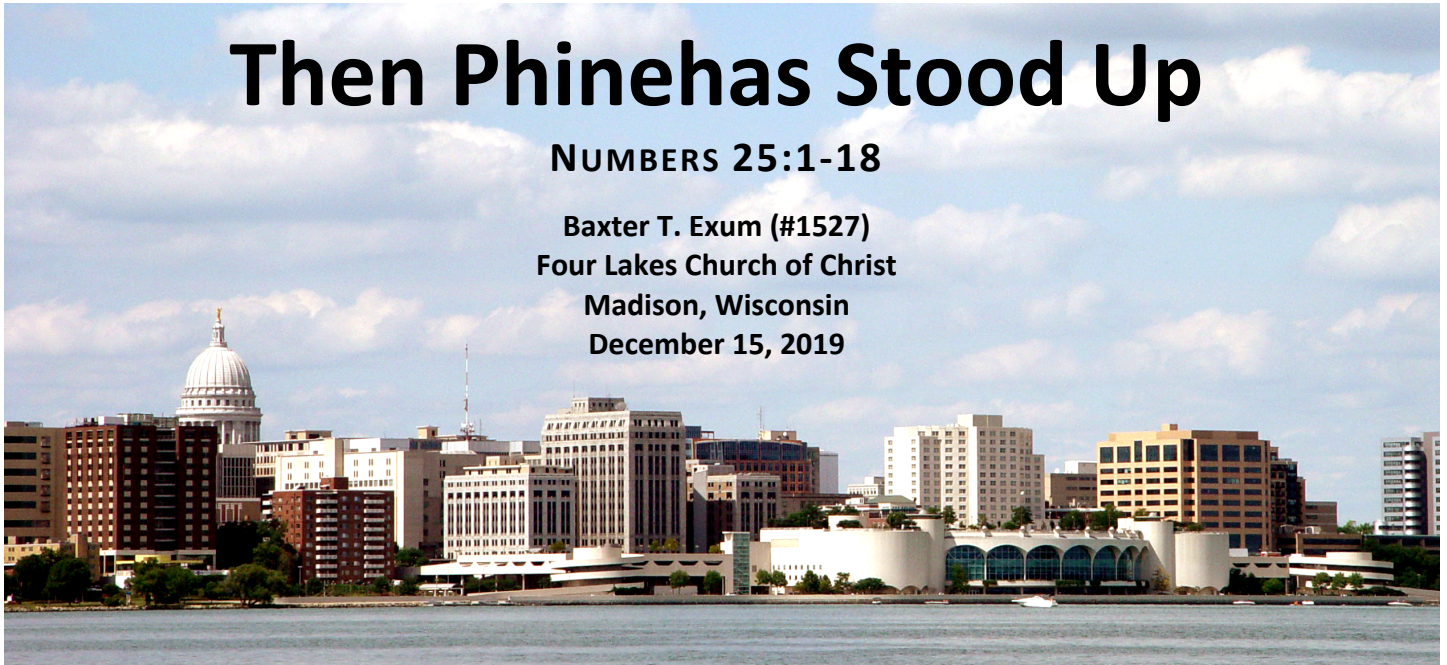


Then Phinehas Stood Up

NUMBERS 25:1-18

Baxter T. Exum (#1527)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
December 15, 2019



This past Wednesday evening, we studied Psalm 106, where the author is summarizing the history of God's people, and in that Psalm we came to verses 28-30, where the text says that,

- ²⁸ ***They joined themselves also to Baal-peor,
And ate sacrifices offered to the dead.***
- ²⁹ ***Thus they provoked Him to anger with their deeds,
And the plague broke out among them.***
- ³⁰ ***Then Phinehas stood up and interposed,
And so the plague was stayed.***

We just briefly mentioned how this describes Phinehas getting angry at two people apparently committing sexual sin with each other, and how Phinehas stands up, takes a spear, and simultaneously kills both the man and woman by spearing them together through the belly, most likely as they are in the act. We moved along quickly, since Psalm 106 is rather long, but right after class, one of our teens runs up to me immediately and basically says, "Wait just a minute! You need to tell me more about this spear thing!" And it is a dramatic account, so I did the best I could to just briefly summarize what happens here. As you might know, we are working through some sermon requests right now, so I thought there might a value to all of us looking at the background to this passage this morning.

