

The Kindness and Severity of God

Numbers 10:11-20:29

Has God ever asked you to something that was hard to do? We cannot judge the will of God by whether a task is difficult or easy. Instead of asking the Lord, *What are you saying to me in this? What do I need to learn? Give me what I need to stand firm.* We bolt. At this point, I'm suspect of easy tasks. Our tendency to shy away from difficult things could arise out of the idolization of ourselves. We may think that the purpose of God is to make much of us, ensure our ease and comfort, rescue us from any hardship, and give us a charmed life. The reality is in this world we are at war.

The first ten chapters of Numbers are marked by a remarkable obedience. Israel has set out on a victory march to the promised land following the glory cloud. (10:11-36). We have a summary of the majestic scene in words of Moses (10:35-36).ⁱ This was a glorious time like no other. We can feel the excitement in the air.

Numbers 11 marks a dramatic shift in the narrative. Chapters 11-25 cover a nearly 40-year period that is marked by the surprising disobedience of the people. It is so unexpected that it leaves the reader asking, *Where did that come from? I didn't see it coming.*

The central narrative upon which this section of Numbers, indeed the whole book of Numbers, turns is the spy story in chapters 13-14.ⁱⁱ In the spy story, Israel is poised on the southern border of the promised land in the wilderness of Paran (cf. 12:16). They sent 12 spies, one from each tribe to spy out the land. The spies came back with evidence that Canaan was indeed *a land flowing with milk and honey* (13: 26b-27, cf. 23).

The minority report said, *Let us go up at once and occupy it for we are well able to overcome it* (13:30). The majority report, however, said, *We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are* (13:31).

The majority report turned the hearts of the people, so that they grumbled against Moses and Aaron (14:2-4). They became the anti-Exodus party.

Here is how the LORD interpreted their words, *How long will this people despise? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?* (14:11). Note the words: *They did not believe.*

Ultimately, this is the same reason Moses and Aaron were not allowed to enter the promised land, *And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them”* (20:12).

The point is obedience flows from faith, or it is deficient. And disobedience flows from unbelief. God requires faith. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness (Gen 15:6). The same is true in the NT: *We are justified by faith* (cf. Rom 1:17; 3:24-26; 4:5).

The Israelites wished they had died in the wilderness (14:2b), that is exactly what they will get (14:28-30a).

The question is how did the Israelites get to that decisive point that they became a faithless people who despised God? Lord willing, we will look at chapters 11-25 in two sermons. Today we will cover chapters 11-20 and on July 14 chapters 21-25.

If we read chapters 11-25, that sadly record the dying out of the exodus generation and only see God’s severity, we miss the larger point of the text—God’s determination to show his kindness as widely as possible among the nations. Moses arranged his material ultimately to show God’s redemptive mission will not fail. Both God’s severity and his kindness have His redemptive mission in view.

1. The rebellion of the people and the severity of God

These chapters are riddled with rebellion, and the rebellion will not stop until the last man of the exodus generation is dead.

The people started out so well in Numbers 1-10. They are on the way to the promised land at last. Every day the manna falls. The last thing we expect is 11:1-3.ⁱⁱⁱ

A. Rebellion started at the fringe

There was a fringe element among the Israelites. Some scholars think the *rabble* of verse 4 are the mixed multitude that came out of Egypt with the Israelites (cf. Ex

12:38) and were the initial complainers of 11:1-3. They are unhappy with things in general, and they complained in earshot of the LORD (11:1). They were the fringe element of the camp and that is where the fire of the LORD burned.

The people cried to Moses; Moses prayed; the fire died down (11:2). We have a new place name, Taberah, Burning (11.3).

B. Rebellion spreads to the congregation

The *rabble* had a strong craving for all things Egyptian that spread to the people of Israel, who began to desire meat (11:4). They remembered the free fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic of Egypt. They had nothing but manna to look at (11:4b-6).

The anger of the LORD blazed and Moses was displeased. This was the beginning of the undoing of Moses. He was at the end of himself, and he laid out his lament to the LORD (11:11-15).

