

“God’s Kind of Love”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2020 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

God’s plan of salvation for the world hinges on what happens here.

Numbers 25:1-18

November 8, 2020

(Available in print form at corinthtoday.org/sermons or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

Wrong headline?

Suppose you woke up this morning and saw in the newspaper or online news feed one of the following headlines summarizing this week’s news stories:

- Americans Agree at the Polls
- CNN and Fox News to Merge
- Trump and Biden Now Best Friends

You would say, “What universe are you in?” If you heard today’s Scripture and then read my sermon title, you might have a similar reaction. How does “God’s Kind of Love” fit Numbers 25?

One of my early thoughts this week was, “Maybe we should skip this one. There are easier texts to explain in Numbers.” I didn’t go there either.

We’ll begin, as we usually do, by simply observing the text.

Zeal among the acacias

All this happened in a place called (The) “Shittim” (shuh-TEEM), which means (and is sometimes translated) “The Acacias.” This was a town, a plain, or maybe even an entire region dominated by acacia trees. The acacia thrives in tropical and subtropical climates. Its density makes it highly resistant to water and insects, and so it was the specified wood for construction of the tabernacle posts, frames, altar, and even the ark

of the covenant. Its wood was so valuable that when the tabernacle was being built the offering options included acacia wood along with gold and silver (Exodus 35:24).

Close to Shittim is Peor, the peak where the Moabite king Balak had met Balaam. For the third and final time, Balak tried to coax the fortune teller into cursing the Israelites, clearly visible in the acacia grove below (Numbers 23:27-29). Balaam had not only participated in, but led the sacrifices to the god of that mountain.

This acacia grove was located to the east of the Jordan River, and would be the forty-second and final recorded encampment of Israel between slavery in Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. Here they would take their post-wilderness census (Numbers 26) and hear a long series of farewell speeches by Moses (Deuteronomy). The second census is remarkably similar to the first one, except for one tribe. The tribe of Simeon lost about 27,000 men during the wilderness years.

This story isn't recorded in chronological order, so let me lay it out for you.

- The Israelite men “began to indulge in sexual immorality” with the women of Moab (1).
- The women of Moab invited the Israelite men not only to their beds but to their shrines for feasts and worship (2).
- The LORD’s anger blazed at the Israelites because they “yoked themselves” to this god – Baal of Peor (3). “Baal” means “Lord,” and Bible readers know this so-called “god of fertility” would prove to be a snare to Israel across the generations.
- Verse 18 says this was an act of deliberate deception. The women were their Trojan horse. Seeking divine help through Balaam didn’t neutralize the threat posed by the Israelites, so the Moabite and Midianites worked with Balaam to come up with Plan B.
- Because of the immorality, participation in pagan festivals, and resulting spiritual, physical, and political alliance, the LORD told Moses to hold the leaders of the people responsible – to execute them and to shame their bodies posthumously in order to alleviate his rage (4).
- It doesn’t seem that Moses obeyed. Instead, Moses told Israel’s judges to execute the individuals who had actually committed the acts (5).
- It doesn’t seem this execution was carried out either, so the LORD sent a plague that killed 24,000 people (9). It seems that God intended this plague to exterminate the entire nation (11).
- Perhaps in their grief over lost loved ones, or maybe in repentance, “the whole assembly” of Israel gathered at the entrance to the tent of meeting, weeping openly (6b).
- While this was happening, one prominent Israelite, Zimri, who headed the tribe of Simeon (14), paraded a Midianite princess named Kozbi (15) past the entrance of the tabernacle in front of Moses and in full view of

the weeping crowd into his own tent (6a). This wasn't just a crime of passion; this was a blatant act of defiance.

- Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron the high priest, followed the scandalous, arrogant couple into their tent, caught them in the act, speared through the back of the man into the belly of the woman, killing them both (7-8). At this point the plague stopped.
- God honored Phinehas for his zeal, declaring that this human sacrifice atoned for the sins of all the people, and that as a result Phinehas' descendants would "have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites" (13).
- God also told Moses that the Midianites, religious, ethical, and political co-conspirators with the Moabites, would pay for their alliance with the Moabites and become enemies of Israel (16-17). This played out in Numbers 31, which records Israel's last military triumph under Moses, the complete defeat of five Midianite kings. The Israelites also killed Balaam for his role in Peor (31:7-8).