As I prepared for today's lesson, I started by wondering whether I might be able to find a spear in time for today. I had visions of one of the most memorable sermon illustrations of all time as we pass an actual spear around the room – children ooh-ing and aah-ing, parents gasping in terror. This is something that all of us might remember for a very long time. So, I went online, but a quick search of Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace let me know that nobody in the Madison area has any spears available for sale right now. This is not a big Christmas item, apparently. I did remember a friend of mine doing a mission trip many years ago (perhaps to Nigeria), he was out in the bush somewhere, and a tribal leader actually gave him a 12-foot long ceremonial spear as a gift in exchange for preaching the gospel. And I remember him talking about bringing it through the airport (this is obviously before 9-11), and as I remember it, they actually allowed it and laid it in the aisle of the airplane. But I couldn't even remember who that was, and there wasn't time to get it here by today anyway.

On Craigslist, I did find what is known as a bale spear, an attachment for a skid-loader, designed to spear bales of hay to move those bales around on the farm. But, that is probably not what is referred to in Psalm 106. So, I kept looking, and I did find a fish spear. This is probably closer to what I was looking for, but still, this is probably not what is referred to in Psalm 106, either. Pictures of Brittany Spears kept popping up. None of those were suitable for displaying during worship, so I kept on scrolling with those.

The closest I got were some spears on Amazon – some were decorative, but many were functional, intended primarily for hunting boar. Some of the reviews had some awesome pictures of those spears in action, but again, very graphic, and like Brittany Spears, not really something I wanted to show during worship. For a brief moment, I thought about ordering this one, but it wouldn't get here in time, and then I also noticed the shipping - \$40 on a \$66 purchase! That's not something I wanted to do, so I concluded on Thursday that a few pictures might need to suffice.

Then we get to Friday, and for some reason a preaching buddy of mine down in Illinois posts a picture on Friday the 13th! And I don't know if I have just missed this through the years, but the dude is holding a spear! Either this is new, or I just have spear on the mind. I don't remember Jason having a spear. My news feed is starting to fill with spears!

I'm finally moving on and away from the spear obsession, and later on Friday I'm reading a story on Madison.com, and suddenly an ad pops up, trying to sell me some kind of leather Viking helmet! By searching for spears, I have now triggered the internet into making me think that I am obsessed with all kinds of ancient weaponry! I am now scared to go online. There are now people in this world who think that I am interested in a leather Viking helmet. The things I will endure for the teens of the congregation!

But I do want us to go back and study the spear incident. It is found in Numbers 25 (p. 262). To put this in context, we are right at the end of the 40 years in the wilderness, and God's people are now camped pretty much across the Jordan River. The map on the wall up here is from a number of years later, but it shows something important, the location of the Moabites. I want us to picture this. The Israelites are a group of perhaps somewhere between 2-3 million people. In my mind, I picture the entire population of Chicago. I checked yesterday, and the population of Chicago is around 2.7 million right now. So let's picture this: A group of people the size of Chicago has moved up into this area and they have set up camp just east of the Jordan River. And we know that the locals are absolutely terrified. This was predicted by Moses many years earlier in Exodus 15:14-16, in the song of Moses right after the crossing of the Red Sea,

- ¹⁴ ***The peoples have heard, they tremble;
Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia.***
- ¹⁵ ***Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed;
The leaders of Moab, trembling grips them;
All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.***
- ¹⁶ ***Terror and dread fall upon them;
By the greatness of Your arm they are motionless as stone;
Until Your people pass over, O Lord,
Until the people pass over whom You have purchased.***

