

I Will Dwell in the Midst of You
Part 3
Read Numbers 25:1-3

You might have thought that forty years of wilderness wandering would have warned the second generation of Israelites to stay clear of the sins of their fathers. Instead, at the completion of the forty years, these children born to those who had worshipped the golden calf copied them. Like their forefathers, the second generation Israelites ate, drank, and caroused in an idolatrous covenant with an idol. This time it was Baal, the god of Peor. Thus, idolatry and breaking covenant with Yahweh their God frames the wilderness years like a set of diabolical bookends.

Shortly before Yahweh would bring the nation of Israel into the wilderness, He declared to Israel, “I will be your God, you will be my people, I will dwell in the midst of you,” (Ex. 6:7). In order to evidence His presence amongst them, Yahweh began to instruct Moses to build a tabernacle to house His glory. As Moses was on Mount Sinai, receiving the blueprints for the Tabernacle, the Israelites grew fearful at Moses’ absence. Thus, they constructed an idol to lead them on. Moses’ prayer caused Yahweh to relent of His desire to totally destroy His people at this travesty. Because of His commitment to His covenant, Yahweh announced, “Yahweh, Yahweh God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ...who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin... (Ex. 34:6-7). And, because of God’s merciful character, the tabernacle instructions resumed; God’s plans to dwell in the midst of His people were not thwarted.

This display of lovingkindness and forgiveness should have prohibited Israel from ever rebelling against her God again. But it was not to be so. At Kadesh Barnea, ten spies had alarmed the people, insisting that there were giants in the Land. The Israelites believed the spies instead of God and revolted, threatening to choose a new leader who would return them to Egypt. Forty years in the wilderness was the consequence of their actions. By the Baal of Peor incident, this first generation had died, and their children were on the brink of entering the Land Yahweh had promised them.

As Israel camped east of the Jordan River, preparing to set foot in the Promised Land, “the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab” (Num. 25:1). That is, they took part in an idolatrous, sexual orgy reminiscent of the orgy their fathers had participated in while dwelling at the base of Mount Sinai. The Moabites, unbelievers in the one true God, had infiltrated the Israelite camp in order to draw them into “the sacrifices of their gods” (v. 2). Moreover, just as the previous generation had done, Israel broke covenant with Yahweh when they “**ATE** and bowed down to [the Moabite] gods.”

This sexual union with unbelievers is described as Yahweh’s people “joining themselves (sexually) to Baal of Peor” (v. 3). Throughout Old Testament history, Israel is accused of idolatry because she “commits flagrant harlotry” with the unbelieving nations (Hos. 1:2). Furthermore, these idols were described by the Prophets, as well as by Paul, as “demons” (Deut. 32:17 and 1 Cor. 10:20). Therefore, when the Israelites at the Baal of Peor scene were committing sexual atrocities with the unbelievers, they were fornicating with the Devil.

No wonder Paul warns against being “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” for “what agreement has Christ with Belial (Satan)?” or “what agreement has the temple of

God (believers) with idols?” (2 Cor. 6:14-16). In other words, marrying or fornicating with an unbeliever is viewed, by God, as yoking ourselves to Satan.

On the other hand, though the consequences were severe for these second generation Israelite idolaters, Yahweh forgave them as He had forgiven their parents. Not long after the incident with Baal of Peor, Yahweh claimed Israel as “His people” and was willing to be “their God” dwelling in the midst of them (Deut. 29:13). Additionally, the Church need not feel jealous of God’s love for Israel. The gracious, compassionate God of Israel is the God of the Church. Hence, it is not astonishing that God affirms to the Church, in 2 Corinthians 6:16, as He had to Israel, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”