and “real estate.” The larger tribes would get more land when Israel settled in the land of Canaan. The record of the Levites is found in verses 57-62. They would receive no tribal territory. As servants of the Lord, they would be distributed in cities throughout all of Israel.

When the total of 601,730 people is compared with the total of the first census that was taken 38 years earlier, the overall population had decreased by only 1,820 men 20 years and older. Remember - this was a new generation of Israelis. In the relatively short period of 38 years, all the adults who had come out of Egypt at time of the Exodus had died. *“But among these there was not a man of those who were numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest when they numbered the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Sinai. ⁶⁵ For the LORD had said of them, “They shall surely die in the wilderness. So there was not left a man of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun” (v63-65).*

The entire former generation died because of their sin of unbelief (Numbers 13- 4). God’s discipline was death. God sometimes used the discipline of death in the case of sinning believers in the New Testament as well. In Acts 5 Ananias and Sapphira were removed by the discipline of death. In the church at Corinth, some believers who sinned experienced the discipline of death (1 Corinthians 11). And 1 John 5:16 says there is a *“sin unto death”* – 1 John 5:16.

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Practical Application

Expect Satan to use sex as a snare.

The Bible teaches that sex is a wonderful gift from God, but it is restricted to limits that **God** has ordained - **one man** and **one woman**, in **marriage**. But Satan, the enemy of every believer, will try to tempt believers to step outside these limits. Sadly, many believers have fallen into this snare of Satan, and that’s what happened in Numbers 25. The head-on

approach of trying to curse God's people failed, so the satanic counsel of Balaam was to ensnare the men of Israel into sin through the women of Moab. And Satan's snare was successful.

This is just as true today as it was then. When Satan sees that a church or a ministry is moving forward and the Lord is blessing, if he can't bring about defeat through a frontal attack, you can be sure Satan will try to use the snare of sex. Many growing churches and ministries have been stopped short and even fallen apart because key leaders have fallen into this trap. Be warned! Expect Satan to use sex as a snare.