

Back to the depths

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[0 : 00] If you're new this morning, you might be wondering why in the world we're reading Numbers 25.

That's because we've been journeying along with Israel in the book of Numbers for the last three months. And I trust that it's been an exciting ride for most of us. So if you want to know more, perhaps you can ask a regular member how they found it.

Or you can listen also to the past sermons on our website. But that's where we are, Numbers 25, this morning. So keep your Bibles open and there's a sermon outline as well.

Let's pray and really ask God for his help. Heavenly Father, I just pray now, Lord, that your word will be living and active. And even with passages that on the face of it seem as difficult as Numbers 25, we pray that you will soften our hearts, that you might help us to receive and to listen to what you have to say to us this morning.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Now as a pastor, like all pastors, one of the things I'm naturally concerned about is the spiritual health of our church.

[1 : 17] But it's actually surprisingly quite difficult to measure. What would some of the signs of a healthy church be? How should we try to measure it? Because we live in a modern age, where we're used to having access to lots of data, where we often try to break everything down into quantifiable criteria, and use KPIs to evaluate where we are, we often turn to external indicators to try to measure our spiritual health.

So for example, one of the things that I think most people will look for immediately, of course, is increased attendance. Surely we must be doing well if at the beginning of the year, we have 300 people in this hall, but by the end of the year, we have 400.

Or perhaps we nuance it a little. It's not just that we're getting more people on a Sunday, but we're getting more young people on a Sunday. I know quite a few of you have said to me over the past few months that you noticed this happening in KEC.

And I take it that all of you who mentioned this to me meant this to be a positive sign. Or perhaps we say, oh, no, no, no, no, no, what we need to measure is not the Sunday attendance, but how many people there are in our home fellowship groups, or our ladies fellowship, or our youth group.

That's more accurate. And then our treasurer interrupts by saying, yes, but don't forget the most important number of all. Look at the giving.

[2 : 52] If it's going up and up and up, then we're really healthy. So is that the best way to measure spiritual health? Another group might say, oh, no, no, no, it isn't.

You're focusing on the wrong thing. Don't focus on the raw numbers. Focus on whether we have a good spiritual atmosphere. That's a sign of a healthy church.

But of course the issue is, that's a very vague phrase. So the debate then moves on to what constitutes a good spiritual atmosphere. Is it when people say, wow, the worship, by which they mean the music, was incredible?

Is it when people say, I really felt the presence of God in the service today? Or is it when people say, I was so moved, I began to weep and cry?

Well, I hope you can begin to see that measuring the spiritual health of a church is not as easy as it looks. And that's why we often end up using external indicators, such as attendance numbers, or the felt experiences of a member.

[4 : 02] These are the signs we typically look for, whether we realize it or not. But are they the most significant ones? When we turn to the Bible, what signs do the scriptures encourage us to look for to help us measure spiritual health?

Well, this morning, Numbers 25 will help us in that regard. For nearly three months now, we've been journeying with Israel in the wilderness.

And I hope that you've all found the ride so far very illuminating indeed. And last week, when we arrived at the end of Numbers 24, you might be feeling quite good about Israel as a whole.

We know that they've had a few stumbles, but all looks well now. After all, if we were to measure them purely by external indicators, they look like they've finally gotten healthy.

For a start, they're numerous, aren't they? Next week, we'll be looking at some raw numbers again, as Israel takes a census for the second time in this book.

[5 : 12] But even before we turn there, we already know that they are doing well on this front. Remember what Balaam said in one of his oracles last week, for those of you who were here?

Who can count the dust of Jacob on number even a fourth of Israel? Despite all the depths in the wilderness, God has kept his promise to Abraham that they will be as numerous as the stars.

But perhaps even more importantly, they've been victorious. Israel didn't start out so well, of course, but in the last few chapters, they've won battles against the king of Arad, the king of the Amorites, and the king of Bashan.

So it would seem like they have every reason to be confident, especially as they stand on the threshold of the promised land. For not only are they numerous and victorious, they are blessed.

