

'Flee Idolatry'

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[0 : 00] And please turn your Bibles back to Numbers 25. As Andrew said, it's a difficult passage. I wonder when you were about to say, more important that we understand it so that we may understand what God wants in our lives.

Now imagine, imagine someone you love, your spouse, perhaps your child or a beloved friend. You love them so much that one day you want to do something for them.

So you decide to cook for them a five-course Indonesian banquet. Indonesian food is very elaborate and time-consuming, so you free up one whole day for that.

And then you go to a specialized Indonesian grocery shop to source the exotic ingredients. Actually, you can never find all the ingredients you need from just one shop, so you drive around Melbourne to find all the authentic ingredients which are not cheap.

You're willing to do that, of course, because you love this person so much. And then you go home and you spend hours trying to make this the best meal ever for the person you love.

[1 : 40] And when you're finished, you taste it. It's great. It's the best food you've ever tasted, if you may say so yourself.

And you ask your Indonesian neighbor to taste it, and they're shocked. It's even better than my mom's cooking, they said. Great. Now you're ready to give it to the person you love.

And the person comes, tastes your food, spits it out, throws the plate across the room, and shouts, bleh, what is this?

I'd better just go with my friend to Maccas instead. This is not a real story, by the way. It might have been inspired by one.

How would you feel? Sad, perhaps? Angry? Frustrated? Disappointed? Humiliated?

[2 : 43] Dishonored? Dishonored? Perhaps if you come from certain cultures, honor is a big thing.

Well, that's what we see in this passage. Previously, we've seen how determined God was to bless Israel. He even worked through a dodgy pagan seer, Balaam, and his donkey, to bless them three times.

On top of all he had already done, freeing them from Egypt, feeding them manna, giving them water from rocks, and giving them victories. God insists on loving and blessing Israel, but what does Israel do towards God?

This, verse 1 to 3. While Israel was staying in Shittim, that's in the plains of Moab, so straight after the event with Balaam, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifice to their gods.

The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord's anger burned against them.

[4 : 05] God is so determined to bless the Israelites, while on the other hand, the Israelites commit sexual immorality with Moabite women, and then make sacrifices to the Moabite gods, eat their sacrificial meals, and worship them.

In verse 3, they yoke themselves to Baal. It's the language of adultery, meaning they're coupled with Baal.

God loves them so much that He was giving them rich blessings, but they run to other gods and prefer their meals. That's like spitting out a five-course Indonesian banquet and going out to get junk food instead.

Now, Baal, the idol that they worshipped there, was the Canaanite god of fertility.

He was believed to cause rain, which was important for the land to produce fruit. But Baal was worshipped in horrible ways.

[5 : 20] The worship of Baal involved child sacrifices, temple prostitution, and as depicted in the story of Elijah, sometimes Baal worshippers practiced self-harm.

The Israelites choose this god over Yahweh. Is Yahweh not good enough for them?

Yahweh has caused the Israelites to be numerous. That's fertility. And even in the wilderness, He provided manna and water from rocks. You know how many rocks there are in the wilderness? Plenty. That's miraculous fertility. God has promised a fertile land with giant grapes, remember? That's fertility for free. No child sacrifice is necessary. But the Israelites choose this god.

[6 : 24] No wonder God is angry in verse 3. The Lord's anger burns against them. And later on in verse 8 to 9, it revealed that with that anger comes a plague that kills thousands of people.

Idolatry is so serious for God that the punishment is death. So verse 4 to 5, the Lord said to Moses, take all the leaders of these people, these people, the people that committed idolatry, 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 people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor so that the plague stops. Now this might offend us modern people.

We don't like capital punishment, do we? So how might we understand this? Well, I think the rest of the passage gives us explanations of the severity of the crime and the reasons why death was needed.

So first, the severity of the crime in verse 6 to 9. Then an Israelite man brought into the camp 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.

[8 : 03] 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 into both of them right through the Israelite man and into the woman's stomach. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped, but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000.

While the people are crying at the entrance of the tabernacle because the judgment was announced, one of the perpetrators brings a Midianite woman into the camp right in front of everyone, right in front of Moses, to have sex with her.

