



The Fire of Phinehas

By Steve Gallagher

What happened that night across the Jordan River from Jericho would be spoken of in horror for hundreds of years to come.

For 40 years the Lord had painstakingly purged the love of Egypt out of His people in the wilderness. He had vigilantly protected them from the corruption of the pagan nations of the area. He had even weaned them of the carnal “flesh pots of Egypt.”

Now, as they sat poised to take the Promised Land, Satan used a turncoat prophet named Balaam to teach the Midianites how to destroy them. “This nation has a powerful God protecting them,” he told them. “You will never overcome them by force. However, I have a plan that is infallible.”

The next day, beautiful women arrived in the camp, inviting the Jewish men to a pagan festival that evening. After 40 years of eating manna, the thought of partaking in a lavish feast and sexual orgy was almost too tantalizing to pass up. They came to the sex party by the thousands, gorging themselves on sumptuous food, gulping wine, and indulging in the lewd and filthy perversions associated with Baal worship.

The utter carnality they gave themselves over to that night was bad enough, but there was something even more insidious than that at work here. Satan was not content to rob this new generation of their innocence. He wanted their souls.

The Lord attempted to limit the damage to His people by ordering Moses to have all of the guilty men publicly executed right away. Even as these death sentences were being implemented, one of the men brazenly paraded a Midianite princess through the camp and into his tent. This so provoked Jehovah that He ignited a plague which began sweeping through the nation. Thousands began dying. It was then that Phinehas, one of Aaron’s grandsons, intervened.

Before we conclude the story, however, it could be profitable to examine some of the ways this situation parallels what we are witnessing in today’s Christian world. We too have an enemy bent on our destruction. In a similar strategy, Satan is once again using sex to destroy the lives of God’s people. Over the past thirty years, sexual sin has gained an ever increasing momentum within the Church. The modern version of the Moabite temptress is pornography, which latches itself upon a man’s mind, filling it with evil.

As I pondered this biblical story in light of our present realities, I began to wonder what it would be like if modern church leaders had been present when this happened. No doubt a council representing the various groups of the Church would have convened.

Pastor Denny Denial, who lacks the wherewithal to help those in sexual sin, would have claimed that there really wasn't a problem. He would become so overwhelmed by his sense of helplessness that he would simply go into denial. "I think you're making far more out of this than is actually there!"

Self-Righteous Sam would express his disgust for the sinners. In an air of superiority reminiscent of the Pharisees, he would exclaim, "People like that just need to get it together!" His strong sentiments aren't based in a love for God's righteousness but in his disdain of anyone who struggles with obvious, outward sin.

Liberal Larry would be aghast at his utter lack of compassion. His solution would be to call for toleration. "I think we just need to embrace these people and make them feel welcome. After all, Jesus didn't condemn sinners; He loved them!" In his humanistic form of mercy, he equates God's love with a lack of concern over sin.

Religious Ron would see everything in simplistic terms. He has a formula for every situation he is likely to encounter. "If the person has confessed Christ with his mouth then he is saved and God's grace covers all of his sin!" He has adopted a mindset that overemphasizes grace to the point that people's behavior doesn't really matter—as long as they have said THE prayer!

Not to be outdone, Carl the counselor wouldn't come right out and claim that the offending parties were innocent of wrongdoing, he would simply spend so much time focusing on the lack of proper emotional nurturing they had received as children, that he would soon convince himself that they had no other alternative available to them. "What kind of behavior would you expect of them?" he would demand; "Look at how they were raised!"

God's way of dealing with these sinners that day would have left this group shocked and appalled.

When Phinehas realized that the plague sweeping through the camp was a direct result of this shameless couple's tryst, he grabbed a spear and ran to their tent. The two were locked in the throes of passion when the young priest burst in upon them and thrust the spear through both of them.

Phinehas was clearly God's champion on this day. So impressed was the Lord with this young man's decisive action that He immediately decreed that he and his descendants would perpetually retain the position of high priest. This is the kind of holy zeal the Lord wanted at the top of the priesthood.

And it was this very thing which David prophesied about the coming Messiah when he wrote, “For zeal for Your house has consumed me...” (Psalm 69:9) Yes, it is true that Jesus befriended sinners, but only in the hopes of leading them into the kind of repentance that would set them free of the shackles of sin.

How different is the feeble and spineless Jesus who is presented by many today. In the Foreword to Eric Ludy’s excellent book, *The Bravehearted Gospel*, my friend Ben Davenport writes the following:

“We have wholeheartedly embraced the sentimental, watercolor Jesus that seems to spend most of His time holding lambs and patting children on the head with some faraway, glazed-over, dreamy look in His eye. And we tend to shy away from, or altogether ignore, the man who spoke the truth of God so boldly that conspiracies were hatched, witnesses were bribed, politicians were entreated to bring about His painful and public execution... What do we do with that Christ who puts down the lamb and mounts the temple steps with whip clenched in white-knuckled fist...?”

We don’t like to think of Jesus in this way, but it was His Spirit that invoked the zeal of Phinehas that day. We might as well admit the fact that just because God is no longer striking people dead for their sin that does not negate His abhorrence of it. God still hates sin and there will be a day of reckoning for all those who flout His commandments.

The truth is that a lust for sin has swept through the modern Church. The great need for today is not teachers who look to explain away the guilt of sin but those who will call for its immediate eradication. We need leaders who will see sin through the eyes of a holy God. We need leaders who are willing to help the penitent and lovingly discipline the unrepentant. We need leaders with the fire of Phinehas!

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