

"How Not to Ruin Your Life"

Numbers 26

In Num. 22-24 we saw the pagan prophet Balaam fail time after time to cast a curse on God's people. Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam, thinking that if he could weaken the nation in the spiritual realm [i.e. weaken Israel's God], then he could defeat them on the battlefield thinking that his army could defeat Israel's army and protect their land. Ironically, God never gave Israel an order to fight Moab, they would bring their own calamity on themselves eventually in history.

Yet when we come to Ch. 25, we see that Israel was weakened and their defeat was threatened by their own sinfulness. God showed he could protect them but Israel showed their inability to trust God with their whole hearts.

How often do we read that in God's word, trust him with all our heart? To this generation of Israelites Moses would give them this charge before they got into the land:

Deut. 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Deut. 10:12 And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

God gives us His words so that if we keep them, it will be for our own good. On the contrary, if we disobey God's words or ignore them, we will experience things not for our good. And this is what we see in Num. 25. It stands in such stark contrast with Ch.'s 22-24, but let's see how this could have happened in the context.

It's important to understand bible geography here. We are told we are in Shittim or sometimes called Abel-shittim. [show map]. The Israelites have travelled around the south and east side of the Dead Sea and have now camped across from Jericho on the east side of the Jordan. It is here they will camp until they go into the land. We read this in Joshua 2 & 3,

Josh. 2:1 Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho.

Josh. 3 Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over.

Instead of travelling in the wilderness, they are now temporarily settled in enemy territory. They are in Moab and Ammonite country. Not surprisingly, they interact with these people and it proves to be a temptation and many fall into the sins of idolatry and adultery. Two serious sins.

I'm sure these Israelites didn't wake up one morning and say to themselves, 'How can I ruin my life?' and then just go and do these things. And neither do we. It happens subtly over time for many reasons. But I'm praying that no one here wants to ruin their life, so what can we learn from a

bad example (Israel) and a good example (Phinehas) on how not to ruin our lives through moral compromises?

Moses had given Israel the laws God gave to help them know He is the only God and not to bow down and worship other so-called gods, who really don't exist. Up until now, Israel hasn't had any problems with idolatry since they haven't encountered too many people and their practices. Now that they haven't moved around much and are getting comfortable in Shittim, they are presented with temptations to sin that they hadn't before. What they should have done and we all should do is,

Deal with Temptations When They Come **(25:1-3)**

Everyone is tempted to sin. Jesus was tempted to sin, but He never did. Temptations are not sin in themselves but we know when we're tempted or not. Someone has likened temptations to birds flying over your head. You can't prevent them from flying over you, but you don't have to let them build a nest in your hair! When we are tempted to sin, deal with it as quickly as possible. James said in James 1:13

1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death

We have good desires and bad desires. When temptations to sin happen we need to deal with it quickly. Since we don't know when they'll come or where they will come from, we have to be proactive, knowing they will come. That means we must

Be alert to the enemy's schemes (vv.1-2; Num. 31:16)

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ² who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods.

God's words warned Israel about worshipping other gods. This is how the 10 commandments begin. There's even a warning about what happens if you do:

Ex. 20:3 "You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,

We assume they knew the warning for bowing down to idols, but we know there are warnings that go with temptations too. Knowing them in our head doesn't always get to our heart – desires – and we commit sin. Knowledge isn't the issue; applying that knowledge to the temptation is. The enemy is sneaky and subtle. At this point we think Balaam is old news and that he's gone from the scene. But look at 31:16,

31:15 "Have you allowed all the women to live?" Moses asked them. ¹⁶ "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people.

It was Balaam's advice to have women entice the Israelites to come to worship at their Baal services and it concluded in sexual immorality. My guess is it happened over time. Simple hellos, next time some small chat. The women watch for men who show interest, etc. Maybe they talked about their gods and compare the two. I think the hook is the food. A Baal worship service involved sacrifices and eating the food. 'You mean, something other than manna? Seriously? Yes, you get to eat what is sacrificed.' So they go for the food, but the women are friendly and the wine flows freely ... and you can imagine the rest.

We have an enemy and he uses our weaknesses in his schemes to entice us. What's our weakness? What do we allow our minds to see, taste or imagine? Are we proactively in the Word of God preparing for these challenges, knowing verses like 1 Pet. 5?

⁸ *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* ⁹ *Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*

Don't deceive yourselves thinking you won't fall (v.3)

³ *So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor.*

'I'll just go for the food, and the girls are nice. I'll just ignore the Baal talk. I'm so tired of manna, anything different would be great.' But to eat at a Baal feast involves worshipping him and all of a sudden, you fall. How did I let this happen? What was I thinking? We weren't thinking enough and we weren't thinking about God's words. Listen to 1 Cor. 10:13,

1 Cor. 10:13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

There is always a way out. No one makes us sin. It's our choice. We could have said no. We maybe should have separated ourselves from the people who's words enticed us. We should have stopped the initial conversations. There's always a way out, God says. We have to make better decisions. And one way to prevent sin is to

Remind Ourselves of the Consequences **(25:4-9, 14-20)**

Remember, Satan is a liar and one of the lies we fall for is, this won't hurt anyone else. But sin always affects who we become. We become anxious. We become angry and defensive. We become liars about our sin. Which affects all those around us. So, when tempted ask yourself,

Who will we hurt that is close to us? (v.4)

Who was affected here?