After all, last week, we saw a pagan king engage an internationally renowned pagan witch doctor to try to curse Israel. And what happened?

[6 : 29] Israel's old enemies end up blessing them. This pagan witch doctor is even used to prophesy about the coming Messiah that will emerge from Israel.

If that's not blessing, I don't know what is. By all external indicators, Israel is looking healthy. But as the commentator Gordon Wenham so perfectly puts it, it's on your outline as well, the Bible startles its readers by the way it juxtaposes the brightest of revelations and the darkest of sins.

The law given at Sinai was followed by the making of the golden calf. And here we have another classic example of this pattern.

For although Israel looks healthy at first sight, Numbers 25 warns us against judging merely by outward appearance.

They are not. They think they've arrived, there's nothing to be worried about, and so they let down their vigilance with disastrous consequences.

[7 : 43] And whenever we think we've spiritually arrived, well, that's when we let down our spiritual vigilance with similarly disastrous consequences.

So how do we know if we're healthy or not? Well, this morning, Numbers 25 will furnish us with four signs to help us gauge whether we are really spiritually healthy or not, according to the Bible.

And so let's explore these signs by exploring this sobering story in Numbers 25. Here's the first sign. We know we are healthy when we realize how dangerous sin is.

When we realize how dangerous sin is. In verse 1, the camera shifts back from the king of Moab to Israel in Shittim on the plains of Moab.

This will be their final location in the book of Numbers. After 40 long years, God has brought them within sight of the promised land with the city of Jericho in full view.

[8 : 55] He's cared for them, he's provided for them, he's protected them. So what happens? Verse 1, the man began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women.

If you were to look at a more literal translation like the ESV or the NASB, the language is even more shocking. They began to whore around.

They were playing the harlot. Now to grasp the gravity of the situation, we need to understand how the religion of these Moabites and Midianites work.

You see, the pagan religions of the day weren't just about idol worship with its ancient equivalent of Joss sticks and so on. It also often included what is commonly called sacred prostitution.

That is, they had women who made themselves sexually available at pagan temples and who would engage in illicit sexual activity as part of their religious worship.

[10 : 04] friendship. And so when the men of Israel were indulging in sexual immorality, it wasn't just about the physical act. The sexual activity they were engaging in had religious overtones to them.

That's why, verse 2, these Moabite women invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. And the people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods.

So what's happening here is not just physical adultery, but also spiritual adultery. It isn't just the seventh commandment being broken, but also the first of the ten commandments.

The spiral is swift, isn't it? What might have started out as an invitation to dinner became indulgence in bed, and finally idolatry in worship.

And it's quite sobering to realise that it wasn't just one or two individuals compromising. Just look at verse 3. So Israel yoked themselves to the bow of Peor.

[11 : 21] Not just one or two Israelites, but enough people that it can be said, Israel as a whole had joined themselves to another god.

Now how had it come to all this? After all, if we're reading the book of Numbers for the first time, we might not have expected chapter 25 to follow chapters 22 to 24.

And you might be surprised to discover that the answer is actually a familiar foe, Balaam, whom we met last week. Huh?

I thought we had left him behind. Plus, he's not even mentioned in this chapter. So what does Balaam have to do with all this? Well, just turn with me to Numbers chapter 31 verse 16 for a moment.

This verse is worth looking up. You see, when we turn there, we discover that Balaam isn't done with the people of God just yet.

[12 : 25] Let me read it and let me just put it on the screen as well. They, that is the Medianites, were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord's people.

And so it turns out that one of the key people behind this tragedy is Balaam. Now, if you still have any doubts whether Balaam is to be taken negatively, I think this seals the deal.

And it appears that Balaam was more dangerous than we realise. See, perhaps he had a brainwave as he got ready to pack his belongings to go back home after last week.

Since I can't curse Israel, he thought, why not try a different approach? Since he couldn't turn God away from blessing Israel, why not turn Israel away from God instead?

Perhaps he did some research, and upon seeing Israel's constant waywardness in the wilderness, decided that he had found a chink in the armour.