And now, here we are, 40 years have passed, and the Israelites are now camped out right here. And the surrounding nations are terrified. Imagine the entire population of the City of Chicago camped out in McFarland

at Babcock County Park, right by the river between Lakes Waubesa and Kegonsa. Well, starting in Numbers 22, the people of Moab take some desperate measures to try to save themselves from this invasion. They know they are not strong enough to defeat the Israelites militarily (they are completely outnumbered), and so the King of Moab basically hires a prophet to curse the Israelites. He finds a guy named Balaam and promises him all kinds of riches if he will only curse Israel. And Balaam loves this idea. He is a for-profit prophet! However, the harder he tries to curse Israel, it keeps coming out as a blessing! Balaam is the guy whose donkey starts talking to him. He is on his way to curse Israel, but his donkey talks him out of it! All of this is in Numbers 22-24, but ultimately, the King of Moab is unable to get Balaam to curse the Israelites.

However, as we will find out later, Balaam has another idea. He gets creative. At the time, we don't know that Balaam is behind this, but we find out about it later. Balaam seems to know that God's covenant to bless Israel is conditional upon their obedience, upon their faithfulness. And so, instead of defeating them in battle, instead of cursing them in some way, the next phase is to try to tempt them to be unfaithful. If we get them to sin, then God will get mad and destroy them for us! And I should point out that this whole incident with Balaam actually takes up more space in the Bible than the entire conflict with Pharaoh, 40 years earlier! That should tell us something about how serious this is. Balaam's advice to the King of Moab probably came closer than just about anything else to completely derailing God's plan to bring the Israelites into the Promised Land.

So, with this in mind, let's please look together at the damage that is caused and the role that one courageous individual with a spear plays in saving the day. And for a title, I'm using a line from Psalm 106, ***"Then Phinehas stood up,"*** because, as we are about to discover, Phinehas standing up becomes a crucial moment in the history of God's people. Notice, please, all 18 verses of Numbers 25,

¹ While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. ² For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the Lord was angry against Israel. ⁴ The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel." ⁵ So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor." ⁶ Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting.

⁷ When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand, ⁸ and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body. So the plague on the sons of Israel was checked. ⁹ Those who died by the plague were 24,000.

¹⁰ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹¹ "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy. ¹² Therefore say, 'Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; ¹³ and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel.'" ¹⁴ Now the name of the slain man of Israel who was slain with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, a leader of a father's household among the Simeonites. ¹⁵ The name of the Midianite woman who was slain was Cozbi the daughter of

Zur, who was head of the people of a father's household in Midian. ¹⁶ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁷ "Be hostile to the Midianites and strike them; ¹⁸ for they have been hostile to you with their tricks, with which they have deceived you in the affair of Peor and in the affair of Cozbi, the daughter of the leader of Midian, their sister who was slain on the day of the plague because of Peor."

I know there is quite a bit of information here, but for the next few moments I want us to notice how awful this situation is, I want us to think for a moment about how Phinehas responds to what he sees, and then I want us to wrap it up by thinking about God's reaction to what Phinehas does.

I. But first, let us think for a moment about the SHOCKING VIOLATION that takes place here.

Again, we are not told until later that Balaam is behind this, but in the first six verses, we have all of Israel camped out just over the Jordan River, across from Jericho, and they are committing sexual sin with the daughters of Moab. Again, the Israelites don't know this at the time, but the Moabites have sent these women on a mission: To pull the Israelites away from God, so that God turns on his own people and destroys them. And in a sense, this is an ingenious plan! Balaam, having been prevented from offering a false curse, knows that God always keeps his word, he knows that God has promised to destroy his own people if they turn away to other gods, and so he uses this as something of a work-around. And it works, doesn't it!

