

Immorality on the Border



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Numbers 25, 31, Deut. 21:10–14, 1 Cor. 10:1–14, Rev. 2:14.*

Memory Text: “Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand” (*1 Corinthians 10:8*).

Here again we see the same theme running through the book of Numbers: God’s people, led so clearly and powerfully by Him, still making wrong choices, still showing a lack of faith, still falling into the most flagrant disobedience. All God wanted to do, from the start, was bring them into the Promised Land; and time and again, all they were doing, by their choices, was making it so much more difficult for that to happen.

No question about it: God’s overriding providence succeeded then, and will succeed. Just as He brought His ancient covenant people into the Promised Land, He will do the same in the end time for us. How much better, though, if we would cooperate with Him rather than work against His purposes.

This week we’ll look at one of the greatest breaches of faith in all of Old Testament history, the apostasy at Shittim. And though it happened thousands of years ago in a culture and context radically different from ours today, the spiritual parallels are there, and they should shout a loud warning to God’s church, also on the borders of the Promised Land.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 12.*

Seduction

Numbers 25:1 reads: “While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women” (*NIV*). Just a clear-cut statement of fact, nothing more.

The text says that “Israel was staying” in Shittim. That is, they weren’t going anywhere. They were at rest. At ease, really, because they just had finished a number of successful conquests: they had beaten the Canaanites (*Num. 21:1–3*), the Amorites (*vss. 21–31*), and the folk under the rule of King Og of Bashan (*vss. 33–35*). And now they were on the borders of the Promised Land, just across the Jordan River.

In other words, after numerous mistakes and setbacks, things were going quite well. They were in no immediate danger from warring armies, because they readily had dispatched all of these military threats. Hence, they were able to take it easy.

Read Numbers 25:1–3. What were the steps involved here in this apostasy? How did something so terrible happen?

Sex, food, idolatry—it was all there on the shores of the Jordan. According to the order seen in the texts, they first had sexual relations with the women, which clearly broke down barriers. And then it was at the invitation of these women that the men sacrificed to their pagan gods and then eventually bowed down and worshiped them.

Again, from our perspective, it’s hard to understand how something like this could happen. *They should have known better, right?* At the same time, here they were, mingling with these people, probably not much at first, but then, over time, more and more. Slowly but surely their guard was let down; and before they knew it, they were ensnared by lust and passion. Once they had fallen into that trap, anything was possible.

We fool ourselves when we think we are less vulnerable to the deceptions of sin of any kind.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1–14. How can we apply the lessons there to ourselves, today, in whatever situation we are in? What similar temptations do we face in our own contexts? What promise can we take from these words and make our own?

Behind the Scenes

Read Revelation 2:14 and Numbers 31:16. What insight do they give us into what was going on here with Israel at Shittim? How does this help us understand how they fell?

Unable to succeed one way, their enemies (the Moabites and the Midianites) now tried another, and it worked so much better. The principle should be clear: As long as we are acting in faith and obedience, a lot of doors to sin, deception, and ruin are closed. Once, however, we move away from doing what we should, anything can happen. How crucial, then, that we seek to stay on the path of obedience.

“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. 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 [a Moabite god worshipped at Mount Peor].’ When Moses was 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.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 454, 455.

Time and time again we see the same principle at play: God doing so much for His people, God promising so much to His people, and they—in response—destroying themselves. What about you? What has God promised you, and how are you responding to those promises?

Sin and Punishment

The fact that these men fell into a trap didn't, obviously, excuse their sin. If they had obeyed the Lord to begin with, if they had kept His commandments, if they had done what they knew was right and not slowly opened themselves up to temptation, this dreadful apostasy and suffering never would have occurred. No doubt, at first, they had no intention of going as far as they did. After all, they were just going to a party, that's all. And because Balaam, a prophet of their own God, had invited them, what could be wrong with that? How quickly, though, things got out of hand.

What other examples in the Bible can you find of people opening the door to sin that eventually led to horrific consequences, consequences that they probably never imagined would come?

No question, all through the Bible we see this same thing happening, again and again. From Eve in Eden to Judas in Jerusalem, those who should have known better, those who had been warned, those who had great light, nevertheless chose to ignore that light and—no doubt justifying and rationalizing their actions—fell into sins that brought devastating consequences. Who of us, perhaps, hasn't experienced this same thing in their own lives? God calls us to obey Him, not because He's a demanding tyrant but because He loves His children and knows what's best for us.

Read Numbers 25:4, 5. Why such a strong reaction? *See also vss. 8, 9.* What lesson can we take away from this for ourselves?

Think how painful it must have been for Israelites to have to kill other Israelites. Indeed, it seems as though each tribe may have had the responsibility of executing those of their own who were involved in this apostasy. Thus, some might have had to execute members of their immediate family! And to do it in broad daylight (literally "in front of the sun"). It must have been a terrible experience for the whole camp.

What do you do with someone close to you who is partaking of a sinful practice that can have a harmful impact on you and others? What is your responsibility and duty in such a situation? To whom can you turn for help in knowing how to respond?

Open Sin

It's hard to imagine the chaos, confusion, and pain that must have been going on among the Israelites at this time. We get an inkling of the pain, at least, in Numbers 25:6, which said that the people "were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting" (*NIV*). Weeping, no doubt, for the apostasy, for the suffering, and for their dead kinsmen. Also, with a plague ravaging the camp, they might have been weeping for themselves and their family, as well, fearful that they might be next. The fact that they were at the tent of meeting means that they were imploring the Lord to end the devastation.

