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**Phinehas:
A Lasting
Priesthood**

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Series: Little Known Legends

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Phinehas: A Lasting Priesthood

THE PROBLEM

It came to pass one day that Balak, king of the Moabites, looked out of his window and saw hordes of Israelites camped around him, and he panicked. The children of Israel had passed through their borders before, and on that occasion the Moabites had made no effort to attack. Instead, they supplied them with bread and water (Deuteronomy 2:29). They had been confident at that time, that should the Jews turn on them, their own armies could either annihilate them or at least drive them back into the desert from whence they had come.

In all likelihood, the Jews had no intention of invading, either then or now. This time, however, fear engulfed Balak. Suddenly, the sheer numbers he saw frightened him to death. Noting that he probably could not defeat so great an army, he determined that there was a supernatural element to this conflict, and that his only hope was in the spirit realm.

Give him credit for that much. If only the leaders of the world in our age at least realized that “they battle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers,” that the rulers of the darkness of this world are vying with the King of Eternity for control of planet earth, and that every war that has ever been waged has spiritual implications. The clouds that loom so frequently over the Mideast are certainly examples of that fact. They are not simply nation warring against nation. They are nations warring because the spiritual battles in the heavenlies have led them into a crisis.

King Balak, unfortunately, was not on God’s team. He did not understand Jehovah’s perspective, but he did understand that something or someone unseen held his destiny in his hands. And so he sent a team of men to Pethor in Mesopotamia, a city known as a gathering place for magi and those practicing witchcraft and sorcery from Babylonia and beyond.

THE PROPHET

There was a seer there named Balaam, whose reputation as a man who could both curse and bless men as well as nations

had spread throughout all the East. And it was to Balaam that Balak's men went, their objective being to ask this "magician" to place a curse on Israel so that they would be powerless against the Moabites they now surrounded.

Balaam, however, had more than a casual knowledge of Jehovah God. So he asked this entourage of foreign dignitaries if they would mind spending the night at his estate while he waited on a word from Jehovah God as to whether or not He approved of this mission. They agreed. Now had Balaam had God's Mind, he would have immediately sent them away, knowing that God will not put a curse His own people. Instead, he prayed the way most of us do; he sort of "entreated" God to see if it was okay for him to do what he wanted to. Balak, you see, had offered a tidy sum to Balaam for his services, and the dollar signs were flashing in Balaam's eyes even as he prayed.

Since Balaam is not our living legend, we won't dwell on the details of this story, except to remind you of some of the highlights. Balak sent a second team of dignitaries to Balaam, and this time, after acknowledging that he could only speak what God told him, he begged God again for a chance to go. This time God allowed it, on the condition that he "speak only God's words."

THE PROPHECY

You probably remember his trip down to see Balak. God used a talking donkey to put a little fear into his heart, and then upon arriving, he and Balak had a series of encounters in which Balak would ask Balaam to curse Israel, and he would refuse, proclaiming instead that God had blessed Israel and could not curse his own. In his final message, Balaam shared a prophecy God had given to him concerning the future of Israel, and it read like this: "I see him, but not now. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. Edom will be conquered, Seir his enemy will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city."

This incredible prophecy of the Messiah who was to come was no doubt engraved in the minds of those three "wise men of the east" who later came seeking the Christ child, for it was made by one who came from their own country. Needless to say, Balak was not happy. Numbers 24 ends,

Then Balaam got up and returned home and Balak went his

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own way.

(Numbers 24:25 NIV)

That's the backdrop for our story. Satan had made an effort to trick a man of spiritual influence into cursing Israel, thus throwing the spiritual forces in the heavenlies into full-fledged conflict. He failed. God intervened and placed His words on the heart of this man, and the curse became a blessing.

Now you would think that Balaam would be scared out of his wits by now and in awe over what God had said He would do to protect His people. But apparently the dollar signs were still flashing in his eyes, and his loss of income proved to be a stronger motivation than what God had said. For we read that he was indeed the instigator of what was to follow. We will find him later on in Scripture aligned with the very forces God had said through him would be destroyed. Oh, what pull the flesh has to draw man away from Truth.

The next chapter begins like this,

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women,

Who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods.

So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them.

The Lord said 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."