[13 : 43] All he had to do was to get Israel to forsake Yahweh and worship the Moabite gods. And so the plan is put into action. We're not sure how, we're not told, perhaps Balaam went back to Balak and advised him what to do.

And so as one commentator puts it, what the fathers of Moab could not do, their daughters were able to accomplish, to bring Israel to its knees sexually, morally, in false worship, and in great judgment.

This isn't, of course, to excuse Israel from their sin. They still bear ultimate responsibility for their actions. In fact, they are falling into sin is the point.

For as Matthew Henry, the 19th century pastor, observes about this passage, Israel's sin did which all that Balaam's enchantments could not do.

It said God against them. Verse 3 again, and the Lord's anger burned against them. So we need to realize how dangerous sin is.

[15 : 03] When we do, and therefore guard ourselves against it, that's a sign of good health. And conversely, when we don't, that's a sign of ill health.

You see, it's so easy to underestimate sin, isn't it? Here is Israel, fresh from seeing the bronze serpent in Numbers 21, blessed to the fool in Numbers 22 to 24, winning victory after victory in all those three chapters, by all external markers, looking successful.

But it's sobering to consider how easily they fell into temptation, temptation, and how far they fell into idolatry. Perhaps the victories all went into their heads just a little bit.

Maybe they thought, I'm doing well, so I deserve a reward. It's been a long journey. So what's wrong with a little attention from the pretty Moabite woman over there?

Nothing wrong with going out for a drink? But as the great Baptist pastor Spurgeon once observed, very few men can bear great success.

[16 : 21] For success can be just as dangerous spiritually as failure. When we're successful, we can become forgetful of the greatness of God and of the dangers of sin.

And we don't guard ourselves. Israel certainly didn't. And certainly one of the things I'm scared of most is becoming successful, however we define it, and falling into this trap.

I'm worried that should Casey do well, oh wow, there's lots of young people, then I'll let it go into my head, forget it's all about God, and then stumble into terrible sin.

I've seen it happen to enough people now that I'm no longer naive that it can't happen to me. And so once in a while, I pray, God, if being successful will have this effect on me, keep me from being successful.

I have to pray that again this week as I look at this passage. So let us not underestimate how dangerous sin is. And let us be on our guard against idolatry.

[17 : 30] And certainly that's how the New Testament applies this passage. In Revelation 2, our New Testament reading this morning, Christ speaks to the church at Pergamum.

And while the church has remained faithful despite persecution, Christ warns them against their toleration of certain idolatrous practices. When you do that, he says in Revelation 2, verse 15, you're letting Balaam infiltrate you all over again.

So how might the church in Sarawak fall into idolatry, even if unintentionally? Perhaps it's when we begin to make certain Christian personalities bigger than Christ himself.

Perhaps it's when we tolerate teaching that turns God into a giant Santa Claus who never asks anything of you. Perhaps it's when we downplay that call to be distinct, whether in the areas of sexuality or elsewhere, in the interest of appearing relevant to the world.

And individually speaking, we shouldn't underestimate the dangers of sexual temptation. Now that's not the only way we fall into idolatry, of course, and I don't want to give that impression.

[18 : 46] But that is how Balaam entice the Israelites, and so certainly it's an area to give attention to. Now, sex is God's idea.

We shouldn't think of God as being anti-sex. He gave it as a gift within the context of marriage to be enjoyed. But sex is like fire.

In its proper place, it's fantastic. If you've been to a country where there's snow and winter, you know how enjoyable a warm fireplace can be. But when it's not in its proper place, like the bushfires currently raging in the Amazon rainforest, it can consume you.

And so we need to guard against sexual temptation, whether that's installing filters on your browser, or avoiding certain places after working hours, or just being honest with a prayer partner.

Otherwise, we're in danger of being destroyed. And that takes us to our second sign. We know we are healthy when we recognize how destructive sin is.

[19 : 55] When we recognize how destructive sin is. In verse three, God's anger burns against them. Now, this appears not to be describing so much an emotional state, but actual judgment.