This is public, defiant rebellion. This idolatry is done defiantly without any remorse. This guy is basically saying, oh well, if I'm about to die anyway, I'm going to commit the crime one more time before I die.

There's no saying sorry. There's no repentance. There's no second thoughts. This is similar to what the book of Revelation describes about what happens on the last days, right?

[9 : 24] People see warnings of judgment, but instead of repenting, they go on rebelling. And also pay attention to verse 6.

The man brings in a Midianite woman. But hang on, in verse 1, aren't they committing adultery with the Moabites?

Why is there a Midianite here? Well, remember that in chapter 22, the Moabites are working with the Midianites to destroy the Israelites.

Israelites. And later on in chapter 31, this is revealed. They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident so that a plague struck the Lord's people.

This crime has been orchestrated by Balaam. Balaam could not pronounce curses to the Israelites so he gave the Moabites and the Midianites an idea to bring the curses themselves through leading the Israelites to idolatry.

[10 : 38] You see, the severity of the event, this is not just the accidental idolatry of one person. It's a national crisis that is done defiantly by the people and caused deliberately by enemies.

It's an attempt to nullify God's blessings that were already pronounced, an attempt to undermine God's deliverance of His people. Seen from that perspective, the deaths that God demands are actually a way for God to keep blessing the people.

The people that bring idolatry, the traitors, the spies, if you like, have to be executed before the idolatry spreads and the entire nation walks away from God's blessings.

God wants to keep blessing them. Now, verse 10 to 13. The Lord said to Moses, Phineas, son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am.

I did not put an end to them in my zeal. Therefore, tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of lasting priesthood because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.

[12:10] here a reason is given why death is required. Idolatry is dishonoring to God.

When the Israelites commit idolatry, it is as if they are saying that all of God's blessings and goodness are not sufficient for them, so they chase something else.

That the all-glorious, beautiful God, the most glorious in the world is not beautiful enough for them, so they chase something else. That despite freeing them from slavery, pardoning their rebellions, how many times did they rebel?

Many. Blessing them, like last week, despite feeding them, God is not good enough for them, so they chase something else. That God's way of holiness expressed in his law, which protects women and children and provides justice for them, is not better than Baal's way, which made women temple prostitutes and made children sacrifices for the altar.

Idolatry is like choosing rubbish over God's expensive banquet, humiliating, dishonoring.

[13:41] And in the ancient world, dishonoring a king was not a small thing. If you treated the king like a peasant, if you publicly rejected his authority, if you gave your allegiance to his enemy, that's treason, treason was punishable by death.

And Yahweh is Israel's king. So here's one cultural reason, if you'd like, for death as punishment. Israel has not merely broken a private religious rule. They have publicly betrayed the good king who rescued them. And then there's the social reason, verse 14 to 15.

The name of the Israelite who was killed with a Midianite woman was Zimri, son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family. And the name of the Midianite woman who was put to death was Cosby, daughter of Zua, a tribal chief of a Midianite family.

The perpetrators are leaders of the people, which means that their sins could easily influence others to do the same. And judging from the way they did it in front of everyone shows that they probably wanted to influence others.

[15:12] So to stop the social spread, and remember this was a communal society, there's no you do you, so to stop the social spread, judgment is demanded.

Again, God wants to bless the nation so he will not allow a few influential people to bring sickness into the camp and turn the whole nation away from him.

So here's a social reason why death is needed. Now, last few verses, verse 16 to 18, the Lord said to Moses, treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them.

They treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the Peor incident involving their sister Cosby, the daughter of a Midianite leader, the woman who was killed when the plague came as a result of that incident.

The Midianites were not originally targeted as enemies before, even though they worshipped other gods. But now they've declared themselves enemies of God, so naturally they don't get God's blessings, but rather death.

[16:30] And also pay attention to the last verse. The plague is a result of the incident. It's a result of the idolatry. So death is not only, death is a natural consequence of walking away from God or fighting God.

we should be able to understand this. If we cut ourselves off from oxygen, we can't keep breathing. If we cut ourselves off from light, we sit in darkness. If we cut ourselves off from the God of life, we don't get life.

So death is not only the punishment for idolatry, death is also where idolatry naturally leads. So here's the first application.

