

For the Journey - Warning

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Date: 04 June 2023

Preacher: Andy Meadows

[0 : 00] The first reading is Psalm 46, which can be found on page 566 of the Church Bible. That's page 566. God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives away, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. God will help her when morning dawns.

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter. He utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes war cease to the end of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear.

[1 : 14] He burns the chariots with fire. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. The Lord of hosts is with us.

The Lord of hosts is with us. To Baal of Peol. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. 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.

And Moses said to the judges of Israel, Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peol.

And behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

[2 : 24] When Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman, through her belly.

Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. And the Lord said to Moses, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy.

Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.

The name of the slain man of Israel, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri, the son of Salu, king, chief of a father's house belonging to the Simeonites.

And the name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cosby, the daughter of Zur, who was the tribal head of a father's house in Midian. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Harass the Midianites and strike them down, for they have harassed you with their wives, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor and in the matter of Cosby, the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on account of Peor.

[4 : 15] Good morning. My name is Andy. I'm one of the assistant ministers here at Grace Church. Great to have you with us. In preparation for this sermon, I did look at home in some of my children's Bibles.

Couldn't find the story. That was no help. So let's pray. All scripture is God breathed.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this chapter in numbers. We thank you that it's from you. Please help us to listen to you now. Amen.

We'll do... There's an outline where we're going on the server sheet, and it should be coming up on the screen as well. I wonder if you've heard of the Museum of Failure.

It's a travelling exhibition that started in Sweden in 2017. It's now in New York. And it features a lot of... A collection of failed products from the past.

[5 : 15] So I've got some up here. So Colgate's beef lasagna. That failed, surprisingly. Not sure you want to eat that. Harley Davidson aftershave.

That failed. And quite famously, Google Glasses, where you could go online just on your glasses. It didn't work. It failed. And the idea is that you go to this museum, and you see how all these failures from the past, and you learn from them in order to succeed in the future.

Like if you're a company that makes toothpaste, don't try and make ready meals. But this notion of learning from others' mistakes, I guess that happens everywhere in life, doesn't it?

So in sport, studying how the others have played against the next opposition, although that did not help Manchester United yesterday. Or in terms of just simple things like traffic, like don't try or try and avoid driving down to London from the Lake District on a hot day with young children, on a train strike day.

Learn from me. And when it comes to living as God's people, learning from the mistakes of others is how the Apostle Paul reflects on Israel's journey to the Promised Land.

[6 : 37] So in 1 Corinthians 10, he tells the Corinthian church this, Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

Do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written that people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did.

And 23,000 fell in a single day. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. Now there have been some positives in the book of Numbers, but Paul says we are to look at these episodes really as exhibits in the Israel Museum of Failure.

Examples to learn from. But it's stronger than that because they're also warnings to pay attention to. Taking care as we ourselves journey to our Promised Land in the new creation.

[7 : 53] So what then are we to learn from this dark episode in Israel's history? Well, firstly, then, on the handout on the screen, our capacity to be seduced away from the Lord.

Our capacity to be seduced away from the Lord. We left off the book of Numbers with things looking promising. Last week we saw that God is for his people.

Balaam couldn't get God to abandon or curse his people. And then they had three battle victories under their belts in chapter 24. We might have think, well, we've left the rebellion days behind.

We're now cruising on the open road to Canaan. But then chapter 25 comes as an emergency stop. Have a look down at verse 1. While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.

These invited the people to sacrifices of their gods. And the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

[9 : 01] In the Ten Commandments that God's people were given just after they were rescued, they'd been plainly told that they must not acknowledge any god but the Lord.

You shall not bow down and worship them, God said. Yet those are the very words we hear in verse 2. They bow down to the gods.

So this is not a minor lapse or stumble. This is not even having a foot in both camps. This is complete apostasy.

A complete turning away from the true and living gods and joining together with this false god. It's a transfer of loyalty. It's a transfer of worship.

And later in Numbers, we find out this is Balaam who actually conjured up this plan. So I'll put a verse on the screen. Numbers 31, 16. Behold, these, on a Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor.

