Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)
Numbers 25:1–3

Peace to you, brothers and sisters, this is Hwa-Chi. Praise the Lord that we have once again come together for our daily Bible reading. We will continue our study of Numbers chapter 25. Today, we will read verses 1 through 3.

Balaam, a Gentile prophet, was invited by Balak, the king of Moab, with great honor and promises of reward to curse the Israelites. However, the LORD God protected the Israelites and would not allow Balaam to curse them. Instead, God caused words of blessing to come out of Balaam's mouth. At the end of Numbers chapter 24, we are told that Balaam returned to his own land. On the surface, it seemed that Balaam and King Balak had gone their separate ways. However, Satan is far more cunning than we can imagine. Balaam was a man who practiced divination. He knew that the God of Israel protected His people and that it would be impossible to attack the Israelites from the outside through supernatural powers. The only possible way was to destroy them from within.

Through his encounters with the LORD God, Balaam came to understand that the LORD was different from the gods of the Gentiles. The LORD is exceedingly holy and hates sin. If the Israelites could be tempted into sin, perhaps the LORD would punish them and withdraw His protecting hand. Therefore, before departing, Balaam offered King Balak a scheme: have the Moabite and Midianite women seduce the Israelite men into sexual immorality, causing the Israelites to fall into sin. At that time, Moses and the Israelites were camped on the plains of Moab, preparing to cross the Jordan River and enter the good land of Canaan. They had no idea about the secret dealings and conspiracy between Balaam and King Balak. It was only afterward that they learned of Balaam's scheme. Numbers 31:16 says, "Look, these women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD." This verse clearly tells us that it was Balaam's scheme.

Before we examine today's passage, let us first take a closer look at Balaam. The book of Numbers devotes three entire chapters, chapters 22 through 24, to the events surrounding Balaam. On the one hand, God used this Gentile prophet to speak of His plan of redemption, laying the groundwork for the Gentiles to receive grace and salvation. On the other hand, Balaam himself became a warning to God's chosen people. Not only did God use his mouth to pronounce blessings, but the Spirit of God also came upon him, enabling him to see the future destiny of the nations surrounding Israel. Through these experiences, Balaam came to recognize that God governs human history. Ordinarily, we would expect someone who had witnessed such extraordinary things to immediately leave everything behind and follow such a great God. Yet Balaam did not do so. Despite these remarkable experiences, he remained completely unchanged. He continued down his crooked path. In the end, Scripture portrays Balaam as a man who loved the wages of unrighteousness, rushed headlong into error, and ultimately brought destruction upon himself.

Numbers 31:8 records that the Israelites killed Balaam, the son of Beor. It is likely that after his scheme succeeded, Balaam returned from the region near the Euphrates River to Moab to collect his reward. He received his wages, but in doing so, he lost his life. In Revelation 2:14, Christ rebuked the church in Pergamos because some among them followed the teaching of Balaam, who placed a stumbling block before others, leading them to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality.

Dear brothers and sisters, Balaam had extraordinary spiritual experiences, yet he could not resist the temptation of wealth and fame, and he continued down the path toward destruction. May God help us not to become obsessed with pursuing earthly wealth, fame, and power. Neither do we need to seek extraordinary spiritual experiences. Instead, may we simply come before God each day, enjoy the nourishment of His pure Word, and allow it to help us live holy lives. This is the greatest blessing of all.

Verse 1: "Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab."

The Israelites were staying at Acacia Grove, also known as Shittim. Shittim was a town on the plains of Moab, opposite Jericho on the western side of the Jordan River. From Numbers 33:49, we learn that this was the last of the forty-two stopping places during the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. From Joshua 2:1, we also see that it was the starting point for their entry into the land of Canaan. Therefore, from Numbers chapter 25 all the way through Deuteronomy chapter 34, the end of the Pentateuch, the Israelites remained at Shittim. The name Shittim means "acacia grove." It was also called Abel Shittim, meaning a meadow of acacia trees. It was probably a flat and comfortable place. Acacia trees are common in the wilderness. They are drought-resistant, and their trunks are covered with sharp thorns that protect them from being eaten by small animals. The wood Moses used in constructing the tabernacle came from acacia trees.

Shittim marked the end of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. When people reach the end of a long journey, they naturally begin to relax. The acacia trees, however, should have served as a reminder to the Israelites: there are thorns here. A comfortable place may be suitable for rest, but it is not a place to let down one's guard. Unfortunately, the Israelites failed to recognize this warning. They did not know that God had protected them from Balaam's curses. Neither did they know that after failing to curse them, Balaam had proposed an even more wicked scheme to King Balak. All they could see were the many beautiful Moabite and Midianite women appearing before them. These women were different from the women of Israel.

At Mount Sinai, Moses had delivered God's commandments, statutes, and ordinances. God had repeatedly emphasized and strictly prohibited adultery and all sexual relations outside marriage. Therefore, the Israelite women had been careful to maintain their purity. During the forty years they had traveled through the wilderness, there had been no major incidents of sexual immorality. But now, the foreign women before the Israelite men were beautiful, seductive, and bold.

Many Israelite men could not resist the temptation and began committing sexual immorality with them.

Some believers may ask: Since the LORD God was able to protect the Israelites from Balaam's curses, why did He not also protect them from falling into sexual immorality? The answer is actually quite simple. This was a lesson the Israelites needed to learn. God had shielded them from every attack involving supernatural powers because they had no ability to withstand such attacks on their own. However, when it came to human temptations and enticements, the Israelites had the ability to refuse them. Therefore, resisting such temptations was their responsibility and a lesson they needed to learn.