Flee idolatry. That's what Paul also says in our New Testament reading. Idolatry is a serious sin.

[17:40] Idolatry dishonors God, who is worthy of all honor. Idolatry means we walk away from God's blessings and life.

Idolatry means we walk away from the source of our life. God's But how easy is it to not commit idolatry?

You might not think that you're worshiping Baal like the people in the Old Testament. Oh, who's Baal? I don't even know Baal. And you might not be involved in temple prostitution or in sacrificing your children in your worship of Baal.

Baal is just a manifestation of the idol of prosperity. As pastor and theologian Alec Motiar said, wherever people see bank balances, prosperity, a sound economy, productivity, and mounting exports as the essence of their security, Baal is still worshiped.

Wherever the cult of what helps replaces joy in what's true, Baal is still worshiped. We might not worship Baal, but how often do we find security in our bank account instead of in the God who provides?

[19 : 10] I do that sometimes. We might not sacrifice our children to Baal, but how often do we sacrifice our relationships with our children or spouse or family for the sake of financial achievement and security.

I do that sometimes. Theologian John Calvin has famously said, the human heart is a factory of idols.

Our hearts keep producing idols. God is a good thing. Like fertility, a cow, gold, wood, they turned those good things into an idol.

So even today, every good thing like money, family, self-image, sex, freedom, work, every good thing that God has given us is prone to be an idol because our hearts are prone to turn it into an idol.

When we put our highest hope, highest satisfaction, highest meaning in it rather than in God, the human heart is a factory of idols.

[20 : 39] idolatry. So yes, flee idolatry. It's a serious sin, but also be aware that our hearts are prone to idolatry.

So how do we save ourselves from idolatry then? I don't think we can. Christianity is not a self-help religion.

Pay attention to what happens in the text. The Lord said to Moses, Phinehas, son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am.

I did not put an end to them in my zeal. When the Israelites are judged because of their idolatry, what saves them? They're not saved because they put all the perpetrators to death like Moses commanded.

They're saved because of what the priest does. The priest embodies God's sense of justice. He's as zealous as God is, and so he makes an atonement for the sins of the people by killing this couple.

[21 : 59] Atonement means payment for wrongdoing. we need someone to make that payment, that atonement for us. Otherwise, we would have to make the payment with our own lives.

And we have that person, don't we? We have that priest who has made the payment, Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of God's justice. He's the embodiment of God himself.

but he did not carry out God's justice by stabbing others as a payment. He carried out God's justice by letting himself be stabbed and be exposed on the cross like the idolaters here in this passage.

In Jesus, God took our dishonor and shame unto himself. While we're busy looking for alternatives to God, God chased us down and paid for the consequences of our idolatry in himself, in Jesus.

In that sense, what Phineas did pointed to Jesus, but Jesus is far greater than Phineas. Phineas turned away judgment by bringing death to the guilty.

[23 : 27] Jesus turns away judgment by bearing death for the guilty. So, yes, first application is flee idolatry, but our hearts keep producing idols.

So, second application is run to Jesus. Let's not just flee idolatry, let's flee to Jesus. and confess our sins to him and get forgiveness from him.

Idolatry demands death, but Jesus has paid it for us so that we don't have to. And because Jesus has atoned for us, we don't fight idolatry as condemned people trying to earn mercy.

We fight as already forgiven people, held by a faithful God who is good to us and who wants to satisfy us.

Let him satisfy us. so the next time our hearts become anxious, dissatisfied, discontent, itching to look for satisfaction and security and hope in things other than God, let's ask our hearts like the psalmist did.

[24 : 59] Oh, so, why are you so dissatisfied? why are you chasing after fleeting things? Has God not been good enough for you?

And we will find as we think about what God has done in Jesus and through his spirit that he has been so good to us, so good. No other gods can satisfy us like him.

So why would we keep chasing after idols? here is the good, good God, the all satisfying five course meal God. He has been so faithful to us, so we stay faithful to him in Jesus.

Let's pray. Father, you are worthy of all glory and honor and power. So you are worthy of all our worship.

Thank you for forgiving all our rebellion in Jesus. And now, through your spirit, help us to be faithful to you, forsaking all other gods.

[26 : 15] Amen. Amen.