[10 : 06] So the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. The king of Moab couldn't get the Lord to abandon his people. But he could get the people to abandon their Lord.

I guess we read this in 2023. It feels so alien, so kind of, this is such an Old Testament problem.

None of us have little statues that we bow down to. We're not going to go to the market and buy a little statue of Buddha, maybe, in our houses. Maybe we're not tempted to wander down to the mosque on Friday and say the Shahada.

But we are tempted to flirt with other kinds of idolatry. Because idols and false gods aren't necessarily things that we physically make and bow down to.

They can be anything that we have our complete and ultimate trust in. The reformer Martin Luther said, A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need.

[11 : 11] That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is really your god. I don't know if you've read any of the Lord of the Rings books or sat through all nine hours of the films.

Well done if you have. The central plot device is Dark Lord Sauron's Ring of Power, which corrupts anyone who tries to wear it.

They become increasingly enslaved and addicted to wearing it. They must have it. Like Gollum the creature. I'm not going to do the accent. But the Gollum the creature going around my precious in his hunt for the ring.

Well that ring is like an idol. A false god. Something our heart clings to and relies on for complete trust and security. And so while traditional idol worship still occurs in many places in the world, internal idol worship is universal throughout every age.

Consider the Apostle Paul's words in the New Testament in Colossians 3, 5 on the screen. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry.

[12 : 32] Notice all those things are called idolatry. We may not be tempted to worship a metal idol in a temple. But we will be in danger of being drawn to live for these mental idols that our society values so highly.

The gods of materialism and greed seen in the chase for money and possessions. I must have it. Careerism chasing to the top at all costs.

Narcissism through the pursuit of health and beauty. Hedonism the pursuit of pleasure. Now there's nothing wrong with earning money and doing well at work but like Lord Sauron's ring they can get such a hook on us.

That's something we must have at all costs even if it means disobeying gods. And like Israel here there's a real danger of us being seduced away from Jesus altogether.

And calling a spade a spade numbers 25 shows us clearly that sex can so easily do that. Balaam knew exactly what he was doing here.

[13 : 47] I can think of lots of friends maybe you can too who have been seduced away from following Jesus altogether or failed to commit to Jesus in the first place because of sex and relationships used wrongly and not willing to give something up or to say no to.

And so while as Christians we aren't to cut ourselves off from the world when it comes to being seduced away from the Lord on our journey to the new creation all of us are in the category of vulnerable.

There will be different things at different stages for different people in life but we are all vulnerable. Now if you wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus here this still I guess feels like an alien concept worshipping false gods and idols but perhaps can you put your finger on what you're living for what is it that if you got means you'd be ultimately happy?

Where do you place your ultimate love trust and security? When I was younger I went through a bit of a Bob Dylan phase it didn't last long he wrote a song called Gotta Serve Somebody here are the lyrics You may be an ambassador to England or France you may like to gamble you may like to dance you may be the heavyweight champion of the world you may be a socialite with a long strith of pearls but you're going to have to serve somebody it may be the devil it may be the Lord but you're going to have to serve somebody all of us are made to serve somebody all of us are made to worship Paul, the apostle Paul explains in Romans 1 that sin is exchanging worship of God for worship of something else a created thing all of us serve somebody all of us live for something and what are we to learn from this exhibit in Israel's

Museum of Failure well we are to be up front be honest with ourselves about our capacity to be seduced away from the Lord well next we see what else we are to learn our need for atonement through someone of the Lord's character the Lord takes this behaviour from his people very seriously have a look at verse 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 and Moses said to the judges of Israel each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal pure God is angry that's perhaps an understatement really so the Lord gave orders for the tribal chiefs to be executed as an aside I guess that can challenge our thoughts of what God is like yet we are repeatedly assured in the Bible that God's judgment is proportionate however much we struggle with that and it shows us just how serious this is and just how holy God is but it seems that Moses goes a step further in verse 5 calling for an execution squad and everyone involved perhaps that is why there is a plague against the Israelites we're not sure yet we're not told whether this sentence was carried out because we're interrupted with a story within a story verse 6 and behold one of the people of Israel came and brought a

