

# The Jealousy of God

*Numbers 25*

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## A Truth That Runs Through All of Scripture

We are nearing the end of the book of Numbers, and I want to begin this morning by highlighting an important truth that runs through all of Scripture. It is this: God's righteousness, glory, purposes, goodness, nature, mercy, grace, love, and salvation are revealed through his people living in right relationship with him through faith. Jesus expresses this truth in his high priestly prayer:

*“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:22–23)*

How will the world know of Jesus? How will the world know of the love of God as expressed in the gospel? It will know through his people. The righteousness of God is revealed through the people of God living in right relationship with him through faith.

This is not merely a New Testament truth — it is a central truth of the entirety of Scripture. Way back in the book of Exodus, the people of Israel are saved from bondage and brought by God to Mount Sinai, where the Lord offers to enter into a covenant with them — where they are his people and he is their God. The purpose of that covenant is expressed in Exodus 19:5–6:

*“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

The whole world is the Lord's. And he has chosen Israel — not in spite of the world, not to spite the world, not to damn the world — but for the world to know him, its Creator. The role of a priest is to intercede for the people. As a kingdom of priests, Israel was to be a nation that intercedes for the whole world. As a holy nation, they were to live in such a way as to communicate to that world the holiness and glory of God.

The book of Numbers is the story of a people who are now in covenant with God, learning over the course of forty years what it means to live as a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation — so that through them, as voiced in the covenant to Abraham, the whole world may be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Through them the righteousness of God would be revealed. Through them the evil, disgusting, despicable, dehumanizing, and demonic practices of the land would cease, so that all of creation might rightly praise and worship its Creator.

I share all of this to give you a sense of the responsibility the Israelites carry. Can you understand why the Lord is so quick to discipline Israel for their sins? If they stumble, the whole world is denied the witness of the righteousness of God.

Numbers 25 is a story of them stumbling — and stumbling badly.

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## **The Fall at Peor**

The people of Israel are now at the location from which they will enter the Promised Land. The people of the land are terrified of them. We saw this last week when we looked at chapters 22–24 — the story of King Balak of the Moabites calling the seer Balaam to curse the Israelites, but the Lord blessing them instead. Because Balaam blessed rather than cursed, King Balak refused to pay him. So Balaam, in pursuit of his riches by another route, instructed King Balak in what he must do to bring harm upon Israel: lead them into sin. As Numbers 31:16 tells us, Balaam directed the women who served the Baal of Peor to lure the Israelites into sin. And it was not hard to do:

*“While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.” (Numbers 25:1–3)*

Here is how I imagine what happened. The people of Israel had been living off of manna for forty years and had complained about it repeatedly. Now, as they prepare to cross the Jordan River, they are encamped near major cities. Groups of very attractive women have come out to them with an invitation to love feasts — tables spread with cucumbers, pomegranates, dates, and all the food they had not tasted in four decades. It was not a hard sell. People attended these feasts given in honor of Baal, the Canaanite storm god, and during the feasts the hosts would lead the gathering into worship of Baal. It appears that the worship of Baal at Peor involved public exposure leading into sexual acts, and the women who invited the Israelites encouraged and led this form of worship. Thus the Israelites who came to these feasts joined with the other worshipers and participated in a form of worship that broke nearly all of the Ten Commandments simultaneously. And so we read again in verse 3: *“Israel yoked himself to*

*Baal of Peor*” — which is to say, addicted, enslaved, in bondage to a Canaanite god who is no god at all.

The people of Israel, on the very verge of entering the land as the Lord’s treasured possession, kingdom of priests, and holy nation, crash and burn. Instead of revealing the righteousness of God to the people of the land, they become like a people who do not know God.

And so we read on:

“*And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. 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.’” (Numbers 25:3b–4)*

The Lord told Moses to take the chiefs of the people and hang them — not because the chiefs bear responsibility for others’ sins, but because the chiefs themselves are the ones who sinned. When Balaam gave his instructions to these priestesses of Baal, I believe he told them to target the leaders. Get the leaders involved, and the whole nation will follow. I acknowledge this is a conjecture, but it rests on two details in the text.

First, the one individual identified by name in this story is a leader. Down in verse 14 we read of “Zimri the son of Salu, chief of a father’s house belonging to the Simeonites.” Second, the instructions Moses gives in verse 5 bring further clarity: “*Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor.*” Only those who have sinned are to be killed — which means the instruction to hang the chiefs reflects that the chiefs are precisely the ones who have sinned.

But this command is not carried out. The judges do not kill the leaders as instructed — probably because they are the leaders. Again, that is my conjecture, but it too rests on two details. First, a plague breaks out that will kill twenty-four thousand people (verse 9), and I believe the plague broke out because of disobedience to the instructions given. Second, there is what Zimri, chief of a father’s house belonging to the Simeonites, then does. If the judges were carrying out Moses’ instructions, Zimri would not have dared to do what he does next. He would have been in hiding — not boldly attempting to incorporate the worship of Baal into the worship of the Lord.

