

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 16: Sin at Peor and the Zeal of Phinehas -- Numbers 25:1–18

It is one of the saddest turns in the whole book. For two chapters we have watched God refuse to let Israel be cursed. Balak hired the best curse money could buy, and every word came out as blessing. No enchantment could touch them; no scheme could break them. The enemy on the ridge could do nothing. And then, with the camp resting in the plains of Moab at a place called Shittim, Israel does to itself what Balak's gold could not buy. The people begin to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab. What no curse could accomplish from the outside, compromise accomplishes from the inside.

It starts, as these things almost always do, in the ordinary. There are invitations to feasts. There are friendships. There are women, and food, and the warm pull of belonging. And the feasts are not merely social; they are the sacrifices of foreign gods, and Israel eats and bows down to them (Numbers 25:2). Sexual sin and false worship arrive together, hand in hand, as they so often do in Scripture. The line between a shared meal and a shared altar is crossed almost without anyone noticing, and the people who could not be conquered are now joined to Baal of Peor.

The Lord's anger burns, and a plague breaks out, and the camp is in agony. Then comes a scene that startles every modern reader. While leaders weep at the tent of meeting, a man named Zimri brazenly brings a Midianite woman into the camp in full view of everyone. And Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, rises with a spear. His zeal for the holiness of God stops the plague and turns away God's wrath, and God grants him a covenant of peace. It is a hard scene, set firmly in the Old Covenant order, and we must read it soberly and carefully, but we cannot read past it. God takes the purity of His people with deadly seriousness.

Here is why this ancient story is aimed straight at us. Paul points to this very plague and says it was written down as an example, for our instruction, so that we would not desire evil as they did (1 Corinthians 10:6–8). The same deadly pattern still works today, the slow drift from a friendly compromise to a shared table to a divided heart to a ruined life. And it still does its worst right after seasons of great blessing, when we feel safe. As you study Peor, do not look down on Israel. Ask instead where your own heart is being quietly invited to the feast, and what it would mean to flee idolatry and immorality and worship the Lord with a pure and undivided heart.

Group Discussion: Israel could not be defeated from the outside, but they fell apart from the inside through compromise. Why are God's people so often more endangered by quiet compromise after blessing than by open opposition, and what does that pattern look like in churches and families today?

Personal Reflection: The fall at Peor began with ordinary invitations, feasts, and friendships that slowly pulled hearts toward another god. Where is your own heart being quietly invited to a table that would divide your devotion, and what would it take to flee rather than linger?

Read Numbers 25:1–18

Study Questions

1. Numbers 25:1–3 shows sexual immorality and idolatry arriving together: Israel commits harlotry with Moabite women, then eats their sacrifices and bows to Baal of Peor. Why does Scripture so consistently link sexual sin and false worship, and what does this teach about the true nature of idolatry of the heart?
2. The fall happened in the plains of Moab after God had repeatedly protected Israel from every curse. Where in your own life have you let your guard down precisely after a season of blessing or success, and how did compromise creep in?
3. Numbers 25:3 says the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. Why does God respond so seriously to His people joining themselves to false worship, and what does this reveal about His holiness and His jealous love for those who are His?
4. Israel was drawn in step by step, by invitations, meals, and relationships, until they were bowing to Baal (Numbers 25:2). What small, seemingly harmless steps tend to draw you toward compromise, and where do you need to break the chain before it reaches the altar of a false god?
5. Numbers 31:16 and Revelation 2:14 reveal that Peor was the very fruit of Balaam's counsel; unable to curse Israel, he taught Balak to seduce them into sin. What does this teach about

how the enemy of God's people works, and why is internal compromise more dangerous than external attack?

6. Phinehas was grieved by sin that others had grown comfortable with, while leaders wept and Zimri flaunted his rebellion (Numbers 25:6-8). Where have you grown comfortable or numb toward a sin that should grieve you, and what would godly grief over it look like?
7. God credited Phinehas with turning away His wrath and making atonement for Israel, and gave him a covenant of peace and a lasting priesthood (Numbers 25:11-13). Reading this rightly within its Old Covenant setting, how does Phinehas's act point us to the greater and final atonement and peace we have through Jesus Christ (compare Romans 5:1; Hebrews 7:23-25)?
8. Paul holds up Peor as a warning written for our instruction, urging us not to be idolaters or to commit sexual immorality as some of them did (1 Corinthians 10:7-8, 11). What specific guardrails do you need to put in place so that this ancient warning actually shapes your daily choices?
9. Phinehas's act stopped the plague and was counted to him as zeal for God's holiness, yet it belongs to the Old Covenant order; under Christ our weapons are not carnal, and zeal for holiness is expressed through purity, church discipline, and the gospel, not the spear (2 Corinthians 10:3-5; 1 Corinthians 5). How do we rightly honor Phinehas's zeal for God's holiness while understanding how that same holy zeal is now to be expressed under the New Covenant in Christ?

10. Peor shows that the deadliest threat to God's people is often a divided heart rather than an outside enemy. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, right now, to flee idolatry and immorality and to worship Him with a pure and undivided heart.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 10:6–13, Paul cites Peor as an example written for our instruction, with the promise of a way of escape from temptation; Revelation 2:14, the risen Christ traces the sin at Peor back to the teaching of Balaam and warns the church; James 4:4–10, friendship with the world is enmity with God; the call to purify divided hearts and draw near; 1 Corinthians 6:18–20, flee sexual immorality, for your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit; Romans 5:1–2, through Jesus Christ we have peace with God, the lasting peace Phinehas's covenant only foreshadowed

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