

Zealous for His Honour

(Ewere Airhihen)

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ² who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. ³ So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them. ⁴ 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." ⁵ So Moses said to Israel's judges, "Each of you must put to death those of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor." ⁶ 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. ⁷ When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand ⁸ and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them, right through the Israelite man and into the woman's stomach. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; ⁹ but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000. ¹⁰ The Lord said to Moses, ¹¹ "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for my honour among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal." (Numbers 25: 1-11 NIV)

Zeal is Enthusiastic devotion to a cause, ideal, or goal (Free Dictionary). An eagerness and ardent interest in pursuit of something: fervour (Merriam Webster). Great enthusiasm, especially in connection with work, religion, or politics (Colins Dictionary). Honour is great respect for someone, or the feeling of pride and pleasure (Cambridge dictionary)

Phinehas was a grandson of Aaron, Moses' brother and the High Priest of Israel at that time. Aaron has lost two of his sons Nadab and Abihu at the instance of the offering of strange fire to God leaving Ithamar and Eleazar. Phinehas was a son of Eleazar. The high-priesthood could follow the lineage of either Eleazar or Ithamar. Phinehas understood the gravity of the sin (spiritual perception) he did not let the world squeeze him into its mould of lackadaisy and tepidity.

It appears Zimri could barely wait to get into the closet or was it Cozbi? They forgot to lock the door it appears or Phinehas would not have been able to get in. Sin had ravaged them.

Here we see the unfolding of the strategy Balaam gave to Balak. He had told them the traditional attack method would fail as long as the people stayed in sync with their God. God had forbidden him to curse but to rather bless them. In principle, as long as the Israelites remained in covenant, God would fight for them. Median needed to only find a way to lure Israel out of faithfulness to Gods covenant. A position God had warned them about in Exodus 15:26 and would later emphasize in Deut. 28:1 -2 *"If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. ² All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God:"* In verse 9 of the text, we see how twenty four thousand

had been slain without a single shot while the casualty on the Medianite side was zero. The strongest does not always win in a battle. Median used the power of food and sex against the Israelites and it worked. These weapons remain as potent and powerful today and the devil is using it to plague many believers and send countless of them to hell.

It is unknown how long the plague would have lasted or how many would have died had Phinehas not arisen. The atmosphere was one of despair. Those who ought to act had either fallen, were falling, unconcerned or just clueless as to what Israel should do at that time. They were in the yoke of the Mediantite gods through their women (Num. 25:3). In verse 6, we see the people of Israel were weeping before the door of the tabernacle. Not clear if it was for repentance or due to the pain of the plague but that the tears had to do with the tabernacle would suggest the former. It was a solemn moment that called for sensitivity and reflection, personal and corporate repentance. The plague did not discriminate between those who were involved or not. All Israel suffered it. This is how the sins of a few affect all. Nehemiah begins his book with a description of the situation the Jews were in. Some in captivity and the others in great affliction and reproach with the walls of Jerusalem broken down. Nehemiah broke down and mourned confessing the sins of the people of Israel. In his words, *"I and my father's house have sinned"* They had done what God had commanded them not to do in Ex 15:26 and Deut 28:1-2 and were suffering the consequences. Healing started with an admission of the justice of God in sobriety with repentance. This mirrors the situation in numbers 25. Zimri ought to have been mourning, crying and repenting along with all Israel. Notice in verse 14, Zimri was a prince as his father was a chief of the Simeonite clan. He should have known better and a greater burden was on him to do the right thing at that time. It appears he was unperturbed. Why did no one challenge him as he passed through? Did the elders not see him? Why did the priests not challenge him? The Levites should have taken it up. His family should have been first to stop him but they did not. Systemic failure all through. If anyone was not in line to address the situation, it was Phinehas. His father Eleazar was there and his grand father Aaron, the serving High Priest was also there. Why was it in his place to act? In the face of all these Phinehas arose and saved a whole nation singlehandedly by his action. God said of him **"he was zealous for my honour"** (v 11). I believe that had Phinehas lived in Sodom God would not have destroyed it as we know in the words of Jesus that Sodom was redeemable (Mt 11:23).

