

# **TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO DELIGHTS TO DISPLAY HIS GREATNESS**

## **Numbers 14:13-45**

### INTRODUCTION

I doubt there is a more universally condemned action than the act of betrayal. Even in our sexually permissive and promiscuous culture adultery is still condemned by over 90% of adults. 35% of Americans think adultery should still be illegal. The betrayal of children by abusive parents or wives by abusive husbands is among the most severely censured behaviors in our culture. Many have known the betrayal of drug addicted children who steal from their families and lie in order to feed their habit. Bernie Madoff is among the most despised people in America for his betrayal of thousands of people who gave him their money to invest and he used it to buy himself a luxurious lifestyle.

The worst act of betrayal in the history of the human race would have to be Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Jesus treated Judas with extraordinary kindness throughout their whole relationship. Judas knew by firsthand experience the wonder of Jesus' love. Yet, for 30 pieces of silver he betrayed this one who only loved him. The second greatest act of betrayal in the history of the world is the one recorded in Numbers 13-14. The whole nation of Israel, after being rescued from their slavery in Egypt by God's miraculous intervention and being carried across the desert for the past year and half, now accuse God of wanting to murder them and turn their wives and children into slaves. They then declare their intention to not only not go into the land of Canaan but to get rid of God's leaders, Moses and Aaron, pick a new leader and return to Egypt. God calls their action, in v. 33, an act of flagrant adultery (the word that stands behind the English word "faithlessness" is a Hebrew word for the crassest kind of sexual immorality). These people have committed adultery against the one who has loved them and cared for them, the descendants of Abraham for the previous 400 years. In v. 12 God has declared how he will respond to these traitors, he is going to wipe them out and start over by making Moses and his descendants into a nation greater and mightier than they.

Clearly just as it is right for the wife of the adulterous husband to divorce him or for the parent of the drug addict child to turn that child over to the police or for Bernie Madoff to be thrown into prison, it is also right that God should destroy these traitorous, faithless people. They have repeatedly despised him and not trusted him and disobeyed him in spite of all his miraculous interventions on their behalf and thus it would be perfectly just for him to destroy them now. However, Moses, laying aside his own hope for glory prays for these people, that God would not destroy them but rather forgive them. He asks God to take back his adulterous wife, to continue giving his resources to the embezzling people, to keep helping the addict. On what grounds does Moses think God should do this? Verse 17 summarizes the main reason God should not destroy these wicked people: "let the power of the Lord be great". In other words, God should not destroy them in order that his great power might be clearly seen or put on display. As we look at how God responds to the treachery of Israel we see how God is at work in his world to show off his greatness. This chapter shows us how it is that nothing and no one, not even a traitorous nation or a treacherous disciple can sabotage God's goal to demonstrate his greatness. Rather, it is in and through the treachery of human beings that God manifests his splendor.

### MAIN POINT

**God displays his greatness by...**

#### **I. Graciously forgiving the wicked for the sake of Jesus (vv.13-20)**

The prayer of Moses for Israel at this point is a very remarkable thing. It is remarkable because things have gotten personal. Moses is praying for these people while they are standing in front of him with stones in their hands, ready to kill him. It is remarkable because he has witnessed their stubbornness on many occasions. It would make perfect sense if he said, "You know God, you're right, these people are beyond help. They've been

given every opportunity to do the right thing and they continue to make wrong choices. They are so hard-hearted that nothing is going to change them so why not wipe them out and start over.” But Moses doesn’t pray like that. Why not?

The reason Moses doesn’t pray like that is because he knows why God does what he does. He understands that what God has done for Israel, has been by grace, for the honor of his own name. He has never made promises to Israel or acted on their behalf because of them but because of his commitment to his own fame. Notice how Moses makes this point in his prayer. First, in vv. 13-16 he reminds the Lord that if he wipes out the Israelites the Egyptians and the Canaanites will hear about it. He reminds him that right now these pagan nations all know that the Lord dwells in the midst of Israel and that the Lord is the one who has brought them out of Egypt by miracles and is now leading them through the desert by the pillar of cloud and fire. He tells the Lord that if he wipes out Israel all the pagan nations will say that the reason they died in the desert is because the Lord is weak and impotent. They will not be impressed with him, they will not hallow his name, rather they will treat him as if he is a nothing and a nobody.