The Moabite women prepare a tempting meal for these men who've eaten nothing but manna for the past forty years, they invite the leading men of Israel to sacrifice to their gods, and that is what they do. They eat and they bow down, and the text tells us that they ***"join themselves to Baal"*** (in verse 3). Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 6 that we are not to be ***"unequally yoked"*** to unbelievers. That is exactly what happens here. They aren't married at this point, but they are dragged along (by the belt, we might say). They have joined themselves to Baal. This, by the way, is the first reference we have to God's people worshiping Baal. And if it's not clear here, Paul will go on to use this incident to give a warning about sexual sin (in 1 Corinthians 10). So many times, sexual sin leads to something else. We see it all the time (Sodom and Gomorrah, Samson, King David, and on and on), and that is what happens here. There's the temptation, and then sin, and then more sin.

And immediately, God reacts to all of this just as is expected. He is angry, and he commands Moses to take the leaders and to execute them in broad daylight, make an example of them, and he needs to do this immediately, so that God's anger can be turned away from Israel. There is some discussion on what happens next, but it seems that Moses perhaps does not immediately do exactly what God commands. Instead of executing all of the leaders, we find that Moses then turns around and tells the leaders to execute just those men who have done this thing. It seems to me that this is at least a little bit different from what God commands. It seems that God's wrath is immediate. A plague starts making its way through the camp, and as the people are coming together to mourn the mounting deaths, a man from one of the leading families comes right into the middle of the camp with a Midianite woman on his arm, he walks right past Moses and the entire congregation, and he's right there at the doorway of the tent of meeting. I would suggest that he's flaunting it: Look at what I can do! Look at what I can get away with!

And there's so much that is shocking here. It all happens so quickly. It spreads (nearly everybody seems to be involved). It is brazen – they don't care. And this is huge. This isn't a little sin, but they have openly violated at least three of the Ten Commandments, all at once, and all right out in the open. And this one man seems to be

bragging about it, bringing this Midianite woman right into the camp. If I'm understanding verse 6 correctly, he's bringing this woman back home to meet his family.

This is a shocking violation. It's exactly what God has specifically warned about, over and over again. We can almost imagine a brief moment of stunned silence. Wow! I can't believe what this guy is doing! People are dying left and right, and this guy is flaunting his sin right outside the tabernacle. He introduces her to mom and dad and then he takes her right into the bedroom.

II. This brings us to what happens next: On the spot and without hesitation, a man by the name of Phinehas sees what is happening, he gets up, he takes a spear in his hand, goes after the man into the tent and pierces both the man and the woman completely through.

There is no delay, no warning, no arrest followed by a lengthy trial, no judge or jury, he doesn't ask permission, there's no discussion of any kind, but Phinehas sees what happens and he almost instinctively does what needs to be done. Immediate death. **A ZEALOUS AND DECISIVE RESPONSE**. He grabs a spear and kills this son of a prominent man along with the Midianite who is also the daughter of a ruler of her people. Phinehas takes no thought of himself or of any possible consequences. These people are dishonoring God, and Phinehas makes it stop.

As a priest, Phinehas knows the Law. He doesn't need some special revelation from God to reassure him that this is the thing to do. God had already revealed what to do in these situations. I find it interesting that Moses is pretty much silent here. Phinehas doesn't wait for the okay to be given by Moses. And I'm also thinking: How embarrassing for Moses! As a leader, Moses should have been the one to do this, but for whatever reason, Moses doesn't do it. Nobody else is doing anything, so Phinehas gets it done. And in killing these two people, we find in verses 8-9 that the plague is stopped. At this rate, if Phinehas had not acted, and if they had continued to lose nearly 24,000 a day, Balaam's scheme would have worked, and the Moabites would have prevented the Israelites from entering the Promised Land, without ever going to war. Thankfully, though, Phinehas does what needs to be done, even though everybody else is silent. In verse 6, the text makes sure we understand that Moses sees this and that everybody sees this. Everybody knows, but nobody does anything. And that reminds us that we don't always need the permission of the majority. Or, as we sometimes say: God + one IS a majority. When the Bible describes something as sin, we don't need to be embarrassed to stand with God. Phinehas stood up, and he stood alone. Or more accurately, Phinehas stood with God!

