

People on the Move: The Book of Numbers

Immorality on the Border

Lesson #11 for December 12, 2009

Scriptures: Numbers 25; 31; Deuteronomy 21:10-14; 1 Corinthians 10:1-14; Revelation 2:14.

1. This lesson is a discussion about the disastrous results of Balaam's work with the people of Midian and Moab and the seduction of the children of Israel leading to the death of 24,000 Israelites. It is a lesson about things that "nice people" do not talk about.
2. By the time of the "encounter" with Balaam, the children of Israel—who forty years earlier had been frightened terribly by the report of the ten spies—had seen God work with their soldiers in conquering three nations and were resting at ease in the small plain east of the Jordan River where they could look across the river and see Jericho a few miles away.
3. What were they waiting for? Was Moses busy writing the book of Deuteronomy—a summary of three sermons that Moses was asked to give to the children of Israel? Were they working out the details of the division of the land of Canaan? How did they divide up a land that none of them—except for the parts that Caleb and Joshua had "spied out"—had ever seen? They had no pictures and no maps. They had only what God may have shown Moses. Surely, God understood the hazard that was present in that setting of idleness. Why do you think He allowed them to camp there for some time? They were camped in a small flat area below the hills of Moab. It is described as a beautiful plain. Don't you think that some of the Moabites had lived there? What happened to them? On one of those hills was the high place known as Baal-Peor where there was a temple to the fertility god, Baal.
4. Read Numbers 25; 31:16. (Compare Revelation 2:14) Apparently, Balaam, still greedy for the monetary reward, traveled by himself all the way back from Mesopotamia on the borders of the Euphrates River to the countries of Midian and Moab and instructed the kings there that if they wanted to overcome the Israelites, they had to get the Israelites to sin so that their God, Yahweh, would depart from them. The words that we have concerning what happened next tell us that the men of Israel were having sexual intercourse with the women of Moab! What happened before that?
5. How much interaction did the children of Israel have with the people around them at that time? Did Balaam actually enter the camp of the Israelites and interact with them? Was that how some of the Israelites—including Moses—found out about his previous activities? What would Moses have said if he found out that Balaam was in the camp and that he had previously tried to curse and destroy the whole camp of Israel?
6. Try to imagine the camp of Israel neatly laid out in rows. Wouldn't it be true that the people had camped near each other and become very familiar with each other's movements and activities over the previous 40 years? How do you think the Midianite women were able to move in without everybody immediately knowing about it? Did they begin by inviting the Israelites to a party? Did they offer alcohol to drink? What do you think the Israelites had in mind when they began to join the Moabites in worshiping their idols? Did they rationalize to themselves that they were simply visiting the Moabites religious services? Do we ever rationalize in a similar way? What would the Israelite women say if they knew that their husbands were doing those things? More than that, those Midianite women were descendants of Abraham. Did they think that what they were doing was just fine?
7. Why were the leaders in Israel foremost in committing those crimes? Did they somehow

think that they were above the law? Were they the ones who were entrusted with interacting with all foreigners? Did they travel to the Moabite territory for some kind of commercial or diplomatic exchange? What were the major factors in breaking down the Israelites' morals? Did they recognize from the first what they were getting into? Did they have any idea what kind of "religion" the Moabites were involved in? What was the Devil doing during that time? No doubt, he was doing everything that he could think of to prevent the children of Israel from successfully entering the land of Canaan and occupying it. And if the Devil was very active in Moses' day, what about in our day? If we could manage to get our lives in order so that the Holy Spirit could use us to finish the gospel, the Devil would be finished for good! How hard is he working to prevent that?

8. What kind of substances, medications, drugs, or activities incline us to lower moral standards in our day? Do we ever observe weakening and lowering of moral standards within our church? Do we just keep quiet about it? Do we get involved?
9. We are encouraged to be "in the world" but not "of the world." How does that actually work?

At Balaam's suggestion, a grand festival in honor of their gods was appointed by the king of Moab, and it was secretly arranged that Balaam should induce the Israelites to attend. He was regarded by them as a prophet of God, and hence had little difficulty in accomplishing his purpose. [What would you do if a "prophet of God" invited you to attend a religious ceremony down the street? What kind of "holy spin" did the Devil and Balaam put on those invitations?] Great numbers of the people joined him in witnessing the festivities. They ventured upon the forbidden ground, and were entangled in the snare of Satan. **Beguiled with music and dancing**, and allured by the beauty of heathen vestals, they cast off their fealty to Jehovah. As they united in mirth and feasting, **indulgence in wine beclouded their senses** and broke down the barriers of self-control. Passion had full sway; and **having defiled their consciences by lewdness, they were persuaded to bow down to idols.** They offered sacrifice upon heathen altars and participated in the most degrading rites.