So Moses said to Israel's judges, "Each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor."
(Numbers 25:1-5 NIV)

THE IMMORALITY

The Lord had defended his people from Balaam's curse. So the enemy decided if God's people could not be defeated on the battlefield, they would have to be defeated on the battlefield of the flesh instead. This time it worked. While the children of Israel were encamped at Shittim, just outside of Moab, they seemed to have a lot of time on their hands, with not much to do. So the Moabites decided to use their secret weapon. They sent some of their more attractive women out to visit the troops who were camped on the outskirts to try to encourage a little "fellowship" among them.

They must have invited them to the USO club for a few drinks and dances, or maybe to the local clubs where entertainment was

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free, but the cost was high. At any rate, these Jewish men who had been told never to date an unbeliever, decided that God couldn't really be that narrow-minded; and they were lonely, with no place to go. Besides, they thought, we'll have a positive influence on this heathen society.

The sad thing is that the idea was planted there by none other than Balaam, our hero who stood toe-to-toe with Balak and proclaimed the word of the Lord. In Numbers 31:16, when God was judging those responsible, we read,

They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor. (Numbers 31:16)

So having listened to Jehovah, he now listens to Satan and leads God's people astray. Back to our story. The Jews began to date these attractive heathen girls, and lightning didn't strike. In fact, they had a good time. Too good a time, it seems. For we read that,

Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. (Numbers 25:1 NKJV)

Or as the NIV reads,

...the men began to commit sexual immorality with Moabite women.

THE IDOLATRY

The next thing that happened was just what God had said would happen. The Moabite women from verse 1 were the ones who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods.

(Numbers 25:2a NIV)

They said, in essence, "We're having such fun! Why don't you come to church with us. Oh, we worship a little differently, but don't be so narrow. Religion is all the same."

So the Israeli troops, with too much time on their hands and too many ideas in their heads, went to the heathen temples with their adulterous girlfriends, and we read next,

The people ate and bowed down before these gods.

So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them. (Numbers 25:2b,3 NIV)

You see the progression. A "harmless" compromise. Dating

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unbelievers followed by the inevitable, succumbing to the moral temptations that the world sees as “normal.” Once the flesh has given in to its lusts, worshiping God loses its exclusive luster. A more liberal approach to theology always follows moral compromise. Before long, these men, whose lives Jehovah had just rescued from the clutches of a heathen curse, are found in the enemy’s temple, worshiping idols and engaging in the filthy practices that these heathens had come to attach to their “religion.”

First, they just attended these “sacrifices” to their gods. Then, they began to partake of the sacrificial meals themselves, which were given in honor of the Moabitish god, Baal-Peor, thus “joining themselves to Baal-Peor” or entering into spiritual union with a god other than Jehovah. The end result was obvious:

The Lord’s anger burned against them.

(Numbers 25:3b NKJV)

THE SENTENCE OF DEATH

Here was God’s sentence,

So Moses said to Israel’s judges, “Each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor.”

(Numbers 25:5 NIV)

How that sentence was carried out is not spelled out in detail, but we do know, according to verses 8 and 9, that God sent a horrible plague upon the people, and thousands upon thousands died. Meanwhile, Moses and his leaders were standing at the door to the Tent of Meeting, weeping over the sins of the people and the judgment those sins had inflicted on the nation. All around them was the stench of death. Even in the light of this scenario, the wretched immorality and idolatry continued.

One young Israeli soldier, determined to flaunt his sinfulness even in the midst of this plague, brought his heathen girlfriend into his tent, right under the eyes of Moses and the leaders. The story goes like this,

Then an Israelite man brought to his family 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.

When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand

and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear

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through both of them—through the Israelite and into the woman’s body. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped;

but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000.

(Numbers 25:6-9 NIV)

While the wrath of God was being poured out upon the nation in the form of a plague, it would appear that the heads of the nation had also been ordered to personally see that every one who had committed these adulterous acts would be put to death. The Hebrew word used in the passage leads many to believe that the death was to be one of crucifixion, a kind of crucifixion in which the guilty would be killed first, and then impaled upon a stake or a cross and left as an example to the nation.

I can imagine that the grief of Moses and his leaders was almost unbearable. Here was a strong army of young men who had simply ignored one basic commandment of separation unto God. The result was immorality, idolatry, and finally death. As they wept over the death penalty that was being inflicted, this young man had the audacity to continue the practice right before their eyes.

THE LIVING LEGEND

But suddenly from out of the shadows comes a living legend. He was a relative unknown in Scripture up to this point. The only thing we’ve heard about him is found in Exodus 6:25 where we read,

Eleazar son of Aaron married one of the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Phinehas. These were the heads of the Levite families, clan by clan.

