

God's Judgment for Sin Numbers 25 & 31

In the back of the Fellowship Hall we have a defibrillator, and if somebody goes into cardiac arrest we're supposed to use that machine to jolt them and hopefully get their heart beating again. I don't imagine it's very fun to get jolted, but if you're having a heart attack you need it to get that heart to wake up. Well today we're going to look at a story that I think will be like a spiritual defibrillator. It's a shocking story that's probably going to challenge many of us, but it might be a jolt we need to wake us up in an area where it's easy to fall asleep, especially in our culture.

This will be the last sermon in our series on the book of Numbers. There's a lot more written in the final chapters, but most of it contains instructions, information, and details specifically related to the Israelites taking possession of the Promised Land, so I'm not going to cover that or come back to it after our fall series, we'll just move on to something new. I wish this series ended on a more positive note, but that's ok. I think we need to grapple with what we encounter today because it's a big part of Israel's history at that time and we need to wrestle through it.

There is a lot of terrible sin going on in our culture, and even more that's being portrayed in our media and entertainment – greed, violence, rape, adultery, homosexuality, the murder of babies, sex-trafficking, Satanism, substance abuse, hatred, narcissism and so on. Sin is so pervasive that it seems to have become normal to us. A lot of it doesn't really register anymore. It doesn't shock us, surprise us or even draw our attention. And because it's normal, we've grown accustomed to it – there's toleration and leniency when it comes to punishment or judgment for sin. People can be very sinful and it's normal for us to think that punishments like restrictions, fines, jail, or prison are fitting and anything beyond that would be excessive.

We're going to see some terrible sins in our story today – they're similar to sins that are going on in our culture right now where there really aren't any punishments for them. As Christians we will see them as terrible and wrong, but we're used to these kinds of sins being tolerated and not punished. So

when we see God's punishment in this story, it's probably going to seem severe. It might even feel wrong and challenge what we believe about God.

It's the same kind of thing you'll encounter in the story of the flood and the conquest of Canaan. It comes up in the horrific crucifixion of Jesus. You encounter the same thing when you read about the judgment that is coming on the earth someday because of sin. And you encounter the same thing when you read about the everlasting torment of hell.

As Christians, I think it is important for us to wrestle with these things and be able to reconcile them with our understanding of God, because if we don't, we are going to have to ignore them, or we're going to think that God is way too severe and unjust in his punishment for sin. And if we ignore them we're probably not going to have a healthy fear of God or hatred for sin that we need in order to live lives of repentance. So as uncomfortable and shocking as this story may be, I think we need to grapple with it, and I pray that God will use it to do what he needs to do in our lives today.

Israel is in the final stage of their journey from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness they traveled all the way around the southern border of Edom and back up to the eastern border of Canaan. Now they are encamped in the plains of Moab, just east of Canaan and the Jordan River. (Map)

They were in that area for a few months as preparations were made to cross the Jordan and begin the conquest of the Canaanite kingdoms. This is where Balak, the Moabite king tried to destroy them by having the pagan seer, Balaam come and pronounce a curse over them. We saw two weeks ago how that backfired and God protected his people.

But after such an amazing story of God's faithfulness and protection, we are immediately faced with a story of Israel's worst failure and greatest rebellion since leaving Sinai. There are not many details about what happened because the original readers would have understood what was going on and to some extent the writer was probably following a standard of decency to not awaken sinful temptation in the readers. So I'm going to try to follow the same standard in my explanation.

Read Numbers 25:1-5.

While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. ² These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. ⁴ And the Lord said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the Lord, that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel.” ⁵ And Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor.”

So as the Israelites were waiting to enter the Promised Land, we see two waves of deplorable sinfulness that took place. It started with rampant sexual perversion. I don't know how it started, probably with a few cult prostitutes from Moab who were enticing some of the Israelite men into sexual immorality, and then as word got out the temptation spread and participation grew like a wildfire to include thousands of prostitutes and Israelite men.

This kind of behavior was widespread in that part of the world because of demented and demonic religious practices, so God had given his people commands regarding their sexual practices that would be honorable and distinct from the other nations by reserving the blessing and sacredness of sex for the marriage relationship as God designed it. One man and one woman becoming one flesh – that was God's good design.

In this story Israel was directly defying God's commands. And as bad as that was, it was not nearly as offensive and grievous as what it led to next. The perversion of the Moabite prostitutes was part of their demonic religious practices and worship. So the Israelites not only participated in sexual immorality, but also the worship of their gods, which was particularly offensive to Yahweh.

It's bad enough to give in to fleshly cravings and disobey God's commands for sexual blessing, but it's far worse to actually reject God, who miraculously brought them to Canaan to be his people, and worship the evil gods of the other nations instead. Verse 3 says they “yoked themselves to Baal of Peor” and that is an expression of grave evil. They were divorcing Yahweh and

committing spiritual adultery. That was the most offensive thing the Israelites could do in rebellion against God and the worst thing the Midianites/Moabites could entice them to do. One commentary called this “the ultimate rebellion of Israel in the desert” – worse than all their past grumblings and even Korah’s rebellion.

