

Immorality¹ on the Border



SABBATH—DECEMBER 5

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Numbers 25; Numbers 31; Deuteronomy 21:10–14; 1 Corinthians 10:1–14; Revelation 2:14.

MEMORY VERSE: “We should not commit sexual sins, as some of them did. In one day 23,000 of them died” (1 Corinthians 10:8, NIV).

AGAIN, WE FIND THE SAME THEME (IDEA; TOPIC) RUNNING THROUGH THE BOOK OF NUMBERS. God's people were led so clearly and powerfully by Him. But they still made wrong choices. They still showed a lack of faith. They fell into terrible sin. All God wanted to do was bring them into the Promised Land. But, again and again, God's people chose to make it difficult to get there. They were stubborn and rebellious.²

No question about it: God's watch-care always will succeed. God brought His people into the Promised Land. He will do the same in the end time for us too. But how much better it would be if we would cooperate (work together) with God rather than work against His plan for our lives.

This week we will read about one of the most terrible examples of rebellion (war) in the Old Testament. It is the apostasy (backsliding) at Shittim. This rebellion happened thousands of years ago, in a culture³ very different from ours today. But the principles (rules) for how we should turn away from sin have not changed. The story of what happened to Israel at Shittim should shout a loud warning to God's church, who is also on the borders of the Promised Land (heaven).

1. immorality—wrong behavior; sex that is not pure; sex with someone who is not your husband or wife.

2. rebellious—fighting or struggling against authority (laws or rules) or any kind of control (power).

3. culture—the way people live, dress, think, eat, and get along with one another.

SUNDAY—DECEMBER 6**SEDUCTION⁴ (Numbers 25:1–3)**

Numbers 25:1 reads, “Israel was staying in Shittim. The men of Israel began to commit [do] sexual sins with the women of Moab” (NIRV). It is a very clear statement of fact, nothing more.

The verse says that “Israel was staying in Shittim.” They were not going anywhere. They were at rest. They were taking it easy. They just had finished winning several battles. They had beaten the Canaanites (Numbers 21:1–3) and the Amorites (verses 21–31). They beat the people under the rule of King Og of Bashan (verses 33–35). And now they were on the borders of the Promised Land, just across the Jordan River.

After several mistakes and disappointments, things were going quite well. The people of Israel were in no danger from armies of neighboring nations. The army of Israel took care of all threats against them. So, now they were able to take it easy.

What were the steps in Numbers 25:1–3 that led to this apostasy? How did something so terrible happen?

Sex, food, and idol (false god) worship! They were all there on the shores of the Jordan River. According to the order of events in the verses, the men

of Israel first had sex with the women of Moab. Sex broke down barriers to other sins. Then these women invited the men to sacrifice⁵ to their pagan⁶ gods. Later the men bowed down to the gods and worshiped them.

Again, it is hard to understand how something like this could happen. *The men of Israel should have known better, right?* But here they were, mixing with Moabite women. Maybe not mixing much at first. But then, over time, the men of Israel mixed in with the ways of the pagan women more and more. Slowly but surely, the men’s guards were let down. Before they knew it, they were trapped by lust and desire. Once they had fallen into that trap, anything was possible.



The men of Israel bowed down to false gods.

We fool ourselves if we think we are less easily deceived (trapped) by sin than were these men of Israel.

4. seduction—the act of causing someone to do something bad or wrong; the act of tempting or leading someone astray or to have sex outside of marriage.

5. sacrifice—to make gifts and burnt offerings as an act of worship.

6. pagan—having to do with the worship of idols (false gods) or nature instead of God.

How can we make use of the lessons in 1 Corinthians 10:1–14 in everything we do today? What same temptations⁷ do we face in the modern setting? What promise can we learn from these words? How can we make it our own?

MONDAY—DECEMBER 7

BEHIND THE SCENES (Revelation 2:14)

What wisdom do we learn from Revelation 2:14 and Numbers 31:16 about what happened to Israel at Shittim? How does this wisdom help us understand how they fell?

Israel's enemies, the Moabites and the Midianites, could not beat Israel in the field of battle. So Israel's enemies now tried another method (plan) to destroy Israel. This method worked so much better. The principle should be clear: having faith in God and obeying Him closes a lot of doors to sin. But once we move away from doing what we should, anything can happen. How important it is for us to stay on the right path by obeying God.

