

# **TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD**

## **BY PERSISTENTLY TRUSTING HIS WORD**

### **Numbers 15:1-41**

#### INTRODUCTION

Numbers 14 records one of the most stunning defeats, the most crushing disappointments that any group of people has ever suffered. Their defeat was their own fault. The people of Israel refused to believe God's promise to give them the land of Canaan. They determined that they would kill God's leaders, pick a new leader and head back for Egypt. As they were gathering stones with which to kill Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb, God showed up and told Moses that he was going to wipe out every man, woman and child descended from Abraham, except for Moses and his family, because of their stubborn refusal to believe him in spite of all the miracles he had performed for them. After Moses prays and asks God to forgive them for the honor of his own name, God does forgive all the Israelites who are 19 and younger but he promises every Israelite that is 20 and older that over the course of the next 40 years, they will all die in the wilderness and will never get to enter into the land of Promise. So the people of Israel have been defeated because of their own sin and now must wander in the desert for 40 years until all who are currently 20 and up are dead.

So what does God say to this audience now made up of people who are condemned to eternal death and promised eternal life? He ignores those 20 and up and addresses those who are 19 and younger. He is done talking with the older generation. They have been rejected and Numbers 15-25 records the death of these rebels over the next 40 years. God's concern now is with the younger generation whom he has promised to bring into the Promised Land. You can see that the people he is addressing is only the younger generation because of what he says to Moses right at the start of the chapter. "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, "When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you..."'" The only people to whom God is going to give the land are those 19 and younger. Thus the people of Israel no longer include those over 19 but only those 19 and under. As chapter 14 makes so clear and I pointed out last week, this younger generation is not being blessed by God because they were innocent in the rebellion or because they are better than the older generation. They, like the older generation, deserve to die. However, they have been saved on the basis of God's unmerited favor, his grace through the intercession of Moses. So what does God want to say to these people? What does he want these people who are saved not by their works but by his free and sovereign grace to do?

If you will look at the end of the chapter you can see the point the Lord is making to them. In vv.37-38 he commands them to put tassels on the four corners of their outer garments and to put a blue cord on each of the tassels. He wants them to do this so that when they look at the blue cord they will remember his word, his commandments to them. He wants them to trust his word to them and so obey that word. God speaks this chapter to this younger generation that has been saved freely, by God's grace so that they will understand that the way to respond to grace is by trusting in God's word, his promises. The older generation failed to enter into the Land of Promise because they failed to trust in the Lord's promises; they refused to believe him but instead believed in their own power and wisdom. This chapter shows that all those who are saved by God's grace are recognized by their faith in God's promises. These are the same promises we must depend upon if we are going to make it safely through this wilderness world. It is this same faith that must characterize us if we are to be the people God has saved by his grace.

#### MAIN POINT

**Those whom God saves by grace are characterized by faith in God's promise to...**

**I. Give us eternal life (vv. 1-2, 17-21, 41)**

The first thing that the Lord wants Moses to tell the younger generation is that he is most definitely going to bring them into the land of Canaan. Twice he identifies the time at which they are to do the commands which he gives in this chapter. First in v. 2, “When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you...” Second, in v. 18, “When you come into the land to which I bring you...” Thus he applies to these particular people the promise that he has been making for over 400 years to Abraham and his descendants. This is the promise that the older generation refused to believe. In order to help them want the land of Canaan, the Lord describes the fruitfulness and goodness of that land by describing the various kinds of offerings that they will make when they come into the land.

There is nothing completely new here that the Lord has not already explained in Leviticus. These summations of the various sacrifices on one hand are simply a reminder that all the commands of Moses regarding the priesthood and tabernacle and offerings are to be carried out in the land of Canaan. However, these commands add to what is explained in Leviticus. In the earlier instructions grain offerings and drink offerings of wine were not made with every animal sacrifice but only with a few specific ones, as during the Feast of Firstfruits or in the consecration of a Nazarite. However, once they are in the land of Canaan, they are to offer grain offerings and drink offerings with every animal sacrifice (vv. 3-4). The point is that the land will be so fruitful that they will have an abundance of grain and wine and so it will not be a problem to offer so much grain and wine to the Lord.