How does Moses know that God cares about what the Egyptians and Canaanites say? It is because that is what God said to Pharaoh through Moses back in Exodus 9:16, “But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” God says that the reason that he raised up stubborn Pharaoh was so that he could perform all those miracles and thus cause his name, his fame to be the subject of conversation among the nations. Moses knows that God’s first and ultimate priority is that God’s person and works be admired, delighted in, praised, honored and worshipped. Thus Moses tells God that if he wipes out the Israelites his purpose to be glorified in the world will be thwarted. The best news you can ever hear is that God delights to be God and he is exercising his omnipotent power at every moment to cause and enable sinners like us to delight in him as well. This is the motivation that stands behind the existence of every star and galaxy and every snail and frog and volcanoes and hurricanes and the coming of Jesus into the world.

Then notice he says the same thing in a different way. He begs the Lord to let his power be great as you have promised (v.17). When and how did God promise to make his power great? In v. 18 Moses quotes what God told him on Mt. Sinai after the golden calf incident when he went to get the second copy of the 10 Commandments. At that time, the Lord, manifesting his presence in the pillar of cloud declared his name to Moses, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” God’s power is made great, not by his performing miracles like those he did in Egypt but by his forgiving sinners while maintaining his justice in the world. God’s power is not displayed if he simply destroys Israel. His power can only be witnessed if he both forgives some sinners, according to his steadfast love and punishes other sinners according to his justice.

Finally, in v. 19 he comes right out and asks the Lord to forgive the people on the basis of his steadfast love, just like he has been doing ever since he brought them out of Egypt. He asks God to continue to deal with Israel according to that love that motivated him to choose Abraham and promise to make him a great nation. He recognizes that God is a promise making God who chooses and blesses people according to his own pleasure and will and not according to what people deserve. He knows that God has, because of his particular love for Abraham and his descendants pledged himself to them and that is why he has forgiven them all along the way. He wants God to continue to operate on the basis of his covenant love, not the performance of Israel.

In v. 20 the Lord tells Moses that he has forgiven according to the word of Moses. The people of Israel have not asked to be forgiven. They are standing with rocks in their hands, ready to kill Moses. They have rejected God and his promises and are determined to return to Egypt. The Lord’s forgiveness has nothing to do with them but with Moses and the word he has just prayed. God is going to forgive for the sake of Moses and in accordance with what Moses has prayed. God forgives because he aims to glorify his own name and because of the intercession, the mediation of his prophet, his servant Moses. Verse 20 is the best news and the worst news

a sinner like you can ever hear. The best news is that God forgives sins, not because of you, but freely, according to his own love, on the basis of the intercession of his chosen mediator. The worst news is that forgiveness has nothing to do with you. You cannot cry enough tears or pray enough prayers or go to church enough times to earn God's forgiveness. God forgives for the glory of his own name and on the basis of his mediator Jesus, not on the basis of your good intentions.

The NT declares that God forgives sins for the same reasons. Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 1:4-7, "...he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses..." Notice that all the benefits of salvation: being loved by God, being his sons and daughters, being redeemed from slavery to sin, being forgiven of our sins; all of this is ours because of God's own pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace and this grace comes to us through the person and work of Jesus. Forgiveness of sins is given to you, not earned by you. God forgives because it pleases him to forgive every sinner for whom Jesus intercedes.

Listen, if you are here this morning as a forgiven sinner it is not due to you but rather it is due to God's own commitment to magnify his glory as a gracious and merciful God through the life, death, resurrection and present intercession of that prophet like Moses, our Lord Jesus Christ. God the Father has forgiven your sins according to the word of God the Son. It was while you were powerless, godless, still a sinner that Christ died for your sins and obtained God's pardon for you. Stand amazed at this word from God: "I have pardoned according to your word." How we should rejoice in the great love of God given to us in Christ by which we are forgiven, declared righteous and made fit for God's presence.