God answered Moses's lament by giving him some Spirit-filled help (11:16-17, 24-26).

He answered the complaint of the people of Israel by giving them more meat than they could eat (11:18-23, 31-35). While the complainers were chewing, God struck them with a plague (11:33). And we have a new place name, Kibroth-hattaavah, Graves of Craving (11:34).

There is a difference between lament and complaint. Moses laments from a heart that wants to serve the LORD. The people complain because they are rejecting the LORD (11:20). Their first food complaint was a month and 15 days after they left Egypt in the Wilderness of Sin (Ex 16:1-4). That is when the manna began. It was raining bread from heaven. Whoo-hoo! The Manna will continue until they eat the produce of the land (Josh 5:12). Now after a year, they complain, *they have nothing but manna to look at* (Num 11:6). At the end of 40 years, they will loathe it (Num 21:5).

Oddly, the shortest way to no more manna would have been to march to the promised land, *a land flowing with milk and honey*. Even when they saw evidence of the food of the land, they still longed for the food of Egypt (Num 13-14; 16:13-14a).

Discontent has spread from the fringe to the mainstream of the camp.

C. Rebellion spreads to the Leaders

The discontent then spread to the inner-circle of leaders, but for different reasons than food. Since Miriam's name is listed first (12:1), and she is the one who got the worst end of the punishment (12:10-16), she was, perhaps, the instigator in this inner-circle rivalry.^{iv}

As a pretext, she raised the issue of Moses marrying a Cushite wife (12:1). From there she made the jump to her real issue: *Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?* (12:2). Perhaps when the Spirit anointed the 70 elders and they prophesied, Miriam and Aaron felt a bit threatened, so they used the lame excuse of Moses's wife to power-grab.

God called the 3 of them out to the tent of meeting. This was the original *come-to-Jesus* meeting. Hear the weight of the words with which the LORD spoke of Moses and how he distinguished the leadership of Moses and the singular relationship he had with Moses (12:6-8a). In light of the unique relationship Moses had with God, the LORD now asked a clarifying question of Miriam and Aaron: *Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses* (8b)?

When the cloud settled, Miriam was leprous (12:10). Moses interceded (12:13), and the LORD in mercy healed her, but required her to bear the shame of her sin for 7 days outside the camp (12:14). We will hear no more from her until her death notice in 20:1b near the end of 40 years of wilderness wandering: *And Miriam died there [Kadesh] and was buried and was buried there.*

These three rebellions are the downward slope to the tragic spy story of chapters 13-14. Discontent spread from the fringe to the congregation to the inner-circle of leadership. A discontent, divided, and disgruntled people do not have the cohesion to undertake something like the conquest of Canaan. The failure of Israel to enter the land is the result of the discontent that led to despising the LORD and their unbelief (Num 14:11).

On the other side of the spy debacle, the rebellion continued. Every rebellion has been met with severity. At this point, we may be asking, *Has no one learned*

anything? Why do they continue rebelling? It seems that whatever God requires they do the opposite (eg. 14:1-4, 28-32; cf. 14:39-45).^v

D. Rebellion spreads to the Levites

If Miriam challenged Moses's leadership, Korah, some notable sons of Reuben, and 250 reputable men of the congregation challenge the validity of the priesthood (Num 16:1-2).^{vi} Moses asked, *What is Aaron that you grumble against him* (16:11b)?

They assembled against Moses and Aaron charging, *You have gone too far* (16:3b). Moses countered, *You have gone too far, sons of Levi*. Moses asked, *Is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel to bring you near to himself...* (16:9)?

Dathan and Abiram, sons of Reuben, counter to Moses, *Is it a small thing that you have brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness...* (16:13-14a)? These rebels assigned the attributes of the promise to Egypt.

Moses called on Korah and his posse to each bring a censer before the LORD the next day. This was a showdown at the tabernacle. *In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him* (16:5, cf. 16-17).