For this is precisely what he is doing when we read in verse 6:

“*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 at the entrance of the tent of meeting.*”

Zimri is doing more than flaunting his sin by bringing a woman home to meet the family. He is staging a demonstration of Baal worship in front of the congregation, directly before the tent of meeting — the very place where God is worshiped. Notice one more detail that points to this. Verse 7 says that when Phinehas *saw it* — not *saw them*, but *saw it* — he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand. Phinehas is reacting to witnessing something being done that dishonors God. He sees, there before the tent of meeting, the worship of Baal being performed — not outside the camp, but inside it, at the very heart of it. And if the worship of Baal continues to grow within the camp of Israel, in what sense are they still a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, a people that reveals the righteousness of God?

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## **Bad News in Our World**

I need to pause right here in the story and bring it to bear on our own day. Yes, this is an ancient story that stands on the other side of the cross, and there are things in it that do not apply to us directly. But some things do.

We Christians — regardless of race or nationality — are a royal priesthood. You and I have been tasked by the Lord to be proclaimers of the good news of Jesus Christ, who is the righteousness of God. We proclaim that righteousness by the words we speak, the lives we live, and the choices we make. We carry that responsibility.

But just as in our story today, there is a tremendous amount of temptation directed at both the church in general and Christians as individuals to not be the light we are created and called to be. One form of that temptation is this same worship of Baal that now appears in our day as the worship of sex. The temptation to bow before this god is on nearly every internet page, in nearly every movie and television show. It is at the heart of the culture war and many of our fiercest political battles. Our culture insists that you are not truly yourself unless you express yourself sexually — that the true self is defined by sexual preference, that you are not free unless you are sexually free, that true rights are fundamentally sexual rights. This is the Baal of our day, and many people suffer under its yoke.

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## **Grace in the Text: A Savior Is Sent**

So what does God do? He sends a savior.

To summarize how I understand the situation: Balaam instructed the religious prostitutes of Baal to identify and invite influential Israelites — leaders, sons of leaders — to worship Baal. The enticement was luscious feasts that devolved into sexual worship. Many of the leaders

went and became yoked to Baal — enslaved, addicted, blinded. The Lord then ordered the judges of Israel to deal with the problem by executing the offenders. That order was not carried out, which led to an outbreak of plague. And because of that failure to act, a son of one of the leaders, Zimri, was emboldened to bring the worship of Baal not just into the camp but directly before the tent of meeting. This is how sin works when it is left unaddressed: it does not stay where it is; it grows into something worse.

But there is one man named Phinehas. He is the son of the current High Priest and grandson of Aaron himself. Beginning at verse 7:

*“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 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. Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.” (Numbers 25:7–9)*

Reading on:

*“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘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. Therefore say, “Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, 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.”’” (Numbers 25:10–13)*

If you are here today and are not a Christian, or if you have never encountered this story before, I imagine you are thinking: *What in the world is going on?* Phinehas spears two people and God applauds because he was jealous? I want to address the jealousy of God directly, because that is really the heart of this message.

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## **The Jealousy of God**

The jealousy of God is difficult for us to hear and understand, because jealousy is so often something negative — used interchangeably with envy, which is a sin. How can God be a jealous God? I spent a great deal of time this week thinking, studying, and praying about what it means for God to be jealous. And to be clear, this is not some obscure passage that can be

explained away by appealing to a larger context. Throughout Scripture the Lord declares that he is a jealous God. Consider just a few examples:

“You shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” (Exodus 34:14)

“You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.” (Exodus 20:5)

“For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” (Deuteronomy 4:24)

As I focused on the jealousy of God this past week, I began to realize — as I had not before — how central and important this attribute is, and how his jealousy points to his greatness, his goodness, his love, and his justice. There are two critical aspects of God’s jealousy that must be understood.

**First: The jealousy of God is the legal defense of what belongs to him.**

The word *jealousy*, in its positive, godly usage, is a legal term. Godly jealousy can only exist within the context of a legal relationship — a covenant. A covenant is a legal agreement made for the purpose of relationship. This is different from a contract, which is a legal agreement made for the purpose of services rendered. The best example of a covenant in our world today is marriage.

When a bride and groom marry, they enter into a covenantal relationship that is distinct from every other relationship they have. What defines it are the wedding vows — promises to forsake all others, to love and honor and cherish until death. These vows are pledges to give special affection and honor only to that other person. When a groom says to his bride at the altar that he promises to love, honor, and cherish her, forsaking all others until death parts them, he is promising her that his loving affection belongs to her alone. Which means that his affections are no longer his own to give away — they now belong to his wife, as hers belong to him.

If there came a day when that husband gave his affections to someone else, he would be robbing his wife of something that belongs to her. And out of that wife would rightly arise anger, grief, sorrow, and wrath — all the emotions that jealousy gathers together. This is good, godly jealousy: the defense of what is mine.