⁴ *The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that the Lord's fierce anger may turn away from Israel."*

Wait a minute. Why should someone else die for their sin? Remember the exciting early chapters about numbering and camping and organizing? Leaders overall and leaders of family tribes,

etc. God is holding these responsible for the sins of the men who [the Hebrew literally reads] whored after the women. God is by nature slow to anger, but here is wrath is stirred because of the flagrant 'yoking' themselves to Baal. That's what the word 'joined' means. Yes, they were enticed and yes, they may have wanted other food but the text clearly says they deliberately worshipped Baal and went after the women.

God wants to hold the leaders accountable whom God felt failed to stress His holiness. So, others were affected by the sins of these men. But so was Moses as well. Now Moses has to be God's spokesperson and be the bad guy and announce that Israel's leaders (all 12 tribe leaders?) should be killed and their bodies publicly exposed for all to see as a severe warning that God does not take adultery and idolatry lightly.

The fierce anger of the Lord will involve a plague of death that will come on 24,000 people. But Moses failed to obey God here. Instead he orders the judges (possibly the 70 chosen by the Spirit to help Moses govern) to kill the individuals responsible, or God told Moses this as well and we just don't have a record of that. A related question we can also ask ourselves when tempted:

What other relationships will we severely damage? (v.5)

When these men sinned, they did not give any or enough thought to their families who would now lose their husband and father and grandfather. They did not think about the roles they played and the responsibilities they carried that now would become someone else's responsibility. They never thought that their actions would cause distress for their tribe or for Moses. And what kind of impact would this have on those judges who had to carry out this terrible sentence? And all the grief this would cause the whole community. All kinds of relationships, close and distant, are damaged severely, some even permanently.

When tempted ask yourself questions like this and one more:

What kind of name do we want to leave behind? (vv.6-9, 14-20)

While the whole community is grieving over the damage done by a few, a key leader from the tribe of Simeon named Zimri, brings a Midianite woman named Cozbi, into his tent and everyone is watching including Moses. Cozbi was a daughter of a leader in Midian (the Midianites joined with the Moabites in their desire to curse Israel). Zimri's father Shelumiel was the head of the Simeonites (1:6), so this explains probably why God said kill all the leaders of the 12 tribes.

Sometimes God gives us the names of people whose sins are recorded for all eternity as a warning not to be remembered for the wrong reasons. When people hear our name, do we want to be respected or ridiculed?

Prov. 22:1 A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

When tempted, think seriously about the damage our sin will cause those close to us, will make life more difficult for others and ruin our testimony as a child of God. If we know Christ and we ruin our life from poor choices, whose name gets dragged in the mud? Oh, he claimed to follow Jesus. Wasn't she supposed to be a Christian, we've said or heard people say.

Now that we've heard these warnings, let's also learn a positive way to keep us from ruining our life from Phinehas in vv.7-13:

⁷ When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand ⁸ and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear through both of them—through the Israelite and into the woman's body. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; ⁹ but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000. ¹⁰ The Lord said to Moses, ¹¹ "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them. ¹² Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. ¹³ He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites."

Phinehas does the hard but right thing; he puts Zimri and Cozbi to death with one thrust of the sword, obviously caught in the act. God commends and rewards zeal for His holiness. Our attraction to sin can be greatly reduced when

We Make God's Holiness the Foundation for Godly Choices **(25:7, 10-13)**

God said Phinehas 'made atonement' for Israel. This 'sacrifice' prevented more people from dying. Phinehas valued God's righteousness. He saw that sin offends God first and is abhorrent in His eyes. We need to have a higher view of God, who satisfies us completely, more than the temporary 'buzz' we can get from that sin. While meat sounded better than manna, the manna satisfied you. While the women showed you some attention, the consistent love of your spouse is God-honouring, which you get to enjoy God's blessing of physical unity. Baal worship may be more exciting but it leads you down a destructive path that ruins your life and many around you.

Phinehas' desire to honour God with his life resulted in a covenant of peace and a perpetual ministry. I don't think this is a new covenant God made because He had already made a covenant with Phinehas' grandfather Aaron concerning what line is the priestly line. Perhaps it would be better to see it as God assuring Phinehas' line that their family will continue to have a ministry before God.

Notice what consistent obedience to God gives you: peace and a fruitful ministry. Obedience brings peace. Disobedience brings anxiety, stress and distrust. Obedience results in fruit-bearing ministry opportunities. Disobedience severs ministry opportunities because we damage our own name and God's.

Jesus tells us these very things – joy and spiritual productivity - in John 15

John 15:7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please
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