NUMBERS

Chapter 25

*Moab Seduces Israel*

**While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, 2 who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. 3 So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. and the Lord’s anger burned against them. 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.” 5 So Moses said to Israel’s judges, “Each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor.” 6 Then an Israelite man brought to his family a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. 7 When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand 8 and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear through both of them—through the Israelite and into the woman’s body. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; 9 but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000. 10 The Lord said to Moses, 11 “Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them. 12 Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. 13 He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.” 14 The name of the Israelite who was killed with the Midianite woman was Zimri son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family. 15 And the name of the Midianite woman who was put to death was Cozbi daughter of Zur, a tribal chief of a Midianite family. 16 The Lord said to Moses, 17 “Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them, 18 because they treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the affair of Peor and their sister Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader, the woman who was killed when the plague came as a result of Peor.”**

**25:1–18** It is not until 31:8, 16 that we learn that the principal instigator of Israel’s apostasy was Balaam (see notes on 22:5, 8). Failing to destroy Israel by means of the mantic curse, Balaam seduced Israel by the Canaanite fertility rites of Baal. (CSB)

**25:1** *Shittim.* Another name for the region of Israel’s staging for the conquest of Canaan; it was across the Jordan River opposite the ancient city of Jericho (see Jos 2:1). (CSB)

*indulge in sexual immorality.* Israel’s engagement in the fertility rites of Baal involved not only the evil of sexual immorality. It was also a breach of covenant with the Lord, a worship of the gods of the land (vv. 2–3) and a foretaste of the people’s ruin in the unfolding of their history. (CSB)

*whore*. Scripture does not mince words in describing unfaithfulness to God. Idolatry here and elsewhere is However, this ugly word is more than a figure of speech when it refers to the worship of a fertility god such as Baal of Peor (v 3). In order to gain a favorable response from Baal, devotees engaged in sexual orgies (vv 6–8). Ter: “The people go to the daughters of Moab to gratify their lust: they are allured to the idols, so that they committed whoredom with the spirit” (*ANF* 3:636). (TLSB)

**25:2** *invited the people*. This enticement came “on Balaam’s advice” (31:16). When this enigmatic and perverse soothsayer was unsuccessful in his attempt to curse the Israelites, he devised a scheme that would undo his blessing. By their worship of Baal, the Israelites would incur God’s wrath and destroy themselves. (TLSB)

**25:3** *Baal*. Lit, “lord,” “owner.” The principal Canaanite god often associated with a particular place (here, Peor). Baal manifestations of fertility worship were in many locations. Baal was pictured in Canaanite mythology as a vibrant god riding a bull on the clouds. He often had the horns of a bull on his helmet. He held a club (perhaps representing thunder) in one hand and a spear (perhaps representing lightning) in the other. He was believed to exercise his power each year in the autumn and winter rains, reviving the dry soil and bringing the mysterious life force to animals and the land. Baal worship and other ancient Near Eastern fertility worship did not focus on commandments, sin, forgiveness, or life after death; it was thought instead that Baal guaranteed the dependable cycle of the growing seasons (TLSB)

**25:4** *kill them and expose them in broad daylight.* The special display of the corpses would warn survivors of the consequences of sin. (CSB)

*hang them*. Lest the bad example of the chiefs lead the whole congregation astray, they were put to death. God has “no pleasure in the death of anyone” (Ezk 18:32), yet He is a devouring fire when His holy will is flouted (Ezk 33:11; Rm 1:18–32; Eph 5:6). (TLSB)

**25:6** *brought to his family a Midianite woman.* The contempt for the holy things and the word of the Lord shown by Zimri (v. 14) and his lover Cozbi (v. 15) is unimaginable. (CSB)

Leaders of their people (vv 14–15). (TLSB)

*in the sight*. Bold defiance. (TLSB)

*weeping*. Likely due to repentant sorrow. (TLSB)

**25:7–8** Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson, leaps into action, in view of the Lord’s command (v 4).

**25:8** *pierced both of them*. Because Phinehas “was jealous for his God” (v 13), he and his descendants were to serve as high priests, whose foremost function was to make “atonement for the people” (v 13; cf 16:46; Ex 30:10, 15; 40:15; Lv 16:29–34). (TLSB)

*the plague*. Along with the punishment of the chiefs (v 4), the Lord sent further punishments among the tribes. Cf 11:33; 14:37; 16:46. (TLSB)

**25:9** *24,000.* The number of those who died because of the flagrant actions of the people in their worship of Baal exceeded even those who died in the rebellion of Korah and his allies (14,700; see 16:49). Again, the large number of those who died fits well with the immense number of the people stated in the first census (1:46) and the second (26:51). (CSB)

**25:1–9** Balaam worms his way into the spiritual lives of Israel and causes them to forsake God for the worship of Baal. The situation is reminiscent of the worship of the golden calf (Ex 32). As at that time, God’s anger against sin causes the death of thousands; yet it saves tens of thousands more. God is a God of both Law and Gospel. He metes out punishment to drive people to repentance but also has compassion on His wayward sons and daughters. • Lord, grant us zeal for Your ways, that we walk and live honorably before You. Amen. (TLSB)

**25:11** *He was as zealous as I am for my honor.* Cf. Ex 20:4–6. The zeal of Phinehas for the Lord’s honor became the occasion for the Lord’s covenanting with him and his descendants as God’s true priests (see note on Ge 9:9). This son of Eleazar contrasts with the casual wickedness of his uncles, Nadab and Abihu (see Lev 10:1–3 and notes). (CSB)

**25:12** *My covenant of peace*. Though Phinehas has acted as a warrior, his covenant shall be for peaceful service in the priesthood. (Cf Ps 106:30–31, where “intervened” is a term for prayer.) Gr Naz: “[Phinehas] was more praised because he prayed for the people when they had transgressed. Let us then also stand and make propitiation, and let the plague be stayed, and let this be counted unto us for righteousness” (*NPNF* 2 7:471). Phinehas had been appointed a priest as a descendant of Eleazar (cf Lv 10:6) but would now be the high priest. (TLSB)

**25:13** *jealous for his God*. Cf v 11. *atonement*. (TLSB)

**25:14–15** Emphasizes the important social rank of the sinners, which illustrates the depth of the problem and Phinehas’s boldness in addressing it. (TLSB)

**25:17** *Treat the Midianites as enemies.* Because of their active participation in the seduction of the Israelites. Midianites had been in league with Balak from the beginning of the confrontation (see 22:4, 7) and became the objects of a holy war (31:1–24). (CSB)

**25:18** *their wiles* … *beguiled*. Midianites were not simply acting as “neighbors” but intentionally sought to lead Israel into idolatry. (TLSB)

 **25:10–18** Phinehas strikes on the Lord’s behalf, stopping the idolatrous actions of Zimri and Cozbi. This is a First Commandment issue. God allows no other gods before Him and takes necessary measures to preserve His people. He always gives Himself fully for His people as demonstrated by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for us. • Protect us, Lord, from the sin of idolatry. Grant us faithful ministers and leaders who will strengthen our faith by Your Word and Sacraments. Amen. (TLSB)