

# In the Hands of a Priest

*A Spear and the Gospel*

SCRIPTURE TEXT: NUMBERS 25



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## MORE THAN A BIRD

What is it that attracts us to superheroes? What is it that makes us watch even remakes of remakes in movie theaters? What is it that attracts us to the likes of Spiderman, Batman, and Superman? These movies are often filled with themes of justice, of good vs. evil, and even true love. And yet, we are also drawn to the 'imperfections' of the super-hero—the questions of identity, the struggle of revenge, and the longing to be known even while hiding from the world. The passage before us gives us a hero, but even more.

## NUMBERS 25

<sup>1</sup>While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. <sup>2</sup>These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. <sup>3</sup>So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. <sup>4</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, "Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the LORD, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." <sup>5</sup>And Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor."

<sup>6</sup>And behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting. <sup>7</sup>When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand <sup>8</sup>and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. <sup>9</sup>Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

<sup>10</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, <sup>11</sup>"Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. <sup>12</sup>Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, <sup>13</sup>and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.'"

<sup>14</sup>The name of the slain man of Israel, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, chief of a father's house belonging to the Simeonites. <sup>15</sup>And the name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi the daughter of Zur, who was the tribal head of a father's house in Midian. <sup>16</sup>And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>17</sup>"Harass the Midianites and strike them down, <sup>18</sup>for they have harassed you with their wives, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on account of Peor."

## AN "R-RATED" STORY

What is going through your mind right now? We can't be too careful with these verses. This chapter may raise more questions in your mind than you are comfortable trying to answer. These words are offensive to some: how could God condone such brutal murder. To others, these words seem to justify us, and even make us proud for the stands we want to take in the public square, though if our only thought is pride, we may be missing something. To still others, these words haunt us in the swiftness and severity of judgment they represent. We start reading, and by the time we get to verse 9, we're simply stunned. What are we to do with this? What is any of this doing in God's word?

As we follow these events through this chapter in seeking to understand so that we might follow in faithfulness, the appropriate place to begin is actually near the end. It's not the actions themselves that provide the explanation; it's God's interpretation of those actions that helps us make sense of this. God in effect says to Moses: "Phinehas is my man." God speaks of both a "covenant of peace" and a "covenant of perpetual priesthood" [12-13]. While many of the people of Israel stand in bewildered rebellion against God—effectively declaring themselves His enemies—God speaks of peace and eternity with this man. Why? The explanation we're given is because of his jealousy for God.

John Calvin, is quick to draw the appropriate analogy to that of a husband's jealousy for his wife's affection in that he is "unable to bear any partner". He goes on to say that "The more holy and chaste a husband is, the more wrathful he becomes if he sees his wife inclining her heart to a rival." Calvin is trying to say that we understand jealousy. We know what it feels like for any close relationship to be 'threatened' by the presence of a third person. In our insecurity, fear, breakdown of trust, and assumptions, we know what it means to be jealous.

But if this is the crux of these verses, how are we to understand God's jealousy? What is it that God wants from us, when He desires for us to live out His jealousy? What does Phinehas' example demonstrate about an honest and even faithful jealousy for God?

## IMPATIENCE WITH SIN

The starting point of understanding Phinehas' display of God's jealousy comes in noting God's response to Israel's behavior: His anger was kindled [3]. We see from the beginning that the sons of Israel were drawn away by their physical desires for the daughters of Moab [1]. The language of unfaithfulness here may be offense, but it is intentional. This isn't a thought out plan to run from God; this is not a carefully reasoned philosophical statement denying the existence of God. This is men thinking about one thing. And really not thinking about anything else. We might call this sin as the priority of the self. This is all about serving a very basic need in the most convenient and most obvious way of doing so. And God displays his impatience with it through a declaration of judgment. Phinehas follows this in the specific case of Zimri and Cozbi.

Notice, then, how the sin builds, and where this subtlety leads to the outright rejection of God. Through these relationships the people begin to join in the sacrifices—eating and worshipping with the Moabites. Verse 3, then, gives the final description: allegiance is transferred away from God to Baal. There is no indication that this was their intention; but this is where they were so easily led.

Ultimately, both aspects of sin point us in the direction of our fundamental problems with regard to sin: disobedience and slavery. For some, it is enough to say that this goes against what God commanded for His people. We believe in God. We believe His word to be true. When He says “You shall not . . .”, we take that at face value. And yet for other of us, it is not that simple. But this is a reminder that the complexity of the brokenness in our lives is such that we will always be slaves to something.