"Balaam told the king of Moab to hold a big party in honor of their gods. Secret plans were made to lead Israel into sin at the party. Then Balaam



The key to staying on the right path is obedience to God.

invited the Israelites to come to the party. The people of Israel thought of Balaam as a prophet⁸ of God. So it was not hard for Balaam to get the men of Israel to come. A great many of the people joined Balaam. They watched what was going on at the party. They went where they were not supposed to go. And Satan caught them in his trap. They were deceived [fooled] by music, dancing, and the beauty of heathen⁹ women. The men of Israel let go of their faith in God. They joined in the joyful party and feasting. They took part in drinking wine. The wine made their minds dull. Drinking broke down their self-control. Lust took full control of their minds. Then the men of Israel were led to bow down to idols. They offered sacrifices¹⁰ upon heathen altars.¹¹ They took part in the most disgusting pagan temple rites [services].

7. temptations—things that can turn us away from God and that try to get us to do, think, feel, or say what is wrong.

8. prophet—a man or woman who is a spokesperson for God. God gives a prophet special messages to give to His people. A prophet also speaks to God on behalf of His people. God also may give prophets warnings about what will happen in the future.

9. heathen—belonging to the worship of false gods.

10. sacrifices—the gifts and burnt offerings given to a god as an act of worship.

11. altars—structures that are raised off the ground, or special places on which sacrifices (gifts) are made or incense (sweet-smelling perfume) is burned to a false god.

“It was not long before the poison had spread through the camp of Israel. It spread like a deadly disease. Those men of Israel who would have beaten their enemies in battle were beaten by the charms of heathen women. The people seemed to be taken over by their desires. The rulers and the leading men were among the first to sin. And so many of the people were guilty that the apostasy [backsliding] became national. ‘Israel joined himself unto Baalpeor [a Moabite god worshiped at Mount Peor].’ Then Moses saw the evil and decided to do something about it. But the evil plans of their enemies had been very successful. The Israelites were taking part in the sexual worship at Mount Peor. And what is more, they already were practicing the sinful, pagan temple services in the camp of Israel.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*,¹² pages 454, 455.



Satan caught the men of Israel in his trap of music, dancing, and the beauty of heathen women.

Time and time again we notice the same principle at work. God was doing so much for His people. God was promising so much to His people. But the people destroyed themselves. What about you? What has God promised you? What are you doing about those promises?

TUESDAY—DECEMBER 8

SIN AND PUNISHMENT¹³ (Numbers 25:4, 5)

The men of Israel fell into a trap. But this did not excuse their sin. If only they had obeyed the Lord to begin with. If only they had kept His commandments! If only they had done what they knew was right. If only they had not slowly opened themselves up to temptation. Then this terrible apostasy and suffering never would have happened. Of course, at first, they did not plan to go as far as they did. After all, they were just going to a party. And besides, Balaam, a prophet of their own God, had invited them. So, what could be wrong with that? But notice how quickly things got out of hand!

What other examples in the Bible can you find of people opening the door to sin? What were the results?

No question. All through the Bible we find this same thing happening, again

12. *Patriarchs and Prophets*—patriarchs were leaders of God’s people in early Bible times, such as Abraham and Isaac, or other leaders of Israel, such as Moses; prophets are men or women who are given messages by God to give to His people.

13. punishment—a penalty (price to be paid) for, or the result of, doing something wrong; when someone must suffer loss or pain for doing something bad, wrong, or against the law.

and again. From Eve in Eden to Judas in Jerusalem, these were people who should have known better. These were people who had been warned. These were people who had great light. But they all chose to ignore that light. They made excuses for falling into sins. And their sins brought terrible results. Who has not experienced this same thing in his or her own life? God calls us to obey Him. He does so, not because He is a very strict tyrant. But He loves His children and knows what is best for us.

Why such a strong reaction in Numbers 25:4, 5? Read verses 8, 9. What lesson can we learn from this reaction for ourselves?

Think how painful it must have been for the Israelites to have to kill other Israelites. It seems that each tribe was responsible for killing those of their own tribe who took part in this apostasy. They even might have had to kill members of their own family! And to do it in the middle of the day! It must have been a terrible time for the whole camp.

What do you do with someone close to you who is taking part in a sinful practice? How can this practice harm you and others? What is your duty in such a situation? To whom can you turn for help?

