

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?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Corinthians 10:8*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Review how complacency and compromise can lead to downfall just as surely as succumbing to unbelief when under trial.

Feel: Recognize how prone we are to evil, and how much we need a Savior.

Do: Strengthen our focus on Christ and His ability to keep us morally pure and loyal to Him.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: The Downward Trends of Complacency and Compromise

A What were the conditions and steps that led to the breakdown of morality and to idolatry in Israel?

B What events were necessary to stop the ensuing plague?

C How were leaders, again, complicit both in the downfall and in the arrest of sin in the camp?

II. Feel: “Prone to Fall, Lord, I Feel It”

A What elements of our lifestyle are designed to protect us from numbed senses and also immorality? How are we tempted to compromise these aspects of our lifestyle in order to fit in with our neighbors and our times?

B How can focusing on Christ and His provisions for our salvation affect our lifestyle?

III. Do: Christ, Our Righteousness

A What steps are you called to take as a leader to stop immorality in your family and your church?

B We are created with a sexual drive from birth. How can Christ, our Creator, help us nurture and promote a wholesome development and expression of sexuality?

► **Summary:** Compromise with worldly practices and intimate associations with worldly companions led to Israel’s spiritual and moral downfall, which had to be met not only with community repentance but also with public accountability.

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?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Christians do not yield to sexual immorality suddenly but via a gradual process that is stopped only by devotion to Christ.

Just for Teachers: Israel’s moral lapse shows the danger of prosperity when mixed with lust. Discuss the following statement from James Dobson. What are the parallels between modern society and ancient Israel?

Quotation: “I knew that the world of X-rated movies and obscene magazines had steadily deteriorated since 1970, but I was unaware of the depth of that plunge. Most . . . citizens are even more uninformed. They think pornography consists largely of airbrushed nudity in *Playboy* magazines. Such images are pornographic, of course, but they are not even in the same league with mainstream hard-core material sold in sex shops today. The world of hard-core obscenity has become unbelievably sordid and perverse. *Its dimensions are wretched beyond description.* Let me explain how we got into the mess we face today. One of the characteristics of human nature is the natural progression that occurs in sexual experimentation. For example, a boy and a girl may find it exciting to hold hands on the first date, but more physical contact is likely to occur on the second encounter. Unless they make an *early effort* to slow that progression, they will move systematically down the road. . . . Obviously, pornographers understand that principle. They know that their products must constantly change in order to avoid boredom, and that change must always be in the direction of more explicit materials. . . . That progression from soft-core to hard-core pornography got an enormous boost in 1970 when the First Presidential Commission on Pornography issued its report. They said, in effect, that sexually explicit materials were a good thing and should not be inhibited in any way. *Not only did they tell us that smut was not harmful; they perceived it to be advantageous to society, reducing sexual tensions and promising to lower the incidence of rape and child abuse. The pornography industry was delighted!*”—James Dobson, quoted in *Pornography, A Human Tragedy*, edited by Tom Minnery (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1986), pp. 33, 34. (Italics supplied.)

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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 our 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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED▶ **STEP 2—Explore****Bible Commentary**

I. Seduction and Behind the Scenes (Review Numbers 25; 31; 21:1–3, 21–31; Deut. 2:14, 15; 21:10–14; 2 Pet. 2:14, 15; Rev. 2:14, 15 with the class.)

Three of God's greatest gifts—food, intimacy, and worship—are debased by Israel as they pause at the gate to the Promised Land. Lust, gluttony, and idolatry are substituted for the genuine, ironically fulfilling the proverb that a dog returns to his vomit (*Prov. 26:11, 2 Pet. 2:22*). The food that sick people throw up is the same food they sat down to enjoy. A fool may argue that the two forms of food are the same—even say that the vomit is more enjoyable. How revolting. Yet, this is what Satan says when he tempts us with his substitutes. Food, which God created to enjoy and nourish, is carried to excess in gluttony. Small wonder that obesity is rampant in modern nations and growing rapidly among the young. Sexual intimacy, which God gave human beings for pleasure and creating families, is twisted into pornography and health-damaging perversion. Worship, through which God offers us a close relationship with Himself, is directed away from God to the things He created.

The link between misused sex and pagan worship is not surprising, for sex and worship are intimately related. God created human beings, who are physical in nature, with a sexual instinct to bring them close physically. This intimacy leads to new life and the multiplication of the family. God also created humans with a spiritual thirst, a longing to be close to Him. Since God is a spiritual being (*John 4:23, 24*), our closeness to God primarily is spiritual, not physical. Worship draws us into His presence and creates intimacy with God. It is these desires for intimacy that pagan religions intuitively blended; not surprisingly, sex (physical intimacy) became involved in worship (spiritual intimacy) in the heathen religions, which worshiped the creature (physical) more than the Creator (spiritual). (See *Rom. 1:24, 25*.)

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: We shudder at the thought of temple prostitution as practiced in pagan religions and fallen Hebrew worship. Yet, how does Satan tempt *us* to substitute physical intimacy for spiritual intimacy in worship? How can we avoid such traps?

■ *Though spiritual intimacy is primary, God also promises us the opportunity to live physically close to Him (John 14:1–3). How does spiritual intimacy prepare us for physical proximity? How does worship produce new life and multiply God’s family?*

II. Sin and Punishment and Open Sin (Review Num. 25:4–18, 32:23, Gal. 6:7–9 with the class.)

Consider This: Simeon and Levi, years before, had avenged their sister Dinah’s rape by Shechem (*Genesis 34*). Ironically, a member of Levi’s tribe kills a member of Simeon’s tribe for another sexual sin. The values of earlier generations cannot atone for the sins of a present one. So, how do we transmit positive sexual values to future generations?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Things that happen gradually may escape our notice. Knowing this, Satan devises temptation in a way that we are caught off guard. So slowly does he set the snare that we are tempted to trust in our safety. Because of gradual compromise, we may fail to discern true danger. When it is too late, Satan attacks, and often we fail.

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Group Activity:

Prop List: (1) Two to four sugar cubes, (2) a clear glass bowl large enough to hold the contents of a glass of water, (3) two paper or Styrofoam cups (approximately five–eight ounces), (4) a small sewing needle for making a small hole in the center of the cup bottom.

Instructions: First, center a sugar cube in the bottom of the bowl and pour a glass of water on the cube. Most of it will dissolve immediately, but a small portion may remain. Next, make the tiniest hole possible in the center bottom of the cup (or have a second cup already prepared with a hole). Place a fresh sugar cube in a dry bowl and fill the cup with water, keeping a finger over the hole. Now let the water drip on the cube. (Bear in mind: tiny hole = slow drip = best illustration.) Result: the cube will completely dissolve.

Talking Points: Discuss erosion in nature. How can Christians' values be eroded? How were the Hebrews *gradually* led to compromise their values? What might they have done differently? What can we do differently?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Activity: As a class, look into ways that you can become involved in sharing God's healing grace with those who have been abused sexually. Women's shelters, Child Protective Services, and law enforcement agencies are good places to start. Medical personnel and professional counselors in your congregation may be strong allies and resources in your endeavor to make a difference.

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*).