It was this same Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said, “Bring the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions.”

They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. It was the same Moses and Aaron.

(Exodus 6:25-27 NIV)

So the Holy Spirit wants to make it clear to all who read these verses that this was Aaron’s grandson. Now, filled with indignation over the flaunting of God’s laws by his people, this man surfaces in a moment of national tragedy and becomes a national hero. He grabs a spear, and rushing into the tent where this young man and his heathen girlfriend are defying God, he thrusts the sword through the both of them at once, and they both die. By this time 24,000 had perished. A whole nation of people were mourning, and the body count was multiplying. Something had to happen, or the

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entire country would be in ruin.

Enter Phinehas. He simply could not tolerate the unrighteous acts that were flagrant violations of the laws of God. This act of judgment at Phinehas' hand satisfied a Holy God as an example to the nation, and His wrath subsided. Immediately, the plague is halted. Had Phinehas failed to act, the carnage would have gone on. But his zeal for holiness would not allow him to see sin unpunished. He risked his own life, for someone who was sinning so blatantly would scarcely have thought twice before killing a priest who was threatening his life. But his own life meant nothing to Phinehas. All he cared about was the reputation of God.

Few men in Scripture were rewarded more openly and more generously than Phinehas. Listen to what God did,

The Lord said to Moses, "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor among them, so that in my zeal I did not put an end to them.

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 honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites."

(Numbers 25:10-13 NIV)

THE LIVING LEGACY

Several things about God's commendation of Phinehas need to be explored:

1- It was Phinehas and what he did that turned away God's anger. It wasn't the obedience of the elders in putting to death those who were guilty. It wasn't that the plague had run its course. It wasn't that God had changed His mind about the severity of the crime. God saw what Phinehas did as an act of intercession, and it alone was sufficient to turn away His wrath. In the same way, when we sin and the wrath of God is to be visited on us, the intercession of His Son, Jesus Christ, on our behalf is all God needs to stay His hand. It is also a fitting picture of how our intercession for those who are out of God's will can please His heart.

2- God pays Phinehas the ultimate compliment. He says, "He was as zealous as I am for my honor among them." The man Phinehas put to death was a prince named Zimri. What Phinehas did was really not all that extraordinary, in the sense that as the apparent

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heir to the high priesthood, he was only obeying the commandment for the judges to put to death all those who had defiled themselves with these foreign women. It appears, however, that he was the only one who thus responded. Perhaps the others hesitated out of respect for Zimri's office. Perhaps they were afraid of the crowd's reaction. Perhaps they were waiting for further orders that forced them to do something.

Phinehas, however, did not wait. Filled with utter disgust at the depravity of the situation and overcome with anger at the blatant rebellion, his heart burned within him that God's reputation was at stake. Therefore, nothing else mattered. It was a kind of righteous indignation that once characterized men and women of God when they were confronted with sin in society or in the church. What God was saying here was that Phinehas was just as concerned over God's reputation as God Himself was, no matter the effect it had on his own reputation. I do not believe there is a higher compliment that God can pay to man.

3- God, therefore, determined to make "a covenant of peace" with Phinehas. This "covenant of peace" was an unbreakable agreement between God and Phinehas stating that the priesthood would remain in his family forever. Not only was he assured of that honor, but all his descendants were assured as well. Few times in Scripture did God honor a man for a deed with a reward of such eternal consequence.

4- The reason was, "He was zealous for the honor of his God, and made atonement for the Israelites." It was primarily because of this act of bravery that the Jews later enacted the so-called "zealot right", which allowed any one, regardless of his official position, the right to take vengeance on someone who was committing a "daring violation of the honor of God." Phinehas set the example. So grieved was he over the degradation he saw, that he reacted to what he construed to be a living illustration of blasphemy against God's laws. He had no personal vendetta against Zimri and his Moabite girlfriend. He was filled with righteous anger that the reputation of God had been violated. And so he acted, and so God honored him for honoring God.

Not only did God honor him for his bravery, He accepted his act of daring as atonement for the sins of the nation. Immediately, the plague was stopped. Immediately, the sentence of judgment was stayed. And immediately, God made it plain to Moses that the

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reason was all wrapped up in the actions of this one brave man.

This was not the last time we hear of Phinehas, either. In chapter 31, Moses was told he had one last order of business before God took him home. It was to “take vengeance on the Midianites” for their part in leading the Israelites into idolatry. It reads like this,

The Lord said to Moses,

“Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people.”