For in verses eight and nine, we discover that a plague against the Israelites has been unleashed. And in verse four, the Lord says 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.

the leaders had clearly endorsed such behavior. They had allowed the people to wander into idolatry, and so they have to bear responsibility.

They need to be punished for God's anger to be turned away, and as a very public warning to others. But faced with the need for bold action, Moses becomes paralyzed.

eyes. In verse five, he calls for a meeting of Israel's judges, and then tries to abdicate responsibility, watering down God's instructions and delegating his job away.

[21 : 18] And even then, it's not certain that Moses' more limited instructions to simply punish the lay people, not the leaders, is carried out.

In any case, the picture being painted here is that no one is doing what God tells them to do.

No one is doing anything about the sin that is literally killing everyone. God has given the solution, but no one is executing it.

The plague continues. And so does the indiscipline. In verse six, the unthinkable happens. Then an Israelite man brought into the camp 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.

The camp, of course, was meant to be off-limits to Gentiles. Never mind sacred prostitutes. And so far the immorality seems to be happening off-site.

[22 : 35] But this man, later identified as Zimri in verse 14, a son of a Simeonite leader, brings a Midianite woman, identified as Cosby in verse 15, a daughter of a tribal chief, right into the camp, before the very eyes of Moses of Moses, no less, to have sex.

It's utterly shocking. Here you have people weeping, either because of the ongoing sin or the ongoing judgment, it's hard to tell.

But in comes someone from a prominent family who says, by the way, while you're mourning over the death of your loved ones, or praying prayers of lament in your personal devotions, well let me go and have intimate relations in your midst.

He's showing open contempt of God. Well, just imagine if this were to happen in church today. Sin is destructive, isn't it?

It's destructive in two ways. It's destructive in the sense that it invites God's anger and judgment, but also destructive in the sense that, left unchecked, it can go from bad to worse.

[23 : 59] And we must recognize this and not let Satan blind us to this fact. You see, here are the two great lies of Satan. The first is this, you will certainly not die.

You will not certainly die if, if you decide to go against God's word and make up the rules yourself and just take that fruit. You will not certainly die, Zimri, if you decide that it's okay to commit physical and spiritual adultery so shamelessly.

You will not certainly die, Christian, if you decide to keep indulging in whatever wrong you're doing right now with impunity. But as we know, Eve was wrong.

As we'll soon see, Zimri is wrong. And Christian, you'll be wrong. Because Ephesians chapter 5 verse 5 reminds us Satan is lying.

For of this you can be sure. No immoral, impure, or greedy person, such a person is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

[25 : 16] Unrepentant sin invites God's judgment. Are you engaging in any right now? Flee. Don't let Satan murder you.

And here's the other great lie of Satan. It doesn't really matter. After all, is that your sin just between you and God? What does it have to do with me?

Right? You can go and do whatever you want as long as it doesn't harm anyone. But the Bible says such thinking is actually mistaken. The effects of sin never stay confined to a private space.

As 1 Corinthians 5 verse 6 reminds us, don't you know that a little yeast leavens the entire batch of dough? In other words, don't you know that unrepentant sin tolerated within a Christian community can spread and affect awe within it?

Because everyone stayed passive, Zimri became especially active. He obviously thought that he could sin boldly without any consequences since no one has acted against him so far, not God, not the leaders.

[26 : 34] Perhaps he was inspired by someone else engaging in similar activities. And so an unhealthy church is one where no one ever speaks up about someone else's sin.

Now, we should do so lovingly and wisely and sensitively, of course, but we shouldn't ignore it. And that's why in the study booklet our home fellowship girls have just started doing, Caring for One Another, Lesson 7 is entitled Talk About Sin.

Because that's part of caring for one another. And that brings us to our third sign. We know we're healthy when we resolve to be zealous for the Lord, when we resolve to be zealous for the Lord.

Finally, with things getting worse and worse, someone acts. In verse 7, we're introduced to Phinehas, and notice how he's introduced.

He's the son of Eliezer, and the grandson of Aaron. In other words, he belongs to the new generation, not the old.

