

If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them Numbers 25:1-5, Numbers 31:8-18

In chapters 22-24, Balak, the king of Moab, employed Balaam, a diviner from Mesopotamia, to manipulate the God of Israel to curse the Israelites, rather than bless them.

Balak's hope was to weaken the Israelites militarily, so that the Moabites and Midianites might defeat them in battle and drive them out of the land.

In spite of Balak's pressure and Balaam's desire to do otherwise, this false prophet consistently pronounces blessings on Israel and cursings on Israel's enemies.

In the end, Balak dismissed Balaam, sending him home without pay. So, when we come to Numbers 25, we don't expect to hear any more about Balaam.

But Numbers 25 makes it clear that the seduction and death of 24,000 Israelites was, at its roots, probably the result of one man's counsel: Balaam.

Fortunately, the satisfaction of God's anger and the termination of the plague was also the result of one man's courage: Phinehas.

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While the Israelites were camped on the east side of the Jordan River waiting for the time when God would lead them into the promised land, a spiritual attack was being waged against them by the Moabites and the Midianites who had hired Balaam to persuade God to curse them.

Remember, on his journey to curse the Israelites, God spoke to Balaam by means of his donkey, where he learned that God would use him to speak words of blessing upon Israel, and words of cursing upon any who would oppose them.

Can you appreciate how difficult Balaam's task was? Balak offered Balaam a lucrative fee for his services if he could persuade God not to bless Israel, but to curse them.

But Balaam found that it was impossible to induce God to curse those whom He had blessed. There was just no way Balaam could achieve the result Balak desired so he was fired and sent home.

Now, in order to understand what happens in Number 25, I want you to imagine Balaam trudging back toward Mesopotamia, muttering to himself about lost wages and a fruitless journey. Then read Numbers 31:16.

Numbers 31:16, *“Look, these people, through the counsel of Balaam, caused the Israelites to act treacherously against the LORD in the matter of Peor—and there was the plague among the community of the LORD.”*

This is speculation on my part, but after reading this I can imagine Balaam, heading back home, feeling defeated and mad, suddenly stopping in his tracks,

As if a light was just turned on, he cried out: *“I’ve got it! Why didn’t I think of it before? I’ve been using the wrong approach. Since God would never go back on His Word, I’ll “use” God’s faithfulness to His Word against his people.”*

Balaam then devised a devious plan for his own personal gain and hurried back to Balak.

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God had promised to bless Israel, but His blessings, under the Law, were conditional. Israel would be blessed only if they obeyed God's commandments.

In Leviticus 18, very specific laws were set down which regulated the sexual conduct of God's chosen people.

Israel wasn't to practice the abominations of Egypt, from which they were delivered, or of Canaan, which they were about to possess.

Leviticus 18:1-5, "The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.'"

Leviticus 18:6-23 specifies what practices God had forbidden, and they're virtually all related to sexual purity. The next seven verses give the consequences if they broke God's commands.

Leviticus 18:24-30, "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. "Everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people. Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the

detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God.”

Later, in Deuteronomy 28:1-14, Moses again spelled out all the ways that God would bless Israel if they would obey His law.

The remaining 55 verses in Deuteronomy 28 describe the “curses” that would fall upon Israel if they disobeyed His law.

I believe that Balaam finally realized he had been foolish trying to change God.

He now saw that, while God couldn't be changed, the Israelites were a fickle people, whose hearts could easily be turned from God.

If he could succeed in seducing the Israelites and cause them to engage in sexual and religious adultery, then he knew their God must keep His Word and bring a curse upon them.

It was a perfect plan. He would use Israel's weaknesses and God's strength against Israel. What a stroke of genius! Balaam must have congratulated himself all the way back to Balak.

All Balaam had to do was to tempt the Israelites to sin in such a way that they would fall under the curse of God as laid out in the law.

If the Israelites could be seduced to follow other gods, this would anger God to the point that they would incur the curses God had pronounced on those who practiced such sins!

The plan seemed to be flawless. He would counsel Balak: *“If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.”* Invite them to dinner so they would unknowingly participate in idol worship, then entice them to engage in sexual and spiritual harlotry.

This would be an abomination to God and bring a curse upon them. Here was a sure-fire, indirect way to bring about the same objective Balaam had failed to accomplish directly.

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Israel's waywardness throughout their time in the wilderness gave Balaam confidence his plan would work. Following Balaam's counsel, the Moabite women invited the Israelites to dinner.

There is a strange irony to all of this when you read Deuteronomy 23:3-6, "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation. For they did not come to meet you with bread and water on your way when you came out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to pronounce a curse on you. However, the LORD your God would not listen to Balaam but turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live."

The Moabites were indicted by God for not offering "bread and water," the basic necessities, to the Israelites when they fled from Egypt.

Now they're tempting the Israelites with "bed and breakfast." None of this registered with them. No one appeared to suspect impure motives on the part of the Moabites.

Don't underestimate just how tempting a "dinner invitation" was to the Israelites. This second generation of Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for nearly 40 years.

They had eaten manna and water, with almost no exceptions. The spices of Egypt were no more and suddenly a "welcome wagon" arrived at the Israelites' camp.

Friendly neighbors who came by to welcome them to the neighborhood, offering them steak and ale. Don't minimize the temptation, such a meal was wrong.

Perhaps the Israelites didn't realize that to share a meal with the Moabites was to join them in the worship of their gods.