Dear brothers and sisters, the same principle applies to believers under the New Covenant. No sorcery or divination can harm us, because the Holy Spirit who dwells within us can protect us from attacks by evil spirits and demons. Nevertheless, we will still encounter the temptations and trials of this world. God permits these trials so that our faith may be tested and proven more precious than gold that perishes.

Furthermore, the Lord Jesus Christ taught us to pray to our heavenly Father, asking Him not to lead us into temptation but to deliver us from the evil one. When we regularly pray to the Father as Jesus instructed, we demonstrate that we are spiritually watchful. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

Verse 2: "They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods."

The Moabite and Midianite women not only seduced the Israelites into sexual immorality but also invited them to offer sacrifices to their gods, eat the sacrificial food, and bow down in worship before their gods. The Canaanites generally worshiped Baal, believing that he could bring abundant harvests to their crops and

increase the fertility and prosperity of their livestock. As part of the rituals associated with Baal worship, people engaged in sexual relations with temple prostitutes in an attempt to secure Baal's protection and blessings. Most of the women who seduced the Israelites were probably temple prostitutes. Naturally, after engaging in sexual immorality, they would offer sacrifices to Baal, lead the Israelite men to eat the sacrificial food, and bow down before Baal in worship.

In the religious life of the Canaanites, idol worship and sexual immorality often went hand in hand. One was spiritual adultery, while the other was physical adultery. In essence, this was Satan's scheme. Satan desires to make himself equal to the Most High and receive the worship that belongs to God. To accomplish this, he appeals to human fleshly desires, combining idol worship with sexual immorality. When people give in to their fleshly desires and become sexually involved with temple prostitutes, they are then led by these prostitutes into idol worship.

Therefore, Paul warned the believers in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 6:16, "Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her?" Paul then continued his warning in 1 Corinthians 6:18–20: "Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."

Verse 3: "So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel."

Baal was an idol widely worshiped by the inhabitants of Canaan. Over time, Baal came to be regarded as the protecting deity of individual regions. In other words, people believed that Baal's protective power was limited to a particular geographical area. Perhaps this was why King Balak repeatedly took Balaam to three different locations to curse the Israelites. He assumed that the LORD's power

was also limited to certain places. The final location to which Balak brought Balaam was the top of Mount Peor, because the Moabites worshiped Baal of Peor. In other words, Peor was considered the territory under the authority of the Baal they worshiped. Balak therefore believed that Baal of Peor might be able to overcome the LORD. But King Balak was wrong. No idol could ever overcome the LORD.

Balaam had also come to recognize the LORD's mighty power to protect His people. That was why he proposed using human means to destroy the relationship between the Israelites and God. His scheme succeeded. The Israelites committed sexual immorality, which then led them into idol worship. Eventually, they became joined to Baal of Peor. This was a serious offense against God.

The first of the Ten Commandments declares that we shall have no other gods before the LORD. The second commandment forbids bowing down to idols or serving them. The seventh commandment prohibits adultery. While staying at Shittim, the Israelites violated all three of these commandments. As a result, the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel.

Dear brothers and sisters, we must recognize Satan's schemes. He constantly uses different methods to lead God's children into disobedience and prevent them from following God's guidance. The first generation of Israelites had enjoyed the good things of Egypt. When they entered the wilderness, life became difficult, and the daily manna seemed monotonous and unappealing. Satan therefore used covetousness to tempt them, including their desire for material comforts and power. Indeed, the first generation of Israelites was corrupted by these desires. Whenever they encountered difficulties, they complained, argued, and wanted to turn back to Egypt. Because of their unbelief, that entire generation died in the wilderness, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb.

The new generation of Israelites, however, had been born and raised in the wilderness. Indeed, they had made much greater spiritual progress than the first generation. Therefore, when they resumed their journey from Kadesh, they quickly followed Moses to the plains of Moab. Along the way, they defeated two powerful Amorite kings and eventually camped at Shittim, a relatively comfortable and

peaceful place. At this point, Satan changed his strategy and began tempting the new generation of Israelites through the lusts of the flesh.

We must understand that no matter how much we grow spiritually, our flesh is still with us. There is a spiritual principle that never changes. Romans 8:6 says: “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” Whenever we set our minds on the flesh and live according to its desires, the result is death. The new generation of Israelites had experienced many victories, but those victories did not guarantee that they would be able to overcome the lusts of the flesh. The same is true for us. We must set our minds on the Spirit and live and walk according to the Spirit. Only then can we experience life and peace.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, the experience of the Israelites at Shittim, where they could not overcome the temptations of fleshly desires while enjoying comfort and ease, is also a reflection of our own condition. We, too, often reach the end of a journey and find ourselves in a comfortable and peaceful environment, only to become careless and let down our guard. Remind us that our flesh is always with us, and help us remain constantly alert and prepared to resist the temptations and enticements of this world. Help us always to set our minds on the Spirit and to live and walk by the Spirit. Protect us from stumbling. Even if we are occasionally overtaken by a transgression, help us quickly return to the throne of grace to repent and confess our sins. May our sins be forgiven through the covering of Your precious blood. Help us put on the whole armor of God once again so that we may live lives that are pleasing to You. We ask for Your guidance, protection, and blessings. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.