So Moses said to the people, “Arm some of your men to go to war against the Midianites and to carry out the Lord’s vengeance on them.

Send into battle a thousand men from each of the tribes of Israel.”

So twelve thousand men armed for battle, a thousand from each tribe, were supplied from the clans of Israel.

Moses sent them into battle, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, who took with him articles from the sanctuary and the trumpets for signaling.

(Numbers 31:1-6 NIV)

When the time came for revenge and the armies were in place ready to attack, there was one priest who had so distinguished himself as a man of holiness and zeal that he was the obvious choice to carry the holy vessels and blow the trumpet, leading the Jews into battle. This was a holy war, and this was a giant of a priest who now had the privilege of watching God complete the task of vindicating His Holy Name.

Again in Joshua 22, it was Phinehas who applauded Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh for their courage in stopping yet another act of rebellion. In Judges 20, it was none other than Phinehas who gave God’s authorization for the armies to go up against the Benjamites. The Lord honored that, and 25,000 Benjamites died in the slaughter.

THE LIVING LESSONS

And so we have witnessed from out of the shadows of Scripture the emergence of another “Little Known Legend”, a man of God whose entrance into Israel’s history came at a time when the word of God was being violated and the heart of God was being broken. Judgment was being visited on the Jewish nation once again, and 24,000 had already died at the hand of a God-sent plague. Then, in the midst of the most flagrant violation of God’s holiness of all,

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Phinehas moves on stage and takes matters into his own hands. God, who knew his heart, commented that here was a man who was “as zealous for God’s honor” as God Himself. That is quite a tribute. And through this act of bravery alone, God sees the sins of His people atoned for, and He stays His hand of judgment.

Two lessons vie for our attention as we conclude this look at the “Living Legend” of Phinehas.

1- When God says do not toy with unbelievers in a dating situation, He means it. Over and over again, the children of Israel violated that commandment, and each time the results were the same: immorality, followed by idolatry. First, the believer bows to the moral standards of the unbelieving world and, having done that, he begins to bow to their gods as well. Christian young people ought to somehow have it burned into their hearts: unequal yoking occurs when you take unbelievers into your heart for the sake of building male-female relationships. Satan has the upper hand in that environment, and almost always the result is a catastrophe. If the only Scriptural reason for dating is preparation for marriage, then Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians is no less vital today than it was then.

What fellowship can light have with darkness?

What does the believer have in common with an unbeliever?

What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?

For we are the temple of the living God.”

(II Corinthians 6:14b-16a NIV)

It doesn’t matter that they are the captain of the football team or the head cheerleader or the nicest guy on campus. If they are not in Christ, they are not of God; and if they are not of God, there is no basis for a relationship of any kind.

2- When God’s honor is at stake, the believer cannot remain idle. When men and women who openly profess to be Christians violate basic Scriptural principles, the church has an obligation to act. Looking the other way is akin to acceptance. If church discipline is required, it must be done. If rebuke is needed, it must be done. Otherwise, the sins will only multiply as the less mature members of the Body of Christ assume that sins unpunished are sins acceptable.

Phinehas understood that. He knew that God’s reputation was at stake because God’s Word was being taken lightly. And so God gave to him a lasting priesthood. In a moment of moral compromise

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this man stood tall and refused to look the other way.

I believe God is looking far and wide in today's church at large for just one Phinehas—one man or one woman who will not be idle when God's reputation is at stake, one man or woman who understands that even though everybody's doing it, if God's name is being violated, then it isn't right and it must not be tolerated. I believe when He finds such a man or woman, today as then, it is that man or woman He will choose to lead His troops into battle against the enemy. The Scripture says,

The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him. In this you have done foolishly; therefore from now on you shall have wars.” (II Chronicles 16:9 NKJV)

He is searching today for a Phinehas. His eyes are running to and fro looking for one man or woman He can count on to stand for righteousness. He is looking for Christian leaders who would rather be right than popular. Could He be looking for you?

GOD IS LOOKING FOR A PHINEHAS

God is looking for a Phinehas
A man who sees God's Word
As the final word of God to man
The Unchanging Law of the Lord

God is looking for a Phinehas
Who despite the cries of the crowd
Knows that moral compromise
Must not be allowed

And in this day when even the church
Has bowed to the standards of man
God is looking extra hard
For someone who understands

That even if its unpopular
You must take the stand that is true
God is looking for a Phinehas
And He's looking straight at you!

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