But they willingly participated, not only in the meal, but in the sexual immorality that also was a part of Canaanite "*worship.*"

In Numbers 25:1, we read that when the people "*began*" to commit this terrible sin, God responded quickly.

Think about it! How many more would have sinned and been put to death if God had delayed dealing with this matter?

Now, many translations render the text in such a way as to indicate that the sin was only about sexual immorality.

I have no doubt that sexual immorality was involved since this was typical of the Canaanite religion.

But the word rendered "*sexual immorality*" in verse 1 was one employed in the Old Testament for "*playing the harlot.*" Referring to spiritual harlotry, the forbidden and adulterous worship of other gods.

I believe, as it's used in our text, it refers to both sexual and spiritual immorality.

By participating in pagan sacrificial meals, and then engaging in sexual relations with the Moabites as an act of worship, the Israelites committed sexual immorality and engaged in spiritual harlotry.

God had laid down strict regulations concerning sexual conduct, and immorality was labeled as a sin that was abhorrent to Him.

Sexual immorality was contrary to Israel's religion because it offended a holy and righteous God. But the Canaanites incorporated sexual immorality into their religion, as an "*act of worship.*"

No wonder church attendance was so good among these pagans! Going to bed was, so to speak, going to church.

How clever Satan was to take what God has condemned as contrary to religion and make it a vital part of religious worship.

In his commentary on the Book of Numbers, Gordon J. Wenham points out that the sin of the second generation of Israelites in Numbers 25 is remarkably similar to the sin of the first generation Israelites at Sinai, when Moses had gone up the mountain to receive the law from God in Exodus 32:1-6.

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Now, several things impressed me in these first five verses of Numbers 25:

- *First*, I'm amazed at how *quickly* this sin occurs.
- *Second*, I'm impressed with how *widely spread* the sin had become in such a short period of time.
- *Third*, I'm amazed at how *easily* the entire nation succumbed to temptation.
- *Fourth*, I'm troubled by how deeply into sin Israel fell.
- *Finally*, I find it difficult to believe *how little it took* to turn Israel from serving God to serving pagan deities. An invitation to dinner, and suddenly Israel finds itself engaged in the worship of false gods.

God's response isn't surprising. He made it very clear to His people whom they were to worship and how. He promised to bless His people when they obeyed His law, and to curse them when they rebelled.

Numbers 15 records some very specific instructions as to how the Israelites were to offer sacrifices. Further instructions concerning the priests and sacrifices were set down in Numbers 18 and 19.

These instructions, so clearly and so recently set down, were cast aside by the “worship” the Israelites engaged in with the Moabites and Midianites.

God then instructed Moses how he was to deal with this spiritual disaster in verse 4.

Numbers 25:4, *“The LORD said to Moses, “Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD’s fierce anger may turn away from Israel.”*

In my opinion, anyone reading these words in the original text wouldn’t have any difficulty understanding exactly what God meant.

The problem wasn’t that God’s words were unclear, but rather they were difficult to accept.

Why would God require such severe action? Why would God command Moses to put *all* of the leaders of the people to death publicly? Why did God command that only the leaders be put to death?

And since God commanded that all the leaders be publicly executed, why did Moses order the offenders be put to death, but didn’t require that their bodies be publicly exposed.

God instructed Moses to publicly execute *all* the leaders of the nation Israel publicly. Why all of them? Surely every leader hadn’t committed the sin of harlotry.

There are several factors that should be taken into account in regard to God's command.

First, we must understand that leaders have a higher level of responsibility, and second, because they have been given more authority, they are examples to those who follow them.

Luke 12:48b, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

James 3:1, "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

Now, some of the corruption was undoubtedly already being practiced by Israel's leaders.

And since corruption often flows from the top down, leaders are responsible to promote righteousness by ridding the nation of the wicked.

Proverbs 20:26, "A wise king separates out the wicked; he turns the threshing wheel over them."

Proverbs 25:5, "Remove the wicked from before the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness."

Proverbs 29:12, "If a ruler listens to lies, all his ministers will be wicked."

It appeared that the leaders did little or nothing to deal with the idolatry and immorality of the people. The only person who acted in response to Israel's great sin was Phinehas.

Even Moses did nothing more than to order the judges to locate the guilty and see to it that they were punished.

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Conclusion

Leaders are responsible for the sins they tolerate, especially those within their family.

1 Samuel 3:11-13, “And the LORD said to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them.”

1 Timothy 3:2-5, “Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?”

These verses help us understand why God called for the execution of all of Israel’s leaders. But let’s pause momentarily to consider why Moses called for action less severe than what God commanded.

The Bible doesn’t tell us why Moses did what he did. Indeed, some commentaries seek to persuade us that Moses didn’t depart from God’s command. However, their explanations are strained.

Now, before we become too critical of Moses, let me remind you that most Christians today fail to carry out a number of Jesus’ commands.

Moses had great compassion on the Israelites. He didn’t desire to see a large-scale execution. Moses also knew that God was merciful and compassionate (Exodus 34:6-7).

When the first generation of Israelites worshipped the golden calf, God threatened to wipe out the entire nation, but due to the intercession of Moses, the nation was spared (Exodus 32).

On this same occasion, without a specific command from God, Moses commanded the Levites to take their swords and kill friends and neighbors.

This dramatic response brought the people back under control and spared them from a more extensive punishment.

I'd like to believe that Moses didn't take the dramatic action God commanded here in Numbers 25 because he knew that God would be gracious.

All of this happened because Balaam wanted to receive a paycheck. Yet, as we will see next week, God isn't to be mocked and evil will reap its reward.