Read Numbers 25:6–18. **How do we understand what was going on here? What lessons can we take away from this story?**

Though the text doesn't come out and explicitly say it, one could read into the text that the Israelite man, Zimri, was having a sexual relationship with the woman when Phinehas came into the tent and thrust his javelin through them both. However harsh all this might seem, think about the circumstances. The whole camp is weeping and pleading with the Lord because of what was happening, and this man—so audacious and open in his sin—brings this Midianite woman into the camp before all of them and then takes her into the tent and has sexual relations with her. *All the while a plague is ravaging the camp!* What made it even worse was that Zimri came from a house of princes; that is, he was part of royal stock and thus should have known better. He must have been so deceived, so consumed with lust, that the sight of the camp weeping before the tabernacle didn't slow him down at all.

All through the Bible, we see examples of how sin clouds the reasoning powers and leads people to do some of the most unthinkable and irrational things. Think of Cain, of David with Bathsheba, of Judas betraying Jesus. No wonder the Bible, time and again, warns us against sin. It's not that God can't forgive our sin; it's that the sin can so warp us that we can get to the point that we don't even see it as sin any longer.

In your own walk with the Lord, how have you experienced the reality of how the practice of sin hardens you to just how bad it really is? What can you do to break out of this deadly unspiritual trap?

Destruction of the Midianites

After the terrible devastation at Shittim, the Lord commanded Israel to attack the Midianites, the ones who had—through their deceptions—brought such suffering to His people. Justice was going to be done. This particular branch of the Midianites had given themselves completely over to idolatry and all its attendant evils. Like the Amorites, this clan of Midian had “filled up the cup of their iniquity.”—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, May 2, 1893. And the Lord decreed their destruction.

Read Numbers 31, the story of the destruction of the Midianites. What are some of the hard things in this account that make it difficult for us to understand today?

Killing all the people, even the children, is hard enough for us to understand. We just have to trust in the revelation we have of God as revealed to us through Jesus Christ and accept that there are things we don't understand from our perspective, things not revealed to us.

Many find Numbers 31:13–18 particularly disturbing, and understandably so. But we should keep a few things in mind. Many of these Midianite women were the ones directly involved in the deception that led to thousands upon thousands of deaths; hence, they were reaping the punishment for their sins. But what about the young girls, the virgins, who probably had done nothing?

Suppose the Lord said to just leave them be? These helpless young women would be left alone, with all their parents dead, their whole social structure destroyed. What could happen to them in the harsh and dangerous world at that time? This way, by being taken into the Israelite camp, these women not only would be protected from whatever dangers they would have faced had they been left alone; they also would be treated well by the Israelites. After all, Israelite law demanded that.

Read Deuteronomy 21:10–14. How does this help us better understand what was going on with those women who were taken as prisoners by the Israelites? In what ways does this help us better understand Numbers 31?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Apostasy at the Jordan,” pp. 453–461, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“It was when the Israelites were in a condition of outward ease and security that they were led into sin. . . . They neglected prayer and cherished a spirit of self-confidence. . . . A long preparatory process, unknown to the world, goes on in the heart before the Christian commits open sin. The mind does not come down at once from purity and holiness to depravity, corruption, and crime. It takes time to degrade those formed in the image of God to the brutal or the satanic. By beholding we become changed. By the indulgence of impure thoughts man can so educate his mind that sin which he once loathed will become pleasant to him.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 459.

Discussion Questions:

1 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?

2 Think of the devastation that this sin caused in the camp. Think of the suffering of the people as a whole. What should this tell us about how, as a church community, we have a responsibility to deal with sin among us?

3 The Israelites didn’t fall into this sin overnight. It was a step-by-step process. What about us as a church today? Are we letting down our guard regarding things that could, ever so slightly, allow us to become hardened to what will lead us into Satan’s traps? What role does the issue of standards play in this important area? How can standards help protect us against this slow and steady move toward apostasy and ruin? Or can they at all? Or, if they can help us, how should they be applied?

Summary: Israel’s moral collapse on the borders of Canaan may serve as an example of one method Satan will use to cause God’s people to apostatize in these end times. “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (*Matt. 26:41*).

Trouble in the Village

by BARNABAS SIRCAR

I am a teenager living in the extreme southern part of Bangladesh. Six years ago an Adventist pastor came to our village. He visited every home, sharing God's love with those who would listen. Because many of the children in the village attended a Protestant school outside the village, some people were willing to hear about Jesus. Two years later 20 people were ready for baptism. Among them were my parents, my elder sister, and I.

But not everyone in the village was happy that we had become Adventists. The Protestant church leaders accused the Adventists of stealing their members. They united with the non-Christians to force the pastor to leave the area and make us return to our former religion. We faced many problems at that time. But even when we were forbidden to use the village well and had to dig our own well, we clung to our newfound faith.

The villagers then went to the police and accused us Adventists of destroying their idols, which lay broken into pieces under the tree where they had once stood. The land on which this tree stood belonged to my family, and we were targeted by the accusations. We couldn't prove that we were innocent, so we turned to God. We fasted and prayed that God would intercede for us. If we lost the case, we could be fined a large sum of money or be thrown into prison.

The police listened to both sides of the case. After we presented our side, we continued to pray that God would reveal the real troublemakers. Suddenly chaos broke out among the non-Christians in the crowd. People hurled accusations at one another. "You broke the idol and blamed the Adventists!" one shouted. "No, you broke the idol!" another yelled. Eventually the truth came out that the non-Christians had broken their own idol and blamed the Adventists.

Finally peace came to the village. The Protestant church leaders in the village still try to drive us out of the village, but we pray that God will soften their hearts so they can hear the message of hope and peace in Jesus.

Your mission offerings help send lay evangelists into villages such as ours, to teach the people and lead them to Jesus. Then they help to build simple chapels in which to worship. Thank you.



BARNABAS SIRCAR (left) attends an Adventist school in Bangladesh.