We’ll eventually get to Numbers 31 that shows us this was all a planned attack against Israel by the Midianites, and the one who gave them the idea was Balaam, the same pagan seer from the story we looked at two weeks ago. After leaving Balak and the failed attempt to curse Israel, he apparently went to the Midianites and convinced them to try to destroy Israel with their prostitutes and pagan worship. I think he could see enough to know how destructive that would be and was trying to turn God against them. So this whole thing was an intentional attack to try to destroy Israel in another way. It didn’t work and God would not be defeated in his purposes and plans for Israel, but it did provoke his wrath and brought staggering judgment on both Israel and Midian.

So you see in verses 4-5 that God commanded Moses to have all the men who participated in the debauchery put to death and hung in the sun before the Lord. This was a blatant and gruesome sign of his curse upon them for their wickedness. From what I read, they were to be executed and then impaled on the end of a stake coming up out of the ground to hang in the sun. This was a deliberate sign of Yahweh’s curse upon the rebels and it would have been a terrifying sight. Moses commanded the judges of Israel to carry out the order.

The rest of Numbers 25 tells the story of how one of the chiefs of Israel actually brought a prostitute, who was likely a priestess of Baal, into the camp of Israel, in view of Moses and the congregation, while this judgment was being pronounced. He brought her into his tent, though some believe he actually brought her to the entrance of the tabernacle, and the two of them defiantly entered sexual perversion right there. I think their example illustrates the spirit of defiant rebellion and wickedness that was going on. It says that Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the high priest, was filled with the righteous jealousy of God and took a spear or dagger, went into the tent and pierced them both straight through as they were committing the despicable act. It

says that Phinehas's jealousy for the Lord turned back God's wrath from consuming the people of Israel and ended a plague that had already killed 24,000 Israelites.

At the end of Numbers 25, we begin to see the judgment against Midian: *"And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁷ 'Harass the Midianites and strike them down, ¹⁸ for they have harassed you with their wives, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on account of Peor.'*"

God's wrath and judgment wasn't just for the rebels of Israel, it was for the Midianites who enticed them to rebel. God commanded Moses to kill all the Midianites because of this incident. They were "devoted to destruction," which was a divine curse placed on them because of their rampant wickedness. It was a sentence of death for the entire population to completely blot them out of existence. All men, women, and children were to be executed. This was the same curse that was already placed on all the Canaanite nations because of their grievous wickedness, and it fell on the Midianites because of what they did to try to destroy God's people.

The punishment against Midian is recorded in Numbers 31 and it is a very difficult chapter to wrestle with. An army of 12,000 soldiers was assembled to execute God's vengeance, and they went to war against Midian. They killed every single adult man along with their 5 kings, and they also killed Balaam. They were supposed to kill all the women and children at the same time, but they disobeyed and took them captive. I don't know what their intentions were. At that time, a victorious army would normally take women and children captive so their soldiers could either rape or enslave them. I hope that's not what the Israelite soldiers were planning to do, and were just being lenient, but either way, they disobeyed. And when they came back with all the captives and plunder, Moses was very angry.

He reminded them of what the Midianite women had done to try to destroy them, and he gave this command in Numbers 31:17-18: *"Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. ¹⁸ But all the young girls who have not known man by lying*

with him keep alive for yourselves.” So in order to carry out God’s judgment and devote the Midianites to destruction, all the boys and all the women who had slept with a man had to be put to death. That would effectively put an end to the people of Midian.

I think Moses decided to spare the young girls because they had not been involved in the treachery leading up to this and could not carry on the Midianite race. They also had nowhere to go, because everyone and everything else had been destroyed, so they were absorbed into Israelite families. The website “Got Answers” says that the Israelite soldiers would have been forbidden from harming them like other armies would have done. The older girls were probably taken as wives and the younger ones were taken into families, provided for, trained, and most likely worked for the families as servants.

So this story presents us with one of the most difficult issues to deal with in the entire Bible – God’s command to exterminate entire nations. With the Midianites there were 32,000 girls that survived, which helps you understand how many people were killed – well over 50,000. And you can’t ignore it or pretend it didn’t happen. And it’s a relatively small number compared to the flood, the upcoming conquest of Canaan, the Day of Judgment that’s yet to come, and all those who will face the everlasting judgment of hell.

After seeing this, I want to point out a few things I think this story should wake us up to that I think we need to remember and not become calloused to in our sin-saturated, tolerant and lenient culture.