God is like this. He has entered into a covenant with his people, and vows were exchanged. The Lord promised Israel:

“You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5–6)

“I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.” (Exodus 6:7)

And Israel, for their part, promised in this covenant that the Lord alone is God — that they would have no other gods before him, bow down to no idols, and give all glory, honor, worship, praise, and thanksgiving to him alone. His name would be held in honor among them and never taken in vain.

Thus when the Israelites bow themselves down before the Baal of Peor, they are not simply doing something wrong. They are robbing God of what belongs to him. When Scripture says that God is a jealous God, it means that God does not like to be robbed. More than that — he refuses to give his glory to anyone or anything else:

“I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.” (Isaiah 42:8)

When his glory is given to another, when the praise and thanksgiving that is due him is redirected to something else, when his name is dishonored — in God there arises anger and grief and sorrow and wrath, all the things that jealousy gathers together. God defends what belongs to him. He will not give his glory to another.

Before moving to the second point, I want to pause and note what ungodly jealousy looks like — jealousy as a sin. Jealousy is godly when I am defending something that belongs to me. Jealousy becomes a sin when I seek to grasp something that does not belong to me. Think of the teenager who has a crush on a girl, but she dates someone else, and the teenager burns with jealousy. Her affections were never promised to him; he has no right to them. His jealousy is envy, and it is a sin. Or consider two people who are dating but have made no covenant with each other. Without real promises given, there are only assumptions — and so there will always be an unhealthy jealousy in the relationship: Who are you texting? Why did you talk to that person? Each partner is trying to claim ownership of something that has never been given. Godly jealousy defends and protects what is mine. Ungodly jealousy grasps after what is not mine.

### **Second: The jealousy of God is a zeal to preserve what is precious.**

I am drawing here from J. I. Packer’s *Knowing God*, where he writes that God’s jealousy is “a praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious.” In the context of Israel, what is supremely precious to God? He has already told us: “You are my treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5). There is a special preciousness that God has for those who have entered into

covenant with him, and there is a zealously in God to protect and preserve what is precious to him.

Let me bring this down into an illustration. If a man began bringing flowers to my wife, trying to woo her away from me — sending gifts, writing letters, showing up at night to serenade her — I can guarantee you that the serenade would be very short, because I would not allow him to finish it. I would act against that man in order to protect what is precious to me: my wife and our life together.

God is like this. He zealously preserves and protects what is precious to him, which is his people.

This is what Scripture means when it says that Phinehas “*was jealous with my jealousy among them.*” Phinehas is at the tabernacle. He sees Zimri bringing a Midianite woman to the tent of meeting, signaling his desire to incorporate Baal worship into the worship of the Lord God. Phinehas becomes enraged — first, because Zimri is robbing God of the worship and honor and glory that belong to him and redirecting them to Baal of Peor; and second, because Phinehas is a man who treasures what God is doing in all of creation through the covenant. God is dwelling among his people, and all of creation gets a glimpse of who this God is. That covenant, that relationship, is precious to Phinehas — and so he stands to defend it.

He jumps up with a spear in hand and drives it through Zimri with such force that it passes through him and into the woman as well.

Before moving on, I want to make one thing clear. Moses had authorized the judges of Israel to execute those who had yoked themselves to Baal of Peor (verse 5), and Phinehas was one of those judges — as we can see from Numbers 31, where he leads the armies into battle in the same capacity as the judges in the book of Judges. He had the authority to do what he did. I highlight this because you and I do not have that authority. The church has no authority to take the lives of other people. What Phinehas does is not available to us as Christians, and it is not the takeaway from this story.

What we are to emulate in Phinehas is his heart. His jealousy is this: he holds God — and thus his relationship with God — as the highest possible good, as supremely precious. To him, the Lord alone receives all honor and glory and majesty. This is the heart of Phinehas, and it describes the faith that pleases God.

Is this your faith? Is the Lord your highest good? Is he supremely precious to you? Do you give him the thanks and honor and glory that are due him? Are you jealous for God?

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## **Christ, the Fulfillment**

You can be — and should be — because he is jealous for you.

God is jealous for his glory, that which belongs to him. And he is jealous for you, because you are precious in his sight. So precious, in fact, that he has done something to draw you close to him. I am always amazed at how so many things in the Old Testament point to Jesus — and even here, in this story, the pattern appears.

Those who had cursed God by worshiping Baal were to be hung on a tree. Jesus was hung on a tree.

The one who sinned was pierced with a spear. Jesus was pierced with a spear.

Why? Because he was jealous for you. You are so precious in his sight that he became the curse hung on the tree and died. He took what was ours — our death, our curse, our punishment. And he gave to us what is his — his life, his joy, his fellowship with the Father.

And this is why what was promised to Phinehas finds its fulfillment in Christ. He is the fulfillment of the covenant of peace. He is the fulfillment of the perpetual priesthood — forever acting on our behalf, the one mediator between God and man, the great High Priest who ever lives to make intercession for us.

God is jealous for his glory, and he will not give it to another. God is jealous for you, and he will not let you go. This is the God who meets us in Numbers 25. This is the God who meets us at the cross.