That next morning, the LORD for the third time threatened to destroy the whole congregation in a moment (16:21). Moses and Aaron again *fell on their faces* in intercession (16:22). The LORD conceded but said, *Tell the congregation, "Get away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram"* (16:24). The earth opened and swallowed Korah and the people who belonged to him (16:32). Fire from the LORD consumed the 250 men offering incense (16:35).

We have all read the same Korah story. But the next day all the congregation *grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, "You have killed the people of the LORD* (16:41). Again the LORD threatens to consume the congregation in a moment (16:45, cf. 21). Moses directed Aaron to get fire for his censor from the altar and make atonement for the people. Aaron ran into the middle of the people

to make atonement and stand between them and death (16:48). 14,700 died in the affair of Korah (16:49).

E. Finally Moses and Aaron rebel

Moses started to crack in his lament in 11:11-15. Near the end of 40 years, the people are gathered at Kadesh, Miriam died, and the people *assembled against Moses and Aaron* because they needed water: *Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord* (20:3)! They wished they have died in a flashing out of the wrath of God.

Moses and Aaron, again, fell on their faces (20:6). There was no fire from the LORD, no threat to consume the people, only the simple instruction to gather the people, speak to the rock, and it would yield water.

Moses assembled the people and went off on them. *You rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock* (20:10). Moses then in disobedience struck the rock twice with his staff (20:11).

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, *Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them* (20:12). We have another place name, Meribah, Quarreling.

These stories show the rebellion of the people and severity of God.

2. The rebellion of the people and kindness of God

In every instance of severity, we can also see the kindness of God at work.

A. God's larger redemptive purpose.

Consider the spy story. This story is central to the book of Numbers.^{vii} Both God's severity and his kindness serve his purpose and advance his redemptive goal. The spy story shows us God's concern for the nations.

Moses reminded the LORD that if he killed the people all at once He would harm his reputation among the nations (14:15-17). When the LORD handed down his verdict that none of the exodus generation would see the promised land, He swore by his redemptive purpose, *As truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD* (14:21). Bringing that rebellious people to the

promised land would not have furthered God's redemptive goal. The impact is seen in your redemption and mine and the saints through the ages.

They had complained in their unbelief that their little ones would fall prey to their enemies in Canaan (14:3b). The LORD, however, would take those little ones and bring them into the land their fathers rejected (14:31).

The legislation that seems so out of place in chapter 15 comes on the heels of the LORD sentencing the exodus generation to die in the wilderness. The legislation is confirmation that the LORD will give the land to the new generation. These laws are for life in the land. Twice we read, *When you come into the land ...* (15:2, 17).

God's redemptive purpose will not fail.

B. The intercession of Moses and Aaron

What a gift Moses was to the people of Israel. As we said, Moses knew the character of God and his redemptive aims, which led him to intercede for the people in the face of wrath.

Listen to Moses's prayer for Miriam when the LORD struck her with leprosy: *O God, please heal her—please* (12:13).

In these chapters the LORD threatens to finish with Israel and make great nation from Moses (14:12) and two times in the rebellion of Korah the LORD threatened to consume the nation in a moment (16:21, 45). Four times Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the LORD to plead for Israel (14:5; 16:4,22; 20:6). Once Aaron ran with his censor to stand between the living and the dead to stop a plague from the LORD (16:48).

God, knowing the exodus generation would die in the wilderness and that pastoring them would take Moses and Aaron to their graves, gave Moses and Aaron as agents of his kindness to a people destined for death, so the earth would be filled with his glory (cf. 14:21).

C. The gift of the priesthood

What a gift the priesthood was to Israel. They lived in the realm of sin and death in all its implications. And right in the middle of the camp dwelled the antithesis of sin and death, the God of Israel who is light and life. Those two worlds do not mix

and cannot coexist. Without the priesthood, Israel would not have lasted 5 minutes with God in their midst.

After the Korah debacle, God established the validity of the Aaronic priesthood by causing Aaron's staff to bud (17:8). The LORD did this to put *an end to their grumblings lest they die* (17:10b). It seems the people finally "got it" on the validity of the priesthood—"everyone who comes near, who comes near the tabernacle of the LORD, shall die. Are we all to perish" (17:12-13)?