In vv. 17-21 the Lord gives instructions aimed to arouse their desire for this land. He tells them that when they are in the land and baking bread, they are to break off a lump of dough from every batch and bake a loaf which they are to give to the Lord as they give the first portion of their grain harvest. During the Feast of Weeks, at the beginning of the wheat harvest each person was to offer the first sheaf of harvested grain and two loaves of baked bread. But here, they are to offer a portion of every batch of bread they bake to the Lord. Again, this is an expansion over what was earlier said and points out how fruitful the land will be. Also, this offering points to an entirely different way of life. There is a day coming when they will no longer live in tents and wander from place to place. They will have permanent dwellings and land and ovens in which to bake bread. They cannot do any of what this verse commands at the moment as they only have manna to eat. But there is a day coming when they will own land and harvest grain and bake bread and then they will make these offerings.

Finally, in the last verse of the chapter the Lord restates the ultimate purpose for which he has saved this younger generation. He says that the entire reason for their being saved is so that he can be their God. Three times in this one verse he makes this point: “I am Yahweh, your God.” He brought them out of Egypt and he is bringing them into the land of Canaan so that he can be their God and they will be his people. This is the ultimate reason to look forward to that day when they will enter the land, so that they will be God’s people in God’s land.

Why tell this new generation at this point about life in the land of Promise, which is 40 years away? Why is it important for this new generation to be filled with anticipation for living in the land of Canaan? The answer is pretty straightforward. The vision of that glorious future is what will keep them trusting in God as they wander in the desert, suffering for their parents and grandparents failures, watching them die off. It is hope in that glorious future that will enable them to endure the difficulties of their 40 years of wandering in the desert. In the same way that the Lord sought to whet the appetite of this new generation for the Land of Promise, so our Lord Jesus wants to whet our appetite for that eternal home that he has gone to prepare for us. While being a Christian has tremendous benefits and joys available to us here and now, yet the primary thing that Jesus taught his disciples to yearn for is that eternal home which we will inherit when he comes back and gives to all of his people their resurrection bodies and creates a new heaven and a new earth in which we will dwell with him forever. Jesus aims for us to be full of anticipation for that glorious eternal home so that we, like the young generation of Israelites, will persistently trust in God and not give up.

Jesus said, “Blessed are you when men insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad for great is your reward in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the

prophets who were before you.” Why should we rejoice and be glad when we are insulted and lied about by those who hate Christ? We should be happy when we are mistreated because we have a great reward in heaven. Paul says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not even worth comparing with the glory to be revealed to us.” There is only one way to endure the sufferings of this world and that is by trusting in God’s promise to bring you to heaven. The Bible is full of descriptions of the glorious future that awaits all whom God saves by grace through faith and it is those promises of life with him forever that are the foundation of our lives. These are the source of all our joy. Getting ready to go on vacation can be a lot of work and hassle. What keeps you working to get ready is the thought of how much you are going to enjoy your time away. And once you are at the cabin or sitting on the beach relaxing or seeing the mountains you don’t even remember the hard work you went through to get there because the joy of being on vacation is so great. So it is with us: our hearts are fixed on the joy that is set before us, the joy of living with Jesus forever in the new creation and it is this hope alone that enables us to endure all the hardship and disappointments of this life.

## **II. Forgive us through the death of Christ (vv. 3-16, 22-29)**

The main subject matter of this chapter is a description of the various sacrifices that are to be offered by the people when they get to the land. There are three clauses in the descriptions of how to do the sacrifices that point to the purpose of the sacrifices. First, six times the phrase, “to make a pleasing aroma to the Lord” is used to describe the effect of the various sacrifices. This phrase is an idiom, a figure of speech and is used repeatedly throughout the OT. It signifies that the sacrifice is acceptable to God and thus the one who offered it is accepted by God. It is a particularly fitting figure of speech as the most common way that the Hebrew language describes God’s anger is with another slang expression: “his nostrils flared”. Thus God’s anger against sinners, his “flaring nostrils,” is taken away by his nose smelling the pleasing aroma of the various sacrifices. (NOTE: God does not have a nose. This is an example of how God accommodates himself to us in order to communicate truth about himself.) This is so important for this new generation to be reminded of because they know how guilty they are of sin and of how God’s nostrils so recently flared at them. How they need to know that as they offer their sacrifices, God’s nostrils are pleased with them because of the sacrifices.