It was not long before **the poison had spread**, like a deadly infection, through the camp of Israel. **Those who would have conquered their enemies in battle were overcome by the wiles of heathen women.** The people seemed to be infatuated. **The rulers and the leading men were among the first to transgress, and so many of the people were guilty that the apostasy became national.** "Israel joined himself unto Baalpeor." [Numbers 25:3] When Moses was [455] aroused to perceive the evil, the plots of their enemies had been so successful that not only were the Israelites participating in the licentious worship at Mount Peor, but **the heathen rites were coming to be observed in the camp of Israel. The aged leader was filled with indignation, and the wrath of God was kindled.**—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 454,455 by Ellen G. White.

Was Balaam directly instrumental in encouraging the Israelites to attend a grand festival honoring the Moabite gods? How and when did the Israelites first meet Balaam? Did Balaam ever tell them the story of what he had done on the mountain tops? How did Balaam come to be regarded by the Israelites as a prophet of God? Did he just show up and claim to be a prophet of Yahweh? What dangers of a similar nature do we face today?

10. Do programs on television and the Internet come into our homes and tempt us to get involved in immoral activities? In what way would that be significantly different from what the Israelites did?
11. How long a time did it take for that decline into immorality? They were only there a few months!

I knew that the world of X-rated movies and obscene magazines had steadily deteriorated since 1970, but I was unaware of the depth of that plunge. Most... citizens are even more uninformed. They think pornography consists largely of airbrushed nudity in *Playboy* magazines. Such images are pornographic, of course, but they are not even in the same league with mainstream hard-core material sold in sex shops today. The world of hard-core obscenity has become unbelievably sordid and perverse. *Its dimensions are wretched beyond description.* Let me explain how we got into the mess we face today. One of the characteristics of human nature is a natural progression that occurs in sexual experimentation. For example, a boy and a girl may find it exciting to hold hands on the first date, but more physical contact is likely to occur on the second encounter. Unless they make an *early effort* to slow that progression, they will move systematically down the road. . . Obviously, pornographers understand that principle. They know that their products must constantly change in order to avoid boredom, and that change must always be in the direction of more explicit materials. . . That progression from soft-core to hard-core pornography got an enormous boost in 1970 when the First Presidential Commission on pornography issued its report. They said, in effect, that sexually explicit materials were a good thing and should not be inhibited in any way. *Not only did they tell us that smut was not harmful; they perceived it to be advantageous to society,* reducing sexual tensions and promising to lower the incidence of rape and child abuse. The pornography industry was delighted!—James Dobson, quoted in *Pornography, A Human Tragedy*, edited by Tom Minnery (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House publishers, Inc., 1986), pp. 33,34. (Italics supplied—quoted in *Adult Teacher's Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, p. 129)

Shouldn't all of this be a huge warning to us today? Those pornographers stand behind the first amendment. That is what protects us in our practice of religion. How can we argue against that?

12. Think of other individuals who got themselves into trouble by compromising bit by bit with sin. What about Eve? Imagine the problems that could have been prevented if Eve had said, "Let me discuss this issue with my husband and with God. If the fruit is so good for us, I will come back and take some tomorrow"! David—no doubt after marrying a number of wives—felt free to add Bathsheba to his list! Judas, after taking money from the collective purse over a long period of time, actually reached the place where he was willing to sell Jesus for the price of a slave! Think of all the evil that fills up even our daily news!
13. When the seriousness of the crime that had taken place at Baal-Peor came to Moses' attention, he spoke to God. Read Numbers 25:2-5,8-18. [Here is a bit of Bible trivia. Notice that Moses wrote that the number who died was 24,000. But in 1 Corinthians 10:8, Paul wrote that the number was 23,000, and that is what the Greek Septuagint (*LXX*) says. Does that bother you? How do you think that discrepancy came about? Didn't Paul know the Old Testament very well? Why did he choose to quote the figure from the Greek

translation instead of the Hebrew original? The ancient numbering system was very complicated. It could easily be confused. Notice that the numbers given are round numbers. This is not an attempt to give an exact number.] Does God's command to kill all of the offenders seem harsh to you? What was the "plague" that struck them? Why did God ask the Israelites to kill their fellow Israelites? Was that an attempt to impress upon them the seriousness of sin? Imagine the scenario. Your pastor gets up one Sabbath morning and announces that some of the congregation has been involved in sin, and he instructs the rest of the congregation to take everyone who has been involved in that sin out and execute each of them in broad daylight!