A pivotal moment

That's the "What?" Let's move to the "Why?" If this isn't a story about the impulsive rage of a jealous God, what is it?

By now Israel should have learned the lessons of the wilderness – lessons of faith and obedience summarized in the two tables of the Ten Commandments – Love God and love your neighbor. Even when life is hard and resources are scarce, even when you have to wait for God to answer your prayers, when you're stuck in the same place for who knows how long or you're on the move but you don't know where you're going or how long it will take to get there, Worship God exclusively and treat others with honor, integrity, and faithfulness. And don't covet what's not rightfully yours.

For forty years, Israel's faith and obedience had been tested by scarcity and delay. Life was dry in more ways than one – routine, boring, and hard. Their signature sins were grumbling and complaining. Now, at the border of Canaan, the Israelites faced new temptations unlike any they or their ancestors had known for centuries. This was parallel to a kid raised in a small town with reclusive parents who homeschooled their children in the mountains with no social interaction, not even church, and no television or internet – and then sent them off to a party school in the big city.

The Israelites are now surrounded by people who worship gods by all different names, and the people worshiping them have a lot more fun doing so. Their food is extravagant, especially in comparison to manna, and the Moabites have no parallel to the Ten Commandments. Their "worship shrine" is essentially a brothel.

Some of the men of Israel sneak away to nocturnal revelries, then recruit others to go along. Before long a growing number are fully engaged in nightly rituals involving delicious foods and spirits, provocative shows followed by unbridled passions, all integrated with bowing down to the gods of the Moabites and Midianites. The married men are coming home in the wee hours of the morning to wives asking, “Where have you been?” “Oh, just having fun with the guys.” Some of them, married or not, begin intermarrying with these foreign women.

Now the nation itself has become entangled with the excesses, the immorality, and the worship of these pagan people. God had told Abraham that this land wouldn’t be theirs for 400 years because “the sin of the Amorites was not yet full” (Genesis 15:16) – meaning that God would wait until their pagan rituals were so bad that there would be no question the right thing to do was to extinguish those cultures entirely. Most egregiously, some of them even sacrificed their children to the gods.

Now, at their first exposure to these alternate worldviews, the Israelites instead of confronting or even avoiding them, are indulging. Behind the scenes Balak and Balaam have decided if they can’t curse the Israelites, they will allure them into a treaty of endorphins – those feel-good hormones that involve food, sex, and revelry. The lure overrules the command of God to possess the land.

What choice does God really have than to deal with this matter boldly, decisively, and memorably? What would be the consequence if God had done nothing about this? It may seem at first trivial, but the parallel would be if a parent caved in the first time a toddler threw a tantrum, took no action the first time an 8-year-old was caught bullying a friend, looked the other way when their 14-year-old spent the night in the embrace of a 20-year-old lover, or “hoped for the best” when their 16-year-old overdosed on a bottle of OxyContin?

Israel has rushed headlong into behavior that will destroy it more quickly and irreversibly than the loss of half its soldiers in any battle. You may say, “What happens here is not exactly like putting a toddler in timeout or sending a teenager to drug rehab. No parent would be justified in letting their anger blaze out of control like this.”

True, but take into account some additional factors. First, this is a pivotal moment not for one child, but for an entire nation. The nation isn’t just any nation; it is God’s redemptive instrument. God will save the world through this people. The entire Old Testament is their story, and the New Testament (the story of Jesus) expands their story to a story of salvation for every tribe and nation in every age until the end of the world. God’s plan to bring salvation, peace, justice, love, and hope to broken humanity hinges on a holy nation taking possession of this central spot on the globe.

To be sure, there will be many ups and downs in their story, but this is their Normandy invasion, only bigger-times-ten in its impact from a biblical perspective. Had God done nothing, Israel is simply assimilated and integrated into every bloodline,

immoral practice, and false god in the Levant. In that scenario, all of God's promises to Adam, Abraham, and Moses fade into irrelevance. We never have a King David or temple or Isaiah or Christmas or Calvary or Great Commission or Pentecost or Paul or you and me worshiping this God and finding hope and promise through Jesus Christ.