[27 : 54] He's not part of the exodus generation that was condemned to die in the wilderness. And he's part of the priesthood. And when he saw the blatant sin of Zimri and Cosby, verse 7, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand, and followed the Israelite into the tent.

He drove the spear into both of them, right through the Israelite men and into the women's stomach. Then the plague against the Israelite was stopped.

The implication here is that they were already in the act when he kills them. And as a result of his actions, finally the plague is stopped. But not verse 9, before 24,000 people have already died.

I wonder if this episode shocks you. It certainly shocks me. Trust me. Even as one committed to preaching the whole counsel of God, I'm very tempted to skip this portion of God's word.

It's not a feel-good passage, is it? It's a very graphic judgment. And I think that's what God wants us to feel.

[29 : 18] He wants us to feel the wake of what's happening here, not to take it lightly. You see, Phinehas is not acting like some rogue vigilante here.

He's not poking his nose in places he shouldn't belong. For as God says in verse 11, Phinehas, son of Eliezer, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites.

You see, if he had not acted, there would be no Israel. There would be no God's people. God's judgment would have continued until everyone is gone.

and he did what Moses should have done. And notice what God specifically commands him for, verse 11 again. Since he was as zealous for my honour among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal.

You see, this passage is not saying that we can become a sort of Christian jachim, nor is it endorsing violence against those whom we think are anti-Christian.

[30 : 35] It's not about an action we should follow, but an attitude we should emulate. Let me say that again, it's not about an action we should follow, but an attitude we should emulate.

That's what the Lord commands. Phinehas was zealous for the Lord's honour. As a priest, his task was to defend the sanctity of the camp.

It was to uphold the holiness of the Lord, and it was to make sacrifices for sin. And he did all that as he drove the spear.

And because he was faithful, the Lord rewards him, verses 12 and 13. Therefore, tell him, I am making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood because he was zealous for the honour of his God and made atonement for the Israelites.

The high priest, at least under the old covenant, will always come from his line. So here's the question for us. Are we resolved to be zealous for the Lord's honour in the same way?

[31 : 51] When we are zealous for something, people around us know it because zeal translates into action. And so if you're zealous to keep fit, people will see it in the effort that we put in, whether that's hours in the gym, the way we watch our diet, and so on.

Well, are we resolved to be zealous for God in the same way? Can people around us see it? For Numbers 25 challenges us not just to guard against sin, but be zealous for the Lord's honour.

How can we tell if we are? Well, in his book Crazy Love, Francis Chan gives us some confronting examples of a lukewarm Christian to help us do some self-evaluation.

He writes, lukewarm people don't really want to be safe from their sin. They want only to be safe from the penalty of their sin.

They don't genuinely hate sin and are truly sorry about it. They are merely sorry because God is going to punish them. Lukewarm people don't really believe that this new life Jesus offers is better than the old sinful one.

[33 : 05] Or elsewhere, he writes this, lukewarm people are moved by stories about people who do radical things for Christ, and yet they do not act.

They assume such actions are for extreme Christians, not average ones. Lukewarm people call radical what Jesus expects from all his followers.

And perhaps that's why the people wept but never took action. Perhaps that's why Moses dragged his feet. Their hearts had become lukewarm. But it is the zeal of Phinehas that the Lord wants.

In verses 16 to 18, God takes idolatry so seriously that he tells Moses to treat the Midianite as enemies because they seduce Israel away from him.

Radical action must be taken. And so at this point, I hope we all feel the wake of this passage.

[34 : 10] I know I certainly do. But perhaps now, the way is so heavy that you're feeling a little crushed by it. For after all, who amongst us have not felt our hearts grow cold?

Which preacher has not always practiced what he proclaimed? So what now? Just try harder to stir up zeal in our hearts? Make sure that we withdraw from the sinful world?

Is that how we can maintain our spiritual health? Well, that question brings us to our fourth and final sign. And actually, this isn't really a separate sign.

It's actually what underlies the three other signs. We know we're healthy when we're real about our sin and our need for a saviour.