Given these factors, God’s declaration of judgment and Phinehas’s actions take a different view. The people have rejected God. Zimri, in particular, has turned from God and put his trust elsewhere. And God’s judgment is enacted. We need to understand the seriousness of this. This is not honest questioning and wrestling with the difficult things of faith—I am not trying to guilt anyone out of their doubt. Rather, this is the deliberate rejection of God’s goodness. And when we choose that path, though God may restore us, we need to know that we cannot have confidence that He will do so. When we ultimately and finally cast aside God’s grace, there is nothing left for us. There is nothing that will satisfy; there is nothing that will meet our needs.

We are called to live out this impatience with sin; to be intolerant of our selfishness, our need to gossip, and our need to belittle others. At the same time, this impatience is not natural for us. Though it goes against the eternity God has placed in each of our hearts and thus stirs within us a discontent over the brokenness in our lives, we often continue to crave it. And if we do not, but God’s grace alone, stand against it, it will threaten to rule us.

## A PASSION FOR GOD’S PEOPLE

I mentioned earlier, that for some of us, this leads passage drives us to a place of pride in one who stood against the onslaught of the influence of his culture. There is an appropriateness to this, and yet if this is all we see, we are missing something. Note that the peoples’ response to God’s judgment was not pride, but weeping [6]. But note also what we see from Phinehas’ calling and his action. And this moves us forward and ultimately gives us hope in something more.

As a priest in the Old Testament, Phinehas stood in a unique position between God and man. As the one who led the people of Israel in their daily, monthly, and yearly sacrifices, he stood before the people as God’s representative. He kept before them the truth of God’s holiness and beauty—guiding them in their relationship with God through sacrifice. At the same time, he stood before God representing the people. In bringing the sacrifices of the people before God, he offered to God what was necessary so that God’s wrath toward sin could be dealt with.

This was his daily practice. And we now see his actions as living out his calling with the confidence of Godly passion. At the point when Phinehas takes action, we read that a plague had

broken out [8], killing 24,000 of their number [9]. This, in conjunction with the judgment declared by God through Moses, had left the people weeping [6]. His actions stopped this plague. God’s assessment of this is that Phinehas ‘made atonement’ for the people. He covered their sin before God, as the passage makes it clear, he turned away the wrath of God toward the sin of the people [10; cf. 4]. His actions (along with the judgment declared by God) must be understood in what was accomplished for God’s people. The exposure to God’s wrath had begun to crush these people. But God did not simply change His mind and decide He wasn’t mad any more. According to God’s gracious provision that wrath was satisfied through these actions.

## THE PURSUIT OF GOD

Ultimately, then, alongside the hatred of sin and the passion for God’s people, Phinehas is commended by God for the pursuit of God Himself. God’s jealousy (that which Phinehas lived out) is God’s desire for us to desire Him above all else. It is the appropriate desire of a loving husband that his wife’s affection would not be shared with another. In short, God’s desire is that we would pursue Him in and above everything.

Phinehas’ pursuit of God is expressed in part through simple obedience to God’s command [4]. Phinehas saw what was a direct affront to God’s judgment—the verses are clear that in the midst of the weeping of the people, Zimri had completely rejected God’s command, and what blatantly flaunting it. Some commentators focus on whether or not Moses was acting out of inaction here. The verses don’t tell us; speculation is a challenge here. The focus of the chapter is that God has made a declaration regarding the actions of Phinehas. But part of the pursuit of God is through obedience.

Notice again, though, God’s words to Phinehas. God commends Phinehas not for the swiftness of his action, nor for his dynamic leadership, but for his jealousy. Phinehas’ concern was God Himself. Phinehas’ actions demonstrate a desire for people to depend on God for everything, to share that worship and need with no other. This chapter is about many things: idolatry, marriage, God’s wrath, and our sin; but it is about nothing if it is not first about God Himself.

## MORE THAN . . .

We can’t stop here, though. In contrast to most of the rest of the Old Testament people, we don’t see the mistakes in Phinehas’ life. And yet to simply say “do what Phinehas does” falls far short of the message and the hope of the Gospel. This is one event in the life of Israel. This is one of many scenes of rebellion and rejection of God for the sake of something far less. This is one instance where God’s wrath was turned away from His people.

And yet in Phinehas’ actions, and even in God’s promise to Him, our gaze is directed beyond this scene. Phinehas served daily, leading the people in sacrifices. They always needed more, because their sin was so regular and never-ending. And God’s wrath toward all of their sin needed to be dealt with. His anger and His jealousy are perfect. They are not mistakes. Even as we read of the spear turning away God’s wrath and atoning for the people, our hope is that nails pierced the hands of a perfect priest, one who spoke God’s truth and who bore the sin of God’s people. And this is the hope of the Gospel: the confidence of lasting peace with God.