14. Three of God's greatest gifts—food, intimacy, and worship—are debased by Israel as they pause at the gates of the promised land. Lust, gluttony, and idolatry are substituted for the genuine, ironically fulfilling the proverb that a dog returns to his vomit (Proverbs 26:11; 2 Peter 2:22). . . The food that sick people throw up is the same food that they sat down to enjoy. A fool may argue that the two forms of food are the same—even say that the vomit is more enjoyable. How revolting. Yet, this is what Satan says when he tempts us with his substitutes. Food, which God created to enjoy and nourish, is carried to excess in gluttony. Small wonder that obesity is rampant in modern nations and growing rapidly among the young. Sexual intimacy, which God gave human beings for pleasure and creating families, is twisted into pornography and health-damaging perversion. Worship, through which God offers us a close relationship with Himself, is directed away from God to the things He created.

The link between misused sex and pagan worship is not surprising, for sex and worship are intimately related. God created human beings, who are physical in nature, with a sexual instinct to bring them close physically. This intimacy leads to new life and the multiplication of the family. God also created humans with a spiritual thirst, a longing to be close to Him. Since God is a spiritual being (John 4:23,24), our closeness to God primarily is spiritual, not physical. Worship draws us into His presence and creates intimacy with God. It is these desires for intimacy that pagan religions intuitively blended; not surprisingly, sex (physical intimacy) became involved in worship (spiritual intimacy) in the heathen religions, which worshiped the creature (physical) more than the Creator (spiritual). (See *Romans 1:24,25.*) *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Tuesday, December 8, 2009 p. 131.

15. What was the plague that was sent upon the children of Israel? (Numbers 25:8,9; 31:16) Did God send the plague? Or was it some disease contracted from their sexual activity with the Moabites? Why was the congregation standing outside the tabernacle weeping? Notice the specific activity of Phineas in boldly putting to death two people who were apparently proudly flaunting their sexual activity? (Numbers 25:6-8)
16. In this story we see some of the baleful effects of sin. Intelligent people can be so led astray that they come to believe that gross sin is justifiable. Or, they choose to ignore what they know to be right.
17. What do you think is the correct relationship between physical and spiritual intimacy? Or are they related?
18. What do you think happened next? Thousands of Israelites were killed either by the plague

or by fellow Israelites. How long did they take to recover from that disaster?

19. At what point did God instruct them to attack the Midianites? We know that both the Midianites and the Moabites were distant relatives of the Israelites. The Midianites (descendants of Abraham's son through Keturah, Midian) were actually more closely related to the Israelites than were the Moabites (descendants of Lot)!
20. Read Numbers 31:13-18. Was the disaster brought on by Balaam a sufficient reason to wipe out the Midianites? Were all the Midianites killed? Moses' wife was a Midianite! What would you have done? Notice that Moses' father-in-law was a priest of God, while other Midianites were priests of the fertility gods. Gideon was fighting the Midianites hundreds of years later! (Judges 7) What happened to the in-laws of Moses? Why were the women who had not had sexual relationships with men allowed to live? Who was assigned to determine which women qualified? Did all of those virgins brought into the camp from among the Midianites become wives of Jewish men? Were any of them consigned to serve as slaves? What did the Levites and the high priests do with their share of the women?
21. One of the greatest gifts God has given to human beings is the gift of sexuality. It's also been one of the most abused, one that Satan uses again and again, and with great success, to ensnare and ruin those who love God and want to serve Him. How can we help each other in this area? What choices can we make regarding dress, language, decorum, what we watch in the media, and behavior in general that can remove stumbling blocks and temptation in regard to a sin that has led to so much suffering among us? *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Friday, December 11, 2009, p. 94.
22. Sexual immorality is not a subject we feel comfortable talking about. Satan has done everything possible to make sex as public as he can. Sex is used to sell almost every imaginable item. How should Christians relate to the deluge of more and more sexually explicit material? It is impossible to avoid seeing it all around us. How can we draw a clear line between what is appropriate and what is not?
23. It was God's original plan that sexual intimacy would draw a man and a woman together in a binding Christian relationship of love. In that relationship, we were to learn more about God. Men need to learn some of the more feminine characteristics—caring, warmth, and softness—while women need to learn more of the masculine characteristics—strength, courage, and boldness. Thus, we are to become “one,” and thus, each of us becomes more like our Father in heaven. How far have we wandered from that ideal? God knows that this is the best setting in which we can learn real love. Think of how that has been perverted. How can a Christian help himself and those around him to have a right understanding of God's ideal?

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