

Title: Getting seduced - Numbers 25

Purpose: This chapter is about seduction and the power of the flesh.

INTRODUCTION

Did Balaam really go home?

Over the past two weeks we have been considering the 2-part story of Balaam and Balak and their joint attempt to get Israel cursed. This is the story that is mapped out for us in Numbers 22-24.

The very last verse of Numbers chapter 24 seems to very nicely round the whole episode off:

Numbers 24 verse 25 "Then Balaam got up and returned home and Balak went his own way."

But a question that we really ought to ask ourselves is:

Q. Did Balaam really go straight home?

- Of course, it could be that what was meant was that Balaam went to his dwelling that he was using while he was conducting business with Balak.
- It could mean that Balaam went home BUT that he went INDIRECTLY - he went VIA some other destination or destinations.

Q. Now why do I question this?

Well simply because we learn from some other scriptures that Balaam had yet more business to transact. Let me read some verses that point this out:

- Numbers 31 Verse 16 Moses here speaking about the Midianite women - he says:
"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."
- Earlier on in that same chapter: Numbers 31 we learn that Balaam is *not* at home in Mesopotamia, rather he is to be found amongst the Midianites, Verses 6-8: we read:
"Moses sent them into battle, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, who took with him articles from the sanctuary and the trumpets for signaling.

They fought against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every man. Among their victims were Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur and Reba—the five kings of Midian. **They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword.**"

- Right at the other end of the Bible in Revelation we get our last reference to the name of Balaam and in Revelation chapter 2 and verse 14 we have the risen Jesus speaking to the church at Pergamum, He says:
"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality."

Numbers 25 - a sequel

So what we learn from all this is that Balaam is very persistent - no doubt he still had his eye on getting something to show for his efforts and at least taking back some sort of financial reward.

He knows that he is not able to manipulate God into CURSING the Israelites

HOWEVER

he see that he can ENTICE the Israelites into SIN and thereby CRIPPLE THEM (it's really the next best thing)!

So this episode we are looking at today, that was read to us earlier, Numbers 25 is basically **THE SEQUEL**. Thinking of these chapters as modern day films - perhaps:

- FILM 1 - might have been called - "BALAAM - THE MAGICIAN'S CURSE"
- FILM 2 - might then have been - "BALAAM - THE MAGICIAN'S REVENGE"

Our structure

Now **last week** with Numbers 23 and 24 our focus was **very much on God** and **His divine responses** to Balaam's attempt to attach a curse to God's people Israel.

What was very clear to see was that God would not be enticed to break His covenant that He had long ago established with Israel through people like Abraham.

There are a couple of lovely comments in Deuteronomy and Joshua about God's response to Balaam:

- Deuteronomy 23 Verse 5 says: " However, the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam **but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you.**"
- Joshua 24 Verse 10 is similar, it says: "But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you against and again, **and I delivered you out of his hands.**"

But now as we head into the sequel, as we head into Numbers 25, we see that the focus is no longer upon God and what He is doing behind the scenes, off-stage - but instead the spotlight is on the Israelites, on those who are acting in the foreground on the stage.

And there are 3 things that I want to highlight as we go through this section of Scripture in relation to SIN & SEDUCTION:

#1 - THE WAY IN; #2 - THE WAY OUT & then #3 - THE WAY ON

OK so #1 then:

1] THE WAY IN - Our capacity for sin

See how the chapter opens:

(Numbers 25 Verses 1-3) "While Israel was staying in Shittim, **the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor.** And the Lord's anger burned against them."

Now let me ask you:

Q. Does this amaze and frankly baffle you?

Here are these Israelites and they are right on the very verge of going through into the promised land - they have recently

enjoyed the blessing of God by way of 3 great military victories and now they are once again plunging themselves head-long into SIN.

2 aspects of knowledge

It was Calvin that very helpfully pointed out that there are essentially 2 types of knowledge that we need in life:

- #1 - the knowledge of God
- #2 - the knowledge of ourselves

So let me ask you:

Q. Do you know yourself?

Putting that question in a slightly more focussed way:

Q. **How prone** do you feel you are to **falling into sin**?

Q. **How much capacity** would you say you have **for committing sin**?

The golden calf episode - Exodus 32

You see we can't really get away from the impact and implication of this passage by saying that this was a bit of a blip in the Israelites history (you know everyone makes a boo-boo at least once in their lives).

Q. Do you remember another episode of massive sin - not at the foot of Mount Peor but at the foot of Mount Sinai?

This was the time when they made a golden calf and bowed down to worship it as god and launched into pagan-style revelry!

It was an episode that had so many of the very same elements:

- in both - God was working up the mountain, behind the scenes for their blessing
- in both - down in the valley the people were doing their bit to enter into idolatry and immorality
- in both - the judgment of God is swift to come and many people die of the plague

Much as it is distasteful to admit - we are by nature very easily led away into sin.

Your "neighbourly" Midianite

So an obvious question we do well to ask is:

Q. How did sin find it's way in on this occasion?

Well the answer is through the Midianites.