[17 : 43] Midianite woman to his family in the sight of Moses in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel while they're weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting we can imagine the scene can't we hordes of people gathered together maybe Moses is the chief giving a briefing announcing the daily death toll and maybe the chief medical officer then comes on and explains what's causing this plague to spread worshipping Baal and there's weeping at loved ones gone but probably more so weeping over the sin of the nation and that they have offended the Lord and that his anger is against them so you've got that scene and then there's Zimri and we find out later his name he's a son of a chief who chose this moment to bring his new Midianite girlfriend home to meet the family but he's not that subtle he does it in front of everyone the Lord has just announced a death sentence against his dad but he just doesn't care he's brazenly flaunting his sin before the people before God and taking his mistress to bed in full view of the nation totally indifferent to what God says no shame whatsoever but Aaron's grandson

Phineas he does see the shame and he takes action himself verse 7 when Phineas the son of Eliezer son of Aaron the priest saw it he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them the man of Israel and a woman through her belly thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped nevertheless those who died by the plague were 24,000 it's a graphic scene isn't it Phineas takes a spear he follows the couple in a tent spearing them in the act so to speak again we might find that a bit harsh but before we go down too far that line we have to read the commentary on this action for starters it stopped the plague that is a positive thing and then we get the Lord's direct comment in verse 10 onwards so verse 10 and the Lord said to

Moses Phineas the son of Eliezer son of Aaron the priest has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel and that he was jealous with my jealousy among them so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy therefore say behold I give to him my covenant of peace and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel God commends and actually rewards Phineas for his action here why he was jealous with my jealousy Phineas shares the Lord's jealousy he shares the Lord's character he commends Phineas for being like him and Phineas his action was commended also for his effect by thrusting the spear through the pair he made atonement for the people of Israel verse 13 and atonement simply means to turn away

God's anger described in verse 10 that is what the people desperately need they needed God's judgment to go somewhere else they needed someone else to pay one of my old housemates was not the most organised of people to say the least got a knock on the door one day and it was the bailiffs I think it was unpaid parking tickets or something like that it was quite clear from my conversation with them he wasn't in that somebody needed to pay somebody needed to pay the debt and I definitely knew it wasn't going to be me someone needed to settle up it wasn't just going to go away he did settle up he was fine but in numbers 25 somebody needed to deal with the debt of Israel's sin the Lord's anger wasn't just going to go away on its own atonement needed to be made that's what we have in the sacrificial system in the

Old Testament atonement needs to go somewhere God's anger needs to go somewhere that's why they sacrificed in the Old Testament and in this action we also see the mercy of God because Phineas did just that he shared the Lord's holy zeal and jealousy and made atonement and just as the hope for Israel was in the zeal and jealousy for God of another so the hope for all of us is the zeal for God of someone else and as the Bible story continues we see that the Lord Jesus is the man with that holy jealousy and zeal for God that we need he was zealous for the Lord's name on one occasion Jesus was in the temple at God's home as it were and there he found in the place where God should have been worshipped people selling religious bric-a-brac fleecing each other for profits and so he got a whip and he whipped all the animals out of the temple and turned over all the tables and then a verse from the

[23 : 44] Old Testament was quoted in John chapter 2 verse 17 zeal for your house will consume me Jesus was completely overtaken like Phineas for the passion for God for the honour and his glory and it was his zeal and passion for the Lord that led him to make atonement not just for a pocket of people but for all of us and not by thrusting a spear through others but by dying on a cross where a spear was thrust through his own side and whereas Phineas's action turned away God's anger temporarily Jesus turns away God's anger permanently as the great high priest for all those who turn and trust in him put a verse there on for Hebrews therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of

God to make propitiation that's atonement for the sins of the people I guess perhaps when we think about and bring to mind things that seduce us away from the Lord's past sins we feel shame and guilt in those moments we can look to the Lord Jesus and know that our sin has been atoned for my shame and guilt has been nailed to the cross my debt has been paid again if you wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus today then I hope you can agree that our world is crying out for justice and it is a good thing that God won't just look at the world and just sweep all the wrongdoing under the carpet it's a good thing that wrongdoing and sin will be punished but it gets uncomfortable when it comes to ourselves because all of us deserve