This same phrase is used to describe the death of Jesus in behalf of everyone who believes. In Ephesians 5:2 Paul writes, “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a pleasing aroma and sacrifice to God.” Thus we are to understand that the smell of all those animals being burned up and/or cooked in the tabernacle throughout all those centuries was a foreshadowing of the “pleasing aroma” of the death of Jesus to the Father on our behalf. God accepts our sacrifice, Jesus, in our place. He is pleased with what Jesus has done and thus pleased with us. We are not like rotting garbage in God’s nostrils but we are a pleasing aroma because Jesus is our sacrifice.

The second phrase that is used several times in this passage is found in vv. 22-29 in the instructions given regarding “unintentional sins”. There are almost two chapters in Leviticus that deal with unintentional sins. These are sins which we commit due to carelessness, inattentiveness, forgetfulness or even foolishness but not as premeditated acts of defiance to God. Jesus, in Matthew 12:36 says, “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be condemned and by your words you will be acquitted.” Every person in here has spoken cruel, critical, condemning and evil words of which we are not even aware. All of us have carelessly said things about which we have later said, “I didn’t mean to say that.” “I was only joking.” “I wasn’t thinking when I said that.” We all have spoken careless words and done careless things that have broken God’s commands because it just comes natural.

In Israel God made provision for when people realized they had carelessly broken one of God’s laws. He told them to offer a sin offering by which the “priest would make atonement” for the unintentional sin. The idea in atonement is that the one who sinned deserves to die but God accepts the death of the animal in the place of or instead of the death of the one who sins. In the NT this is one of the most common ways that the death of Jesus is talked about. Paul says that God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement for those who believe. In other

words every believer deserves to die for their sins but God the Father killed God the Son as a substitutionary sacrifice, an atoning sacrifice. Jesus dies the death I deserve; he makes atonement for my sins.

Finally, notice that the result of the atonement in vv. 26 & 28 is that the sins for which atonement is made are forgiven. Remember, forgiveness is a term that comes from the world of economics. We are in debt to God because of our sins. We have squandered all the resources he has given us on the pleasures of sin. We cannot repay him in any way. When Christ lives and dies for us he repays our debt for us so that God forgives the debt we owe him. We do not have to pay him back and he will not pay us back for our swindling him out of all that he has given us. We have been released from our debts, we will not have to pay for our crimes against God.

So God reminds this young generation that will be suffering in the wilderness for 40 years prior to entering into the Land of Promise that they are acceptable to God, they have been released from their death penalty and their debts to God are all paid. He aims for this good news to be of great help to them as they live out these 40 miserable years in the desert. My friend, whatever sorrow you have in your life, the knowledge that you are acceptable to God, that you will never die for your sins, that you are completely forgiven for all of your offenses towards God is to be a balm and healing salve for your wounds. Have your children forsaken you? Does your spouse ignore you? Have you lost your job? Have you lost a child? Are you afflicted with physical sickness and pain? Have your friends or family betrayed you? Are you in a dead end job? Whatever sorrow you might experience in this wilderness world can be relieved if you will believe that the God who was angry with you and who was your enemy now loves you and accepts you and forgives you because of Jesus' sacrifice for you. There is no better news for you to hear than this. There is no greater source of joy than this. If you are trusting in Jesus' death for you, then God loves you and is no longer angry with you.

### **III. Reject all who refuse to trust and obey his word (vv. 30-40)**

I wish that I didn't have to say what I'm going to say now. But the fact that I am going to tell you this bad news points to the reason I preach through entire books of the Bible and don't skip anything. The reason I preach through books of the Bible is so that what I want to say to you is not what determines what I say. In vv. 30-31 God warns this young generation whom he is going to bring into the land of promise that sins which are done 'with a high hand', that is, sins which are done defiantly, intentionally, in a premeditated way with knowledge that it is a sin, cannot be forgiven. There is no sacrifice for these sins. The reason given for this is because this person is reviling the Lord and despising his word.