That is a good question. It is answered as the duties of the priests and Levites are spelled out in chapter 18. The Levites guard the tabernacle and the priests. Part of guarding the priests and the tabernacle was staying on their own lane. They could not come near the vessels and the altar lest both Levite and the priest die (18:3-4). They were gifts to the priests (18:6).

The priesthood was a gift to Israel. Israel was in the wilderness. They desperately need someone to bear their sin and some way to be free from the pollution of death. The Israelites needed someone to stand between them and the LORD who dwelled among them.

The priesthood was a gift to Israel because they bore their sin (18:1b). The people needed to have their sin dealt with. They could not draw near. They could not approach God. The priesthood was a gift to them because any outsider who came near was to be put to death (18:7b).

The exodus generation was going to die out in the wilderness. It is a tragic story. Death was all around them, and God who is life and the source of all life was in the middle of the camp.

What is to be done about the pollution from death? The uncleanness of death dare not encroach upon the dwelling place of God. The purification laws in chapter 19 provide a way for cleansing from the pollution of death that is all around them (19:13, 20).

Aaron himself would soon die. What would happen to the priesthood then? Who would bear the sin of the people and provide for their purification? In the law for purification, Eleazar, Aaron's son, is emerging as Aaron's replacement (19:1-3).

Finally, in the 40th year of wilderness wandering the LORD instructed Moses to take Aaron and Eleazar up on Mount Hor. Aaron was *to be gathered to his people* (20:23-24; cf. 33:38). He would not see the land because they rebelled at Meribah. There Moses stripped the high priestly garments off Aaron and put them on Eleazar his son (20:26). There Aaron died (20:28b). It is a heart wrenching scene, but the priesthood is firmly in place. It was a gift to Israel. They wept for 30 days (20:29b).

The writer of Hebrews picks up on the priestly themes of Numbers. He puts before us a superior high priest and a superior covenant.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 9:11-15a).

We too live in the realm of sin and death, but we have a high priest who has borne our sin and purified our hearts. Through him we draw near to God.

ⁱ The words of Moses spoken here are enshrined in Psalm 68.

ⁱⁱ The exodus generation committed two great apostasies: the golden calf (Exodus 32-34) and the spy debacle in Number 13 and 14. The two stories are tied together in a way that lets the reader know they are related theologically. In both stories, God threatened to eliminate all the Israelites and start over with Moses (14:12; cf. Ex. 32:10). In both stories, Moses interceded, citing the blow it would be to God's reputation in Egypt and among the nations if he annihilated his people and did not give them the land (Num 14:13-14a,15-16; Ex. 32:12). Moses, also, reminded God of the revelation of God's Name in the renewal of covenant after the golden calf (Num 14:17-18; cf. Ex 34:6-7). To move forward after the golden calf, Moses and the people must know more of the nature of the God of Israel. He is slow to anger, abounding in love, forgiving the transgressions of thousands but will by no means clear the guilty. God is both kind and severe. The covenant was renewed after the golden calf but not after the spy story. Rather, at Moses's request God pardoned them (14:19-20) in the sense that their disobedience would not thwart the divine mission (14:21). Yet, not one of them would be a part of it (14:22-23). See the kindness and severity of God.

ⁱⁱⁱ The short complaint story gives us an outline for the basic pattern of complaint stories: the people complain, God's anger is kindled, Moses intercedes, and punishment is stopped.

^{iv} Miriam was an amazing and capable person. More than likely Miriam was the one who kept watch on the basket the baby Moses was in as he floated down the Nile (Ex. 2:1-10). She was there to arrange for Moses's Mom to be his nurse and raise him in the formative years of early childhood. She was a prophetess whose song is inscribed (Ex 15:19-21).

^v Stephen assessed his generation and the wilderness generation the same—stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, always resisting the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51).

^{vi} Since the spy story, when people rebel, Moses and Aaron fall on their faces (14:5; