

“Narratives for One-Anothering, Part 5: Zeal” Numbers 25:1-18; James 4:4-10

Introduction

I don't normally do this sort of thing. But in a strange passage like we have here, I think it's helpful to let you know where I am coming from as I preach this text.

There are basically two ways of approaching the Bible:

- 1) 2 Tim 3:16-17: All Scripture is breathed out by God, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, that we might be completely equipped for every good thing God has called us to do as followers of Jesus. John 5:39: And all Scripture testifies to Jesus.
- 2) *Scripture* is not God's Word: Only Jesus is. Because obviously, these folks say, there are horrible, offensive things in the Bible. And of course the Bible contradicts itself, etc. We need to read the Bible, and *listen for* the Word of God. For Jesus. The revelation of Jesus may contradict other parts of the Bible.

I believe the first approach.

I believe the Bible is God's breath, God's Word.

So I have two prayers for us as we look at this strange part of Scripture:

First prayer: “Lord, since you breathed out this strange Scripture passage, how do you want to use it to teach me, rebuke me, correct me, and train me for the good you've called me to do?”

Second prayer: “Lord God, your Son Jesus, your Word incarnate, says that all of your Word is ultimately about him. Use your breath, your Word, the Scriptures, to speak Jesus, your Word, to me” (John 5:39).

With those as our prayers, let's look at 3 things here:

1. Our absent zeal
2. God's awful zeal
3. Christ's atoning zeal

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First, Our Absent Zeal

CS Lewis famously said that our desires are not too strong, but too weak. We were made for greater joy—to enjoy *God*. But in our absent zeal, we’ve tried to satisfy ourselves with good things that aren’t God. Absent zeal is self-destructive.

But our absent zeal is also *offensive*. We’re not just missing out. We’re declaring that God is not valuable—not worth pursuing zealously.

Over and over, from Genesis to Jesus, God says: have zeal!

Passionately love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; passionately love your neighbor as yourself!

Let’s start with Adam and Eve. They had true zeal for God and one another. Until one day, when they loved knowledge and control more than God. Absence of zeal.

The salary of sin is death (Rom 6:23). *Any second chances* that God gives to us are totally unearned.

God decides to stay with Adam and Eve and their family.

But by Genesis 6, no one loved the Lord or their neighbor. Completely absent zeal. Except this one man: Noah. God floods the world, but stays with Noah’s family, saving them from the flood. It’s a fresh start.

But people lost zeal for God and their neighbors. So God called Abraham out of his culture and family. To make a fresh start. God is going to use this family to make a nation. God is going to bring renewal and blessing to every nation on earth through this nation. Another fresh start.

This family grows into a nation while they’re in slavery in Egypt. God judges Pharaoh and Egypt with the 10 plagues and delivers his chosen family. They’re going to settle in the promised land, and become a blessing to every nation on earth.

But pretty soon: they lose zeal. They forget their slavery and God’s salvation.

Now, in our passage, they need to go through Moab.

The people in this region have no zeal to love God or their neighbors. The Moabites worshipped fake gods of course. But they also made women have sex with people who were worshipping at their temples. They burned children alive as sacrifices.

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The local rulers of Moab knew that Israel was a danger. Their strategy was this: “Let’s weaken them and assimilate them—get them to take our women to bed and worship our gods. They’ll be with us. Then they can’t attack us.”

So (1) they sent some of their women, sex workers, and Israelite men slept with them. Strategy is working! They’re not so zealous for their God after all! Part 2 of their plan worked too (2): want our women? You’ve got to worship our gods. Sounds fine, they say.

Instead of passing through Moab, on their way to the promised land, Israel (3) joins forces with Moab’s god.

They were liberated from slavery by a God of love. They decided they wanted bondage to a god that demanded sexual submission and child sacrifice.

We would like to think that if we were those Israelite men, we would have *never* got in bed with those Moabite sex workers. We’d have more zeal than that!

Let’s be honest about our absence zeal.

Ever since Adam and Eve—instead of having a pure passion to love God and people—our zeal has come and gone;

sometimes it’s kind of pure, often it’s polluted;

sometimes it’s strong-ish, often it’s weak;

sometimes we love God and neighbor, often we just love ourselves;

sometimes we refuse to settle for anything other than God, often we’ll take an easy substitute.

sometimes we desire nothing compared to God, often our whole lives are one big worship service to money, sex, and power.

In our absence of zeal for God and his plans, we’ve grieved God’s heart and crushed our neighbors.

Now what?

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Second, God’s Awful Zeal.

Remember: any second chances for the human family are totally unearned! And there have already been lots of second chances.

What happens next is God’s awful zeal. *God* is still passionate about his plans for a world full of God-love and neighbor-love. And Israel is not zealous for God’s plans. They’re too busy satisfying themselves the best they can with women and false gods.

Chapter 31 tells us that the first thing God did in response to Israel's outbreak of idolatry and sexual immorality was to introduce a plague of sickness among the Israelites.

As this disease spread in the Israelite camp, Moses prays to God. What should we do? And God answers:

Verse 4: You want the plague to stop? Take the leaders who have led their people into these orgies and idol worship. They must die. Then I will turn my anger away and the plague will stop.

Slowly, the whole nation has absent zeal, and so they’re disregarding God and abusing their neighbors. Slowly, the whole nation is *dying* from a plague of God’s judgment for their wickedness. But God says: not everyone will die.

In verse 6, the whole nation is repenting. They know their zeal for God-love and neighbor-love has been absent. They are facing the awful zeal of God. And they are weeping together in sorrow outside their worship tent.

As they weep: what happens?

Verse 6: A guy named Zimri marches through the weeping crowd of worshippers. He is taking one of these Moabite sex workers—Kozbi—through the crowd. Into his tent. To have sex with her. To satisfy his tiny zeal for a little pleasure. And in the process, he’s worshipping her god of prostitution and child sacrifice.

Right in front of Moses. In the middle of their church service.

Then one man, Phineas—while everyone must have stood their with their mouths open, tears still running down their faces, trembling—Phineas takes a spear. He goes into the tent where Zimri is having sex with this Kozbi. And (8) he runs the spear through both of them.

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God’s awful zeal for his own honor and for the nations of the world he so loved—God’s awful zeal (11) brought about the plague, and the sentences against the leaders.

But when this one man, Phineas, full of zeal like God’s (11), acts with God’s own zeal, against all the absence of zeal of the whole nation, represented in this one man, Zimri—God immediately stops the plague.

One man’s death. One man’s zeal. And the death stops.

Third, Christ’s Atoning Zeal

So we have seen Israel’s idolatry and sexual immorality and their complicity in child sacrifice as—at the foundational level—an absence of zeal. A lack of passionate love for God and neighbor.

Their absence of zeal leads them to settle for pathetic false substitutes: bad gods; bad rituals; bad sex. It grieves God’s heart and awakens his holy anger. Zeal is a matter of life and death.

We’ve seen God remain awfully zealous for his purposes—to bless Israel and all the nations through them, as they learn true zeal: love of God and neighbor.

And we’ve seen the zeal of this one man, Phineas.

At the beginning, I said two things about the Bible:

I believe the Bible is God’s breath, and it’s meant to correct and teach us to act with zeal for the things God is zealous about—ultimately, love of God and neighbor.

I believe all of God’s breath on the pages of Scripture is meant to show us his zeal for saving and ruling us by his beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

This weird story shows us Jesus. It shows us Christ’s zeal. To atone for our absent zeal.

At the head of the human race, there was supposed to be one zealous man: Adam. But his zeal was not enough.

Noah was a fresh start. His zeal was not enough.

Abraham was another beginning for humanity. His zeal was not enough.

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Moses formed Israel into a nation, who was God’s fresh start with humanity. Moses’s zeal was not enough.

One man, Phineas, *seems* to have enough zeal. And for a moment, he’s got lots of zeal. God’s zeal. God’s zeal for justice and truth.

The zeal of Phineas saves countless lives.

We even read that Phineas’s zeal (13) made atonement for the Israelites! His action allowed God and people to remain *one*. His zeal in that moment meant that God could keep working with, traveling with, these tribes, zealously pushing his purposes forward with them, despite their sin.

But the zeal of Phineas is not enough. Because it didn’t make Israel zealous enough.

The zeal of Joshua, and David, and Ezra and Nehemiah, and Isaiah, and the Pharisees, and James and John the “sons of thunder”, were not enough.

Not enough to take people’s hearts and God’s heart and make them one. Not enough to reverse the death that is the salary of sin.

Not enough to give us zeal to love God and our neighbor. And therefore, not enough to bring God’s blessing and redemption and love to every nation on earth.

But.

Jesus is a *way* better Phineas.

He comes with all the zeal of God: zeal for justice for the oppressed; zeal for lifting up the fatherless, the poor, the widow, the foreigner. Zeal for God’s temple and its worship *consumed* Jesus (John 2:17).

But when he saw our ongoing absence of zeal, when he saw the plague breaking out; when he saw us in bondage to the false gods of moeny, sex, and power—

instead of piercing through one sinner—one wicked person who represented all of us—

he stepped forward. Not to take another’s life. But to give *his* life. The spear pierced no one’s body but his.

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He said “I will be Phineas and Zimri at the same time— the one with zeal, and the one with absent zeal. I will have all the zeal of God, and all the zeal a true human is meant to have—full of love for God and neighbor. But I’ll also be the one whose death stops death. I am God, but I will die that my people—and through their zeal, all the nations—might live!”

Zeal, friends, is a matter of love. And no one loves like Jesus. And his zeal is enough. Enough to change the course of human history. Because it is enough to change human hearts.

You need to see yourself in the pathetic, rebellious absence of zeal that Israel has in Numbers 25.

But you need to see yourself in the eyes and in the heart of Jesus, who, full of God’s zeal and full of—finally!—true human zeal, loved you and gave himself for you. Not just so that you can live another day. But so that you can live forever, and with his own zeal, glorify and enjoy God forever in his world, among all the nations.

Do you believe it?