## **II. Justly punishing the wicked (vv.21-23, 26-30a, 32, 34-45)**

If you are paying attention then vv. 21-45 is confusing in light of what the Lord has said in v. 20. In v. 20 the Lord says that he has pardoned according to Moses' word but then he explains how he is going to deal with all those Israelites who are 20 years old and up who have witnessed his miracles in Egypt and in the wilderness but who have tested him these ten times and refused to obey his voice. He says that none of them will see the land of promise. Notice this is an oath (v.21). In other words, you can count on this happening; nothing can keep God from doing what he says. He goes on in v. 27 to tell Moses and Aaron that all those who grumbled against him will have done to them exactly what they said. They said they wanted to die in the desert and so they will all die in the desert. According to vv.34-35 they will not all die immediately, rather they will die over a period of 40 years; one year for each day they explored the land. Then, after the Lord explains what he is going to do he kills the 10 spies who gave a bad report to the people and fomented the rebellion. He killed them with a plague like the plagues he sent on Egypt (vv. 36-38).

The confusing thing is that the Lord tells Moses he has forgiven according to Moses' word and then he does not forgive the 10 spies but immediately kills them and he does not forgive the Israelites who are 20 years old and up but rather says they will all die in the wilderness and will never enter into the land of Promise. How can God say he has forgiven and then do this? We need to notice four things. First, in v. 12 the Lord tells Moses he is going to wipe out every Israelite: every man, woman and child except for Moses and presumably his family so that he can make Moses into a great nation. In other words, every Israelite regardless of age deserves to die. Second, when Moses quotes God's word to him in v. 18 that word says God makes his power great by both forgiving and punishing. God promises to forgive some sinners while punishing other sinners. Third, notice that in v. 20 there is no object to the verb "pardon, forgive". The Lord doesn't say who he has forgiven, only that he has pardoned. Finally, in light of all this we see that while God destroys all 20 years old and up, yet he forgives and preserves every Israelite that is 19 years old or younger. Thus we see how God's power is made great both by his graciously forgiving some and justly punishing others. He does forgive some in Israel while he gives to others in Israel exactly what they deserve. Those Israelites under 20 whom he forgave did not deserve to be forgiven. They were as guilty as those over 20. They were sentenced to death in v. 12 but now

they have received a pardon and taken off from death row and set free and at the same time he justly punishes all 20 and up.

Prior to v. 39 the Lord has been speaking to Moses and Aaron but in v. 39 Moses and Aaron announce to the people what the Lord is going to do. These words, coupled with the death of the ten spies, send the people of Israel into a state of panic. They mourn greatly at the announcement that they will wander in the wilderness for 40 years until everyone who is 20 and up is dead. While that might at first seem to be a promising sign we are quickly informed that they are not mourning their sin but rather they are mourning God's judgment against them for their sin. True repentance is sorrow for my betrayal of God by my sins, not sadness that I will go to hell for my sins. These people are sad they got caught, not sad they sinned. We know this because they decide they are going to now do what they just recently said they could not do, they are going to go and attack the giants and forts in the land of Canaan. They make this plain in spite of the fact that God has told them to go south away from the land of promise (v.25). He has told them they will not enter into the land but are going to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Then after they make their bold pronouncement Moses tells them that they are sinning against the Lord, that the Lord is not with them and they are turning back from following the Lord. Therefore they are going to be killed by the Canaanites. They ignore God's prophet and mediator, Moses and do what they want to do. They once again do not trust God but disobey his word. They attack the Canaanites and are soundly defeated by them. Thus God begins the judgment he declared by killing some of them in the desert.

One of my favorite movies is a western named "Silverado". It is a classic western in that there is a corrupt, rich rancher who has the local sheriff on his payroll. These wicked men kill and plunder and oppress the farmers and all who resist them. After these crooked men ruin lives and murder many innocent people they are finally confronted and killed by four "good guys". When I first saw the movie, when the bad guys are killed at the end of the movie the whole audience cheered. We all clapped for the good guys when they destroyed the bad guys and had love in our hearts for them. Why was that? It is because we all know that evil people should be punished. It is good and right for the wicked to die. We are all impressed with those who stand up to evil and execute justice upon the wicked. It is impossible to read this story in Numbers and not recognize how right it is for these people to suffer the fate that God has decreed for them and for how great God is in punishing these wicked people. Throughout the Bible God's name is praised and glorified and admired because he is a just God who punishes the wicked. Thus it will be for all eternity, all God's people and the elect angels will glorify God for his just punishment of all humans who have refused to glorify God or to give thanks to him.