With those consequences, do you still think God was overly zealous in taking out a few thousand Simeonites, with one particular couple singled out for a most dramatic display of justice? I don't. The plan of salvation for global billions across the millennia is contingent on the forward movement of this plan for Israel to live as a separated people in this new land.

God's kind of love

So let me explain that sermon title. This text offers a rather obvious platform to talk about how not to read the Bible. You don't read every story in the Bible, even stories of commendable acts, as models for our behavior. You don't say, "Well, God's anger blazed, so my rage is justifiable. Nor can you extrapolate that because God sent a plague in Numbers 25 the coronavirus is God's punishment. You have to look at this text in its historical context. I see a number of possible angles.

Godlikeness. We could point out that Phinehas is honored for zealous jealousy. In this way he is striving to be God-like. Jealousy is not always a bad thing. Jealousy that emerges from insecurity is very different from jealousy that is rooted in an exclusive relationship. Remember, we're dealing with the "progress of redemption" here. We're talking about a story from 3500 years ago in a very different culture and time. Don't judge this act through a modern lens. Instead, place yourself in this pivotal moment, with salvation history on the line. Phinehas gets God at this particular moment. This must be stopped because God loves this people and the world so much.

Cravings. It would be appropriate, I think, to talk about the false sense of fulfillment of our lusts – lusts of the body or the mind or the pocketbook. "It can't be wrong if it feels so right" is a lie from the pit of hell. Many a man and woman have been blinded by the surge or hormones so that they can't see or feel anything except what feels good in the moment. Coveting what rightfully belongs to someone else or what lies outside the boundaries God has given will destroy us. I wish I could tell you that I know this warning doesn't apply to anyone listening to me, but I know better. In the short term, endorphins are endorphins whether the relationship is holy or not. It's quite possible that the exploitive or destructive relationship or addiction might produce more of a high. The boundaries for physical pleasure or financial gain must be God's boundaries.

Tough love. We could also talk about the need to make hard choices when you're a parent, a teacher, a coach, a pastor, a political leader, or anyone else placed in a position of authority. You don't have to go to the javelin in the tent or the plague to illustrate that giving grace doesn't necessarily mean you "forgive and move on." Some

of you may right now be in that very difficult position of deciding whether this moment is when a child or a spouse or an employee or a friend needs a consequence that will prompt, "That's so unfair! Why can't we just pretend it never happened and start over?" In those most difficult moments where punishment or intervention or even severance is on the table, this text teaches that sometimes the hard choices are absolutely necessary. Pastorally I would always advise getting some godly counsel before you move ahead. It's why God has given the body of Christ.

Love. I really think the most important lens through which to see this story is the lens of "God's Kind of Love." There's a profound and consistent biblical principle that sin leads to death, and that atonement must be made for sin. That principle is behind the animal sacrifices in the tabernacle and later the temple, but those sacrifices are always situational and have to be repeated perpetually throughout the generations.

In this incident we have a human who dies. He has blatantly joined himself to the enemy – openly defying God's laws. And it is only his death that stops the plague from destroying the entire community. His is a literal, dramatic, visual death at the hands of the high priest, but it's described with the words "covenant" and "atonement." The one, though not innocent, nevertheless bears the corporate sin of all the people. One dies to save a nation from their sins.

In that way, God offers a terrifying but beautiful display of his love. Because centuries later, when neither law nor priest judge nor king nor poet nor prophet has succeeded in atoning for the sins of the people and turning the hearts of God's people toward him, God offers the ultimate and final atonement – himself. God enters our world and in one man, Jesus Christ, fully accepts all the consequences of the entire world in his body and soul. One dies to save a world from their sins.

God will say, "In my zeal, I will exercise all the 'tough love' you deserve on my Son." Then I will raise him so that neither death nor sin need ever have the last word.

The remembrance of that atonement brings us to this table today. It's an act of eternal grace. It's free, but it's not cheap. It's available to all, but we must receive this gift by faith and embrace the substitution of his death for ours. We come to him, overwhelmed by his act of ultimate sacrifice, and in exchange give him not only our faith but our pledge of obedience to his way, always growing in our love for God and for neighbor, never excusing ourselves. And we don't give up or quit until this Gospel is preached to every person on the globe. That's God's kind of love. Amen.