Why would God want the younger generation to know this? This is what happened to their parents and grandparents and God doesn't want it to happen to them. Their parents and grandparents despised the word of the Lord when they refused to go into the land, when they accused him of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them, when they determined to kill their leaders and go back to Egypt. The Lord wants to be their God and thus he warns them to not despise his word because if they do, he will despise them. Then we are told about a man who is discovered gathering firewood on the Sabbath day. This is an example of the high handed sin God warns them not to commit. The ones who found him bring him to Moses and he was held because it was not clear what should be done with him. That is an odd thing to say because there are about a dozen statements prior to this in the law where God says that anyone who works on the Sabbath day is to be killed. For example Exodus 35:2 says, "Six days work shall be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death." Most commentators think that while it was clear he was to be put to death, it was not clear how the sentence should be carried out. Thus what the Lord told Moses was that he was to be killed by stoning. That is what happened. He was taken outside the camp and killed by stoning for gathering firewood on the Sabbath day.

So how are we to understand what is being said here? As I have tried to make plain to you on numerous occasions the way in which we are to read the OT is given to us by Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Thus every word of the OT applies to us but only as it has been fulfilled in, by or with Jesus. So how

are we to think about the 4<sup>th</sup> of the Ten Commandments, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy”? As the commandment goes on to say and then it is repeated scores of times throughout the OT the Jewish people kept the Sabbath day holy by not working on it but by resting and worshipping on that day. In the OT, to obey that commandment meant you would do no work but would rest and worship every Saturday. As you can see here, if you worked and did not rest and worship you would be killed. Is that how we are to keep the commandment? Should we have the death penalty for everyone who works on Saturday or would that be Sunday? I don’t have time to give the full answer with all the biblical justification so I’m just going to give you the summary. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, which means he is the one who gives Sabbath rest to his people. He has done all the work to obtain salvation, which in Hebrews 4 and Matthew 11 is described as “Sabbath rest”. The way we keep the Sabbath, the way you and I obey the fourth commandment is every day we rest in the finished work of Christ. We do not work for our salvation but trust Christ to give us his rest by means of his work. We are not commanded to not work on Sunday but to only rest and worship on Sunday. Rather we are commanded to not work for our salvation on any day but on every day to rest in Christ and worship Christ. If you work for your salvation and do not trust the work of Christ you will die and go to hell, just like this guy who gathered wood on the Sabbath day. If you want a fuller explanation you can go read or listen to my sermons on the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment and on Matthew 12.

Is there a “high handed” sin that we can commit and for which there is no forgiveness? The answer is yes. It is talked about in many places in the NT. Again, I’m only going to give the summary explanation, there are several sermons you can listen to on the website to get a fuller explanation. This “high handed” sin can only be committed by a person who has a full and complete understanding of the gospel and who has been a part of the Christian community for a significant period of time and has experienced many of the blessings of Christian living. This is just like the situation in vv. 30-31 where it is only a person who is fully aware of God’s commands and a member of the people of God who can commit this sin. The guy who gathered firewood had seen and experienced all the glorious things that God had done for Israel. He knew that God commanded no work be done on Saturday. So his gathering firewood was spitting in God’s face, despising his word. So for us, it is the person who says, after all they have known and experienced of the gospel, “Jesus is a fraud and Christianity is a crock and I want nothing more to do with the whole business. I am going to live my life the way I want to live and I couldn’t care less about Jesus or the church.” It is a person who completely turns their back on Christ after having known the gospel and lived in the Christian community. If you are worried that you have committed this sin, then you haven’t because the person who has committed this sin doesn’t care. There isn’t anything else that they can be shown or told. Nothing can be done for a person who has committed this sin that can change their mind, they are permanently indifferent to and hostile towards Jesus and his way of life. The death of Christ is sufficient to atone for every sin you ever commit for all those who trust Jesus and his word to the end of their lives but his death will do you no good if you despise him and refuse to believe in him. So I warn all of us who are on that wilderness journey to the land of promise to remember that God will reject all who refuse to trust Christ and to live by faith in his word.

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