### **III. Graciously providing for the wicked (vv.20, 25, 34)**

I'm not going to say much here but I want to draw your attention to God's grace towards these people who are under his condemnation. Everyone who is 20 and up will die in the wilderness over the next 40 years because they are God's enemies. They have rejected him and his salvation and deserve to die. However, during those 40 years God will daily provide for them manna and he will daily lead them by the pillar of cloud and fire and he will continue to live in their midst over the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle. As we will see in coming weeks, he continues to respond to them and deal with their concerns. In other words, while they are all going to perish and not enter into God's kingdom, yet he will graciously provide for them during the next 40 years. An immediate death sentence has been commuted into 40 years of God's provision. Here we see God loving his enemies. As Jesus said about how the Lord deals with all of rebellious humanity, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." All humans deserve to be killed by God and sent immediately to hell and yet God daily provides food and clothing and shelter and children and all manner of good things in spite of humanity's continuing rebellion and unbelief.

### **IV. Graciously saving some of the wicked (vv.24, 30-33)**

As we noted earlier, because of Moses' intercession and because of God's ambition to have his name hallowed in the world God forgives some of the Israelites and promises to bring them into the land of Canaan. Who are

those whom he has forgiven? First, Caleb and Joshua will be the only two men over the age of 20 who will not die in the wilderness but whom God will bring into the Promised Land. Look at v. 24 and how the Lord describes Caleb, a description which would also apply to Joshua. In contrast to all other Israelites God describes Caleb in this way: literally, v. 24 reads, “a different Spirit is with him and he followed me fully.” God has given Caleb and Joshua his Holy Spirit and as a result they have believed God’s promises and thus obeyed God. Here we have an example of two born again men who have denied themselves, taken up their cross and followed after Jesus. They have, in the face of opposition from all Israel and at the threat of losing their own lives insisted that God is faithful to his promises. They believe that following God in battle against giants and obtaining the land of promise is infinitely superior to a life of leisure in Egypt. They are living by faith and fighting the fight of faith. They trust God to do what God has promised.

But notice in v. 31, the second group whom God has forgiven and promised to take into the land of promise is all the “little ones” of Israel. You need to pay attention to what is being said here. In v. 12 God said that he was going to justly kill every man, woman and child in Israel because they had all rebelled against him. Now, he has said he forgives everyone 19 years old and younger and will bring them in. Think about how arbitrary that appears. Every Israelite, including those under 20 had a hard heart towards God and would be happy to return to Egypt and deserves to die and yet if you were one week shy of your 20<sup>th</sup> birthday you would not die in the wilderness but would get to go into the land of Promise. How is that fair? It is not fair, it is called grace. They all deserve to die but God, contrary to what they deserve and according to the pleasure of his own will promises to take these little ones into the land. All those 20 and up deserve to die. They cannot complain that God has not treated them fairly; he has been perfectly just towards them. All those under 20 deserve to die but God has sovereignly, freely determined that they will live. This is called grace.

It is not insignificant or accidental that they are called “little ones”. This is the same word that Jesus uses to describe who it is who will enter into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says it is those who humble themselves like a little child who will enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3-4). The characteristic of humility in children is the objective fact that they have no power or influence or authority; they have no legal standing but are under the authority of their parents. Their humility also is the subjective reality that they depend upon their parents for everything. To be a little child is to recognize that I have no authority, no right to enter into God’s kingdom on my own but that I must depend entirely upon God’s mercy and favor. Thus, when we put the description of Caleb and Joshua together with the fact that the little ones will inherit the land we can see that all those whom God graciously forgives and brings into his eternal kingdom acknowledge their powerlessness, their unworthiness to enter in and depend entirely upon God’s grace given in the person of Jesus as the only reason they will enter into the kingdom of God. So you can know today that your sins are forgiven and that you are on your way to God’s eternal land of promise if you are a person like Caleb who is trusting in God’s promises and thus fighting the fight of faith or like a little child you are not depending upon yourself and your own goodness but upon your heavenly Father to forgive your sins for the sake of Christ. Jesus is praying for you and the Father has pardoned you according to the word of Jesus for the praise of his grace if you are trusting in what Christ has done for you and not in yourself in any way.

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