First, God hates sin. Sin is highly offensive to God – all of it. I was just reading this week in the book The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W. Tozer and he explained that the nature of sin is choosing to be independent of God, rejecting his sovereignty and dominion and sitting on our own throne. He writes: *“A moral being, created to worship before the throne of God, sits on the throne of his own selfhood and from that elevated position declares, “I AM.” “To set our will against the will of God, to dethrone God and make ourselves supreme in the little kingdom of Mansoul, this is sin at its evil root.”*

The toddler who is loved, cared for, protected, and guided by loving parents but defiantly rejects their instruction and does the opposite instead gives us a small taste of our sin before God. It is absurdly rebellious and offensive. It's what Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden and since that time the same root of sin has spread throughout the entire human race. Romans 5:12 says *"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."* The desire to dethrone God and go our own way exists at the core of every human being, manifesting itself and growing from there. And it is highly offensive to the only true King, Creator of life, and Giver of all good things. So God hates sin.

Second, sin rightly deserves to be punished, must be punished, and will be perfectly punished because God is good, holy, righteous, and just. Romans 6:23 says, *"The wages of sin is death."* Romans 1:31-32 says that those who practice *"unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice... envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness... gossip,³⁰ slander, hatred for God, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, those who are inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless... deserve to die."*

When Adam and Eve sinned, they were removed from the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life, which guaranteed they would die. But physical death is only the beginning of judgement. The Bible tells us that at the end of this age the unrighteous will be raised to face their final judgment for sin. Revelation 20:12-13 says, *"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done."¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done."* This judgment will be righteous and just. Each person will be judged according to what they have done.

All sin is offensive and deserves to be punished, and God's judgment is righteous and just and each person will receive what is fitting for their sin. As we look at the punishment of the rebellious Israelites and Midianites, God put more than 75,000 people to death in righteous judgment for their sin. This is a story of the most highly offensive and egregious kind of sin against God, and I

believe that is why God pronounced the death sentence right then and there. Judgment for that evil and rebellion and the purification of the congregation was necessary before entering the Promised Land. I expect the plague that killed Israelites was very selective and every Midianite involved in planning and carrying out the attack against Israel was killed as well.

The rest of the Midianites that were killed, including the young boys, were included in God's judgment and curse upon the nation, and we might think that was somehow unfair or unjust, but it was not. What happened to them is the same thing that happened to all the Canaanite nations that the Israelites exterminated in the upcoming conquest. We have to understand that these nations and kingdoms were utterly wicked to the core and through and through to every last person – man, woman, and child. God had seen the wickedness growing in these kingdoms for hundreds of years until it reached a point of complete and utter evil, and he was bringing the army of Israel to execute justice and judgment. They were devoted to destruction because of how utterly sinful they were. Midian was not included in this until they did what they did and then the Lord pronounced his curse over them as well.

Most of us have never or rarely encountered the kind of evil that was permeating the Canaanite society. The Bible gives us some glimpses, but it's hard for us to even imagine – community wide rape, sacrificing and burning of children, torture, murder and mutilation of bodies, the frenzy of drunken sexual perversion... Their entire lives and communities were centered on and controlled by demon worship. The demonic evil influence was so thorough that it penetrated every fabric of their lives and society to the point that everything was evil all the time.

If you've ever been in the presence of pure, demonic evil like that, it is very disturbing, and you've had a taste of what's going on there. Canaanite life was not like what we normally experience here in Wisconsin, even though there's sin all around us as well. So after hundreds of years of enduring the increase of that kind of evil, the time had come for judgment. It was to be complete removal of demonic nations and principalities from that chosen land so that the priestly kingdom of Yahweh could come and take possession and his holiness would shine forth through them.

This is heavy stuff and necessary to understand and wrestle with... but aren't you glad this isn't the end of the story for sinful humanity? Yes, all sin is offensive to God and deserves to be punished and will be perfectly punished. *But not everyone will receive punishment for their sin.*

Because not only is God righteous, holy, and just, he is also abounding in mercy. And because of his mercy, God sent a sin bearer to suffer and die in our place and take upon himself the punishment that we deserve. That sin bearer is Jesus. The Son of God became a man in the person of Jesus. Jesus lived a perfect life and then went to the cross to suffer and die for our sins. He became sin for us. He took the curse upon himself. And when he died on the cross and said, "It is finished!" he opened the way to forgiveness and reconciliation with God for everyone who chooses to follow him and turns to him in faith. Romans 3:23-25 says: "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* ²⁴ *and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,* ²⁵ *whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*" Christ was punished in order to remove your punishment. And he rose again to give you new life – eternal life with God.

For some of us, this will lead to reverent fear and worship. We need to know these things to live our lives in the rightful fear of the Lord and to hate sin in our lives and fight against it with enduring resolve.

And for some of us, this will lead to repentance and faith. Maybe you've never realized how bad your sin is and how much you've offended God. Maybe you didn't think you needed Jesus or would eventually get to a place where you would take him seriously. Do not wait. Today is the day of salvation and forgiveness. God does not delight in punishing the wicked and he does not desire that any should perish. He is merciful and patient and has provided a way for us to not have to face the punishment and judgment for sin. But there is a day of judgment coming – so turn to him today!