When we're real about our sin and our need for a saviour. You see, I think numbers 25 might just possibly be the lowest point of numbers.

[35 : 16] We've gone through 25 chapters. We've seen Israel spend 40 years in the wilderness with God who's been looking after them. And after all that, sin still has Israel so tightly in its grip.

If we're not convinced before that our biggest enemy is not black magic or our less than ideal circumstances or sickness, but sin itself, I hope the book of numbers have convinced us otherwise.

For numbers illustrates for us so very well what the theologians call the doctrine of total depravity. It's the truth that every part of human nature has been corrupted.

As the famous Pogo comic strip once proclaimed, we have met the enemy and he is us. And so that means redrawing from the world isn't going to solve the problem because the enemy is us.

The problem is us. But don't be crushed because numbers 25 should give us great hope as well.

[36 : 28] Because we know numbers 25 does not come to us on its own, but as part of the whole Bible story. It is not the end. After all, as we all know, Jesus says the whole Old Testament is about him.

And the zeal of Phinehas does not just lay down an example for us, although it does do that in part. Rather, he points ahead. For look at Phinehas.

Here is a priest who in his zeal made an atoning sacrifice, stopped the plague, and averted God's wrath.

And so he points ahead to the one who was consumed with zeal for his father. For it was Jesus consumed with zeal who made a whip out of cords, overturned the tables, and drove the merchants from the temple.

It was Jesus consumed with zeal who chose to obey his father's will in the wilderness even though he was tempted by Satan, and yet he did not give in to idolatry and worship the devil despite his hunger and tiredness.

[37 : 45] And it was Jesus consumed with zeal who also made atonement for his people. But he did it in a different way to Phinehas.

Phinehas consumed with zeal drove a spear through the idolaters. But Jesus consumed with zeal had a spear driven through his side.

We had committed idolatry, and he was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. And in doing so, he spared us from God's wrath.

God himself stepped down into darkness to spare us from God's judgment. And so God has made a new covenant with his people. As the eternal priest, he makes us now into a kingdom of priests who will last into eternity.

And so when we look at the zeal of Phinehas, well let that not lead us first of all to our own weak zeal, but let that lead us first of all to the zeal of Jesus.

[39 : 05] Can you see how zealous Jesus was to save you? And can you see how zealous Jesus was to do the Father's will? Because they are one and the same. Jesus died on the cross because that was the Father's will, to save us.

And only after looking at the zeal of Jesus, only after looking at the zeal of Jesus, then look again at the zeal of Phinehas, and let that challenge our half-heartedness.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, choose to idolatry. Choose to lift high the Lord's name. Choose this day whom you will serve. So brothers and sisters, how can we tell if our church is spiritually healthy?

It's when we are real about our sin and our need for a saviour. It doesn't really matter if we have a lot of people, or even a lot of young people, or that people feel emotional in our services, if we are not deeply broken by our sin, aware of how dangerous and destructive it is.

But when we find ourselves hating our own sin more, and longing to get rid of it, well, that is a sign of spiritual health. And when not only are we deeply broken by our sin, but eager to confess it to Jesus, well, that's an even better sign.

[40 : 39] Because that means we see the real Jesus. We see the Jesus whose zeal is not to condemn us, but to forgive and restore us.

And when such a culture begins to grip our church, where we are realistic about our sin, but joyful about grace, and zealous for his name, my goodness, if that culture really, really, really, really grips our church, well, KEC would be absolutely the best place to be.

So that's what I leave you with. Shall we walk together so that KEC may notice you of Phinehas? I just want to give us a short moment now in silence just to consider what we heard from God's word.

And then I will lead us in prayer and we will sing our closing song. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Heavenly Father, you are here with us this morning.

[42 : 16] You are present with us. And I pray that your Holy Spirit be working a very deep conviction in our hearts that you'll be turning our church and transforming our church into a healthy one, one that is zealous for your name, that one that knows that we are great sinners but is joyful because we have the greatest, most gracious saviour of all.

I pray that this moment will not pass us and be forgotten but that this will prove to be a good turning point in our church.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.