God's justice all of us have exchanged God for something else all of our sin must be paid for and so may I gently ask who will pay for our sin will it be you or will it be Christ and we're promised that when we do turn to Jesus we have peace with God and a place in the promised land to come not because we're good enough people but because Jesus took the spirit of God's anger for us and so we are to praise God for his mercy on us that Jesus makes full atonement for the sin of his people and yet we mustn't overlook the warning here and from where we started which is how the apostle Paul teaches this passage when we see 1 Corinthians 10 or numbers 25 through the lens of 1 Corinthians 10 we come out with the message don't be like them don't be like them so in the last few minutes please turn with me to 1 Corinthians 10 in your Bibles in my

Bible it's 1 1 5 3 1 1 5 3 it's striking isn't it that God had us in mind when Moses wrote the book of numbers here in this room today Paul writes in this letter to those who are already calling themselves Christians warning them from Israel history that they cannot walk safely down the tightrope of sin and so verse 8 is clear commenting on this on numbers 25 we must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did Paul wants us to see what happened to them and take drastic measures to avoid ending up like them so in one sense we are to share the same attitude as Phineas not that we all turn up here next week with a spear and start stabbing people who we think are offending gods that would get messy very very quickly but instead by not tolerating unrepentant sin within the church perhaps to risk friendships for the sake of saying to one another we're all sinners but what you're doing is not okay

God's honour matters and you're doing yourself and other people harm and as a last resort we are to use appropriate church discipline as the Bible outlines because God's honour matters don't be like Israel then the take home point comes in verse 12 of all these examples therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall Paul is saying if you think you're fine learn from Israel's museum of failure now his intention is not to undercut our assurance of our salvation through Jesus the Bible gives us different messages for people in different spiritual states and attitudes there is great comfort in the Bible for those who are battling to live for Christ and yet there is a very different message for all those on the one hand who claim to be Christian but are making no effort to fight sin and presuming on God's promises that everything will be fine

[29 : 35] Paul wants us to look back on numbers and to see that if we ignore the warnings and travel into the waters of sin then spiritual shipwreck awaits well how then do I take heed how do I row back by resisting temptation and repenting and believing so verse 13 no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man God is faithful and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it therefore my beloved flee from idolatry as we've said over our time in numbers we are in a similar position to Israel and we are on a journey from rescue to the new creation the promised land but we are in a better situation because we travel as fully forgiven people who have God's

Holy Spirit within us and because of the Holy Spirit within us we can say no to sin we are not we are to use a spear but not to kill other sinners but to kill our own sin as Paul said in Colossians 3:5 I wonder if he had numbers 25 in mind when he wrote that verse puts in to death so continuing the theme in numbers 25 perhaps some of us need to make more drastic measures in the area of sex but I imagine some here are genuinely battling in the area of sex or other areas we're only too aware of our vulnerability where we are to throw ourselves on the mercy of God for forgiveness that when we repent we can be reminded us sin has been atoned for in a daily battle with sin we can remember that our temptation is not unique to us and through the Holy Spirit's help we can say no in the battle inch by inch we can gain ground we are to learn from the

Israel's museum of failure well later on in our service we are going to share the Lord's supper this won't be right for everyone but for those of us who trust in Jesus we take the bread and the wine as symbols of Jesus' atoning death saying I need it and when we do so we can thank Jesus for his zeal for his jealousy that consumed him to the point of death going to the cross to make a sacrifice for us let's pray together heavenly father we thank you for the Lord Jesus who shared your holy character the zeal and passion to make atonement for us to turn aside your anger as he died on the cross to take that anger on himself please help us father to be up front with ourselves and others about where it is that might seduce us away from following

Jesus altogether please help us to take heed from this warning but to know the comfort of sins forgiven through Jesus amen down to our God listen love to ■stad said