You may remember that they had formed an alliance with Balak, the king of the Moabites, to try and find a way to stand up to the Israelites (even though the Israelites weren't planning to attack them).

And the Midianites were a people who were basically related to the Israelites through Abraham's nephew Lot - and perhaps on this account it was no very big leap for the Midianites to USE THE FRIENDLY NEIGHBOUR CARD to invite the Israelites to come and join a celebratory meal in which there would be some homage paid to the rain and fertility god (who was called Baal - and by the way this is the very first time we have the Israelites worshipping Baal) AND then as part and parcel of the celebration there would be some ritual sexual goings on.

Sin does not always come through the front door - but which ever way it comes it is just as devastating in the final analysis.

God's response swift

So God's response is not slow in coming:

Verse 4 & 5 "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.'

So Moses said to Israel's judges, 'Each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor.'"

It is a very severe judgment - but as they say the punishment must fit the severity of the crime.

Notice where the punishment seems to be **TARGETED** - it is **those people who have lead the way and blazed the trail into sin.**

Sin is *not* a "private matter"

We often think that sin is a somewhat "private matter" - but the truth is that sin is rarely private in reality:

- when we choose to do things then - even though it may be only us that is doing the deed - **OTHERS WATCH ON** and maybe then they too are emboldened to do the very same things
- also our sinful choices usually have **BAD CONSEQUENCES** and these consequences tend to **FAN OUT AND TOUCH OTHER PEOPLE.**

So for example: if I indulge a drinking habit and then get violent in the aftermath: Q. Who knows who it will be that will perhaps get the **lash of my tongue OR the blow of my fist?**

So that's the first thing this story shows us: #1 - THE WAY IN - Our capacity for sin #2 now:

2] THE WAY OUT - Our need for atonement

The bible throughout teaches us a simple truth and that is that: **"The wages of sin is death!"**

You might think that God has some big carpet in heaven under which He can sweep all the sin & injustice of this world - however, I can reliably tell you that this carpet does not exist!

If you think it through - it might on the surface sound very LOVING - BUT

Q. Where would the JUSTICE be?

Verses 6-9

The story goes on from **Verse 6 and I'll read just through to 9:**

Verses 6-9 "Then an Israelite man brought to his family a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand 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; but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000."

The sin is becoming brazen

It appears that what may have started with a few Israelites going to a few ritual meals with the Midianites has now become something **more brazen and more serious**.

This is exactly what sin is like - as we proceed into sinful ways and paths - we discover that over time it becomes easier and easier to sin. The shame that we may have once felt we no longer feel - in fact we may become brazen and even proud of what we are doing - proud of our liberal attitudes.

And this is exactly what we see with this Simeonite man and his Midianite partner.

This signals that what we desperately need:

is a way out of this SINFUL DOWNWARD SPIRAL

is a way of ATONEMENT to put us once again RIGHT WITH GOD

And this is our cue for a man who will make ATONEMENT ---> ENTER PHINEHAS (A great name - a great name to give your kid :-))

Phinehas

Phinehas was the grandson of Aaron and the son of Eleazar (one of the very first priests ordained by God to serve in the tabernacle) and what we see is a man full of zeal for God and for His honour.

To the extent that Zimri son of Salu was wicked and shameful - in the reverse direction - Phinehas was honourable and godly and full of a burning jealousy for God's honour.

He takes very dramatic action and PIERCES this couple right in the very act - and this radical act is taken as a token of ATONEMENT - and God stops the plague that he is visiting on the people.

Q. But where can we find atonement for our sin? Q. Is there a greater Phinehas for our sin and for our shame?

Well there is one who took the punishment on our behalf.

There is one who received the terrible piercing instead of us - He is the one who brings true atonement and Phinehas in the OT gives us a faint echo of this great priest who will offer the everlasting sacrifice of Himself.

Phinehas A HERO *not* THE HERO

I want us to be clear about 2 things in regard to Phinehas:

- the FIRST - is that he was a great HERO.

God greatly approved his zealous actions and rewarded him with covenant of peace and a lasting priesthood for his family - that's certainly a pretty lovely reward.

- the SECOND thing is that he was not and is not THE GREAT HERO

You see Phinehas action does not itself have the power to ATONE - God simply took his action as a TOKEN of the ATONEMENT that Jesus - the TRUE HERO would achieve.

So an important question is:

Q. Can we follow in the footsteps of Phinehas? And if so

Q. How exactly can we do this?

This brings us through to our third point (#1 - THE WAY IN - Our capacity for sin; #2 - THE WAY OUT - Our need for atonement) #3:

3] THE WAY ON - Our call to ruthless battle

Now if you ever thought that the book of Psalms were just about praises and prayers - well they are actually a whole lot more.

Psalm 106 gives us a very helpful sidelight on this episode:

Verses 28-31 read: "They yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifices offered to lifeless gods; they provoked the Lord to anger by their wicked deeds, and a plague broke out among them.

But Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was checked. This was credited to him as righteousness for endless generations to come."