Our world appears to be sliding more and more into darkness and the command to arise and shine (Is 60:1) could not be louder. To combat this darkness, we need the spirit of Phinehas. What then is it that distinguished him for which he could singlehandedly deliver a nation? It may be that if we adopt those principles and take on the same mindset, we would achieve the Phinehas result in our generation today.

It was possible for Phinehas to run to Eleazar his father to ask him to take action or his clan leader or anyone else, but he rather took it upon himself to deal with the situation. In the words of Paul, *"we are labourers together with God"* (I Cor 3:9). We are members of the body *"...as each one does its part; the body builds itself up in love."* (Eph 4:16, NET). Phinehas knew this. he saw it as his business and took ownership. He did not pass the buck. All through scripture, when people

arose and took responsibility, they came out with the Phinehas type of result. Nehemiah, Esther and Deborah quickly come to mind. It is written of Deborah in Judges 5:7 *"Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel"*. Today's believer needs to stop sitting on the observing fence judging those doing or not doing their best while waiting for someone else to do what they can arise and do.

From verses 7 and 8, he took a spear and went after them. Phinehas knew the implication of what the man was doing. He knew how God felt about it. It is quite common for believers today to defend homosexuality, divorce, cohabiting and all sorts of sins that grieve God. How did Phinehas come to know God in this way? Was it that he learned by observing his father Eleazar and his grandfather Aaron? Was it a family issue? Paul says of Timothy *"I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also"* (2 Tim 1:5). Is there possibly a cause/effect relationship? Paul further writes in II Cor 3:3 *"you yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone"*. A further look at the story shows that Phinehas was not the only grandson of Aaron in that camp, yet he was different. Maybe it has nothing to do with his family background. After all, although Samuel walked with God blamelessly, his children did not. *"But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice."* (I Samuel 8:3). Eli also comes to mind. Although he was without fault, it is said of his sons: *"Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD."* (I Sam 2:12 NIV). A few years ago, I attended a conference in Norwich, UK where the speaker mentioned that the majority of black people in London's prisons were children of pastors. I thought it was unfounded inaccurate statistic but the lady sitting close to me happened to work with the prison service and confirmed it. But why did they not observe the lives of their parents and follow after their parents' God? It appears to me that while living a life worthy of the gospel is necessary, it is not sufficient. Deliberate tutelage is mandatory. In Deut 6:6-9, God commands Israel along these lines: *"These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."* In today's busy world with mounting bills to pay, it is imperative that we seek God for ourselves and deliberately teach our kids the word of God. Such teaching must be didactic, forensic and exegetical. The bible in Hebrews 6:1 speaks of the elementary doctrines of Christianity: Repentance, Faith, Baptisms, Laying on of Hands, Resurrection of the Dead and Eternal Judgement. Do our kids know these doctrines thoroughly? Sadly, many professing Christians do not know these doctrines let alone the tougher doctrinal positions on LGBT and the likes. I went into town a few weeks ago and a young girl of about 8 years of age engaged me with the gospel. I marvelled at her answers to my difficult questions. When I stretched her even further, she said to me, come to my daddy and he will explain this to you and took me to her dad standing by. That day I resolved to start teaching the bible to my family as I was sure my daughter of similar age would not have fared that well under that very same situation. Recently, I asked my kids how many wise men visited Jesus at his birth. Three was the unanimous answer.