WEDNESDAY—DECEMBER 9

OPEN SIN (Numbers 24:6–8)

It is hard to imagine the confu-

sion and pain that the Israelites must have felt at this time. We get some idea of the pain they were feeling in Numbers 25:6. It says that the people “were weeping [crying] at the entrance [door] to the Tent of Meeting” (NIV). Weeping for the apostasy, for the suffering, and for their dead family members. Also, a plague (deadly disease) swept the camp. So, they might have been weeping for themselves and their family too. They were fearful that they might be next. At the Tent of Meeting, they were praying to the Lord to stop the plague.

What lessons can we learn from the story in Numbers 25:6–18?

The verses do not say it clearly. But we can guess from reading them that the Israelite man, Zimri, was having sex with the woman of Midian. Then Phinehas came into the tent and thrust his spear through them both. This seems cruel. But think about the results. The whole camp is crying and praying to the Lord because of what was happening. And this man, Zimri, had the nerve to bring this Midianite woman into the camp before all of them. Then he takes her into the tent to have sex with her. All the while a plague is spreading across the camp! What made it even worse was that Zimri came from a house of princes. He was a leader. He should have known better. He must have been so deceived. The sight of his own people crying in front of the sanctuary¹⁴ did not stop him from doing what was evil.

14. sanctuary—the home of God on earth in early Bible times. Here the high priest offered prayers and the blood of animals to God for the sins of the people of Israel.

All through the Bible, we find examples of how sin clouds minds. It leads people to do some of the most unthinkable and foolish things. Think of Cain. Think of David with Bathsheba. Think of Judas betraying Jesus. No wonder the Bible often warns us against sin. Sin can twist us so much. Then we do not even realize it as sin any longer.



Phinehas went into the tent and slew (killed) Zimri and the heathen woman with a spear.

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

THURSDAY—DECEMBER 10

THE MIDIANITES ARE DESTROYED (Numbers 31:1–24)

Israel suffered terribly for their sins at Shittim. But they were not the only ones who had done wrong. The Midianites had brought such suffering

to God's people. Justice was going to be done. This group of the Midianites had given themselves completely over to idol worship and all its evils. Like the Amorites, this group of Midianites had "filled their cup. So, the Lord allowed them to be destroyed."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, May 2, 1893.

Read in Numbers 31 about how the people of Midian were destroyed. What hard things in this story 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 what we know about God's love shown to us through Jesus Christ. We must accept that there are things we do not fully understand.

Many people find Numbers 31:13–18 disturbing. But we should keep a few things in mind. Many of these Midianite women led thousands upon thousands to their deaths. So, the women were receiving the punishment for their sins. But what about the young girls, the virgins,¹⁵ who probably had done nothing?

Suppose the Lord said to just let them go? Think what that meant for them. These helpless young women would have been left alone. Their parents were dead. Their people were destroyed. What terrible things could happen to them in the rough and dangerous world at that time? But instead, they were taken into the Israelite

15. virgins—persons who never have had sex.

camp. There, these women would be protected from whatever dangers they would have faced if they had been left alone. And they also would be treated well by the Israelites. After all, Israelite law required that.

How does Deuteronomy 21:10–14 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?

FRIDAY—DECEMBER 11

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “Apostasy at the Jordan,” pages 453–461, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“It was when the Israelites felt too comfortable and safe that they were led into sin. . . . They did not pray. They were filled with false pride and overconfidence. . . . Unknown to the world, a long, slow process [change] goes on in the heart before the Christian decides to sin openly. The mind does not come down quickly from purity [clean and good thoughts] and holiness to sinful and criminal [wrong] thoughts. It takes time to change those who are formed in the image [likeness] of God to the evil likeness of Satan. By beholding [experiencing] we become changed. By favoring impure [not clean] thoughts, we

can so teach our minds to love the very sin that we once hated. It will become pleasant to us.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 459.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① One of the greatest gifts God has given to us is the gift of sex. It also has been one of the most abused gifts. Satan uses it very often, and with great success, to trap and ruin those who love God and want to serve Him. How can we help one another in this area? What choices can we make about how we dress, what we say, what we watch on TV, and other things we do? How can making good choices help avoid temptations to this sin?
- ② Think of how much suffering and loss 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 group, we should deal with sin among us?
- ③ The Israelites did not fall into this sin overnight. It was done step-by-step. What about us as a church today? Are we letting down our guard? What things could very slowly cause us to fall into Satan’s traps? How can Bible standards (rules) help protect us against this slow and steady move toward ruin? And how can standards be used to benefit us?