SIN is like the plague

Now I think that it is fair to say that SIN is rather like the plague - when we think of SIN then it helps to think in terms of an OUTBREAK.

If you know much about cooking food, you know that there are certain things that you need to avoid if people are going to eat and not get food poisoning.

So for example, if you are handling RAW EGG or perhaps RAW MEATS you need to be careful that you don't end up getting those somehow mixed in to the food that is cooked and about to be served up.

And what that means is that you are VERY CAREFUL to minimize contact with RAW things - so in the same way we should consider SIN as something that is RAW and that should be carefully isolated, carefully washed off, carefully controlled and kept at bay.

Is SIN serious in your thinking

But let me ask you:

Q. Is SIN really that serious in your thinking?

Q. Do you really have any analogous concept of, shall we say "SIN HYGIENE"?

Perhaps, as far as you are concerned, when it comes to SIN you simply wipe it off - rather like wiping raw meat juices or raw egg on the tea towel that is used to dry up the clean plates!!

Making too much of SIN?

Perhaps, though, we are making too much of SIN.

Best thing is for us to adopt the same language and mindset that the Scripture itself uses - we are always safest when we use the same categories that the Bible employs:

- 1 Peter 2 verse 11 "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul."

SIN wars against our soul - against our very lives.

- Proverbs 4 verse 23 "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

This verse comes from the other direction - starting with our lives, with our hearts - we need to GUARD THEM, to take measure to SAFEGUARD them from what well from SIN entering in.

TAKING ACTION

Phinehas, when he saw RAW SIN coming into the camp - **he took IMMEDIATE, SWIFT ACTION.**

He dealt with it at source.

Dealing with things at source is something that happens in real life all the time.

So, for example, because we have to pay taxes and this is very important to the life of the nation, taxes tend to be deducted at source.

And similarly SIN is of such importance that we must tackle it at source, we must tackle it before it can take any root and grow.

SIN can be looked at like a very aggressive weed - it takes no time at all before it gets established and is then very hard to root it all out. (Sin is like brambles, or nettles, or grape hyacinth).

Phinehas was passionate about God and passionate about His Honour and that meant that he could *not* be dispassionate OR unmoved about SIN - he takes RADICAL ACTION.

Put it this way:

SIN must be SPEARED and *not* SPARED!

Q. How many of us have "toyed" with sin? We have given it "house room", given it a bit of leeway - only to discover that what we thought we were mastering is mastering us!!

SIN will never take second place!

Resident SIN, even if it appears DORMANT, is nevertheless growing under the soil and will suddenly appear with full and enhanced vigour and catch you by surprise.

Jesus - cut it off!

Jesus gave us clear advice in this matter of sin:

Mark 9 verse 43ff "If **your HAND** causes you to sin, **cut it off**. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if **your FOOT** causes you to sin, **cut it off**. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if **your EYE** causes you to sin, **pluck it out**. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ..."

Now, you probably realise that Jesus is not asking you to take his words in a literalistic manner, rather he is using hyperbole, or exaggeration in order to make a strong point and that point is simply that SIN:

- whether that is something we **DO** (or do *not* do) with our **HANDS**
- whether that is somewhere we **GO** that we should *not*, with our **FEET**
- whether that is something we **LOOK AT** that we should *not* (or something we **see but ignore** when we shouldn't), with our **EYES**

Then the course of action is to be one and the same - we are to CUT IT OFF or PLUCK IT OUT - sin must be pierced through the heart so that it dies OR else in the long run SIN when it is fully grown bring death (as James point out in his letter - James 1 verse 15).

John Owen - "On sin and temptation"

One of the greatest books on dealing with sin is one by **John Owen** called simply "**Overcoming Sin and Temptation**".

(John Owen, for those who have never heard the name - was one of the greatest theologians that ever lived - his books are still being read now even though they were written in the 1600's - currently I'm reading a modernised version that makes it more readable.)

J.I Packer - one of the great British theologians wrote:

*"I owe more, I think, to John Owen than to any other Theologian, ancient or modern, and I am sure I owe more to this little book **on mortification** (this is the 1st of the 3 sections in the book Overcoming Sin & Temptation) than to anything else he wrote..."*

And Owen writes:

"And is it not time for us to awake before it be too late, — to watch against the **FIRST RISING OF SIN**..."

We have to stamp out sin as soon as it starts to make it's presence known.

A prairie fire

I was reading a book with Bola the other night and it described a "prairie fire", the summer had been long and hot, the corn stubble was tinder dry and a fire had started and they had to tackle the blaze itself AND AS WELL AS THAT they had to have people working to stop any new fires breaking out as small burning fragments would be carried on the wind and start a fresh fire somewhere else.

We have to tackle SIN in a serious way, we have to STAMP IT OUT - we have to KILL IT DEAD!!

CONCLUSION

So today, this morning through this sad episode we learn some salutary but very necessary lessons about this subject of SIN:

- THE WAY IN - Our capacity for sin
- THE WAY OUT - Our need for atonement
- THE WAY ON - Our call to ruthless battle

Let us pray shall we AMEN