III. Before we wrap it up this morning, I want us to notice GOD'S STAMP OF APPROVAL ON THIS.

And this is important, especially since this happens so quickly and since Phinehas acts alone. I'm reminded of what happens today when a cop makes a split-second decision and then the lawyers, and the media, and everybody else literally have years to second guess that decision. But we notice, starting in verse 10, that God steps in, and God wants Moses to know that Phinehas turned away his wrath because he was ***"jealous with God's jealousy among them."*** And not only that, but God also wants Phinehas to be recognized forever. He is given a perpetual priesthood, and the reason is: Phinehas was ***"jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel."*** In other words, Phinehas is held up as an example. God is basically saying here: I want all future priests to be like Phinehas. Look at Phinehas, and do that. Not only is it okay to be angry sometimes, but there are times when we **MUST** be angry. Phinehas kills these two, not because he doesn't like them, but because they are disrespecting God. We think of David the teenager, years later, who would be so upset that Goliath was taunting God, that David had to do something. And he did it immediately. We might also think of

Jesus and the cleansing of the temple. It is okay (and even good) to get angry, to get zealous, at the same things that make God angry. Then, in the next few verses, almost in contrast to Phinehas, the man and the woman are identified, publicly humiliated, for all of us to remember. And in the closing verses, God tells Moses to destroy the Midianites for what they've done here.

Conclusion:

As we come to the end of our study, and as we ask the "So what?" question, we might have a dozen applications. And there are some good God-approved conclusions I think we can very safely take away from this passage. I had quite a list going, but it started getting long. Balaam is referred to a number of times in the New Testament, and it started getting complicated. So I just scrapped it all and backed up and asked myself again, "So what?" Why is this passage in the Bible? If you're using your own copy of the Bible, go back and underline the word "*jealous*" or "*zealous*" in verses 11-13. It's the same word (depending on your translation), and it's found four times in only three verses. That's what this whole passage is about. What Phinehas does in verses 7-8 is an act of God-approved jealousy. Phinehas sees what is happening, and this man is on fire. He stands when nobody else has the courage to stand, and in an outburst of righteous anger, Phinehas has the courage to do what needs to be done.

Now, this lesson may apply to us individually in any number of ways. The New Covenant doesn't encourage us to go around spearing people. But maybe we see sin sneaking up on us personally – not a full frontal attack, but like what happened here with Balaam. We need to get mad enough to do something about it. Rip it out! Or maybe we see sin wreaking havoc in the life of a friend. We need to be jealous enough to say something. Even if the elders don't notice. Maybe you notice. Speak up. Or maybe we see some unscriptural practice starting to take root in the congregation. Say something. Others might be thinking it, but others might be cowards. Do something.

And since this question comes from one of our teens, I want to let you know that this right here, this is what we want to see in you. We want to see you have the courage to stand up and do what's right, even when it's hard. Ultimately, it doesn't really matter eternally if you struggle in school. We're not worried about the color of your hair. We don't care if you have tattoos and a few extra holes in your nose or your ears or whatever. I'm not worried about you walking while texting, or any number of things. Any number of those things that the stereotypical Boomer us supposed to get mad at the younger generations for doing. Who cares! But what we really want to see is you having the guts to stand up and get mad about those things that make God mad. We want to see you put His kingdom first, no matter what. We want to see you speaking up and doing something to help the fatherless and the widows. We want to see you guys fight back against sin. Don't just go along with it, but have the courage to struggle with it. Fight back. Stand up and do something spiritually important. Be different. Be holy. Read the Bible so you can be angry about the same things that make God angry. Be like David and Jesus. Be like Phinehas.

This morning, we are looking for people like Phinehas who want to be right with God more than anything, despite what anybody around us might say or how the world might react. The world is dying. The world, in a sense, is suffering through a plague. The good news is that Jesus (like Phinehas) stepped in and courageously put an end to it for anybody who will listen and obey. That takes courage. Confess your faith in Jesus as being the Son of God. Turn away from sin. Be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. If we can help, let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com