We went to the scriptures in Matthew and Luke that tell the story and found out for ourselves that they were not numbered. Wise men brought three gifts. That is forensic. Exegetical as in this study that seeks to inductively expose the character of Phinehas to pick out principles for today. While teaching the bible to our family is important and commanded, it is not an excuse when that teaching does not come our way. We must take personal ownership of our learning of Gods word. *"For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel."* (Exra 7:10). *"Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful"* (Joshua 1:8). Have you ever wondered what happened to Moses' kids Gershom and Eliezar? In Exodus 18, we see that his father in law brought them to him with his wife Zipporah. This means they had all the while been in the custody and tutelage of a Medianite pagan priest who rejected an offer to become part of the family of God. What would he have taught them? The Torah? Of course not. We see in Judges 18:30: *"There the Danites set up for themselves the idol, and Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses, and his sons were priests for the tribe of Dan until the time of the captivity of the land."* Sad. For Eliezer, we understand from I Chron 23 that his descendants joined the Levites but did not play a key role. While the High priesthood stayed with Aarons lineage, the leadership of Israel left Moses' lineage immediately. Moses found no time for his family and his family did not find God for themselves in the face of the mighty miracles they heard of and witnessed.

Phinehas did not delay. Immediately he positively confirmed what Zimri was up to, he picked a spear and went after them *'David asked Ahimelek, "Don't you have a spear or a sword here? I haven't brought my sword or any other weapon, because the king's mission was urgent."*' (1 Sam 21:8). When we know what to do, feet dragging serves no purpose as there is the coming night when no man can work (John 9:4).

Phinehas took a risk. Zimri could have attacked him. He left his comfort zone and safety and put his life on the line to attack Zimri and Cozbi. *"For whoever wants to save their life^[a] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."* (Mt 16:25). *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell"* (Mt 10:28)

Being Aaron's grandson, he would have been a youth. That would have been a constraint, but he did not allow that stand in the way. For some others, that constraint may be paucity of funds, old age, inexperience, physical disability or whatever. It is in such weakness or challenges that we find the sufficiency of his grace. Paul was allowed a thorn in his flesh and *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness..."* (1 Cor 12:8-9). Recently I attended an inhouse meeting and noticed the brother playing the keyboard had burnt fingers. I had an opportunity to listen to his story. He was involved in a fire incident and it looked like he would never play the keyboard anymore as he waited for the cast over his hand to heal. That day in church, there was no one to play the keyboard so walked up, pulled off the cast and with pain, played the keyboard. He was due shortly for a review. The doctors were shocked at his recovery. He pointed

back to that experience in church as the point of the miracle. He still plays the keyboard today. When we put our little at the disposal of God, he magnifies it beyond our expectation. We do not need to wait for perfect situations. That seemingly small response in our eyes may be the kill switch to a raging plague.

That the spear went through them both suggests to me that he struck them with all his might. That means that if God sets me on a path or puts some work in my hands, it must be done with all my might. Mark 12:30 says *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."*

Why did Phinehas do what he did? We see the actions, but God sees the heart and has testified that zeal for His honour was the motive. That same action could have resulted from a different self-centered motive. It is all too common to see people join the choir just for the popularity or pastors preach just for the money or popularity. It is also common these days to walk into a church and everything seems to be about the pastor and his wife only. In Jeremiah 17: 10, *"I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve."* In John 2:25, *"He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person."*

Jesus left us a similar pattern of zeal in John 2: 13-17 *"When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶To those who sold doves he said, 'Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!'" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."*

Today's generation is calling for us to arise and take our place. Occupy till He comes in the spirit of Phinehas, with zeal for his honour. The call to us his children is loud and clear *"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you."* (Isaiah 60:1). Non longer will we sit idly, and watch pastors teach the body of Christ their own doctrines. We will speak out for God's honour. No longer will we sit idly by moaning that churches are no longer evangelising. We will step out and lead it. No longer will we sit idly by complaining that the walls are falling. We will step up to rebuild it. We will rise to the challenge like the Maccabees who witnessed the desecration of the temple. That we take action without delay is proof that we know and love God for *"but the people who [are spiritually mature and] know their God will display strength and take action [to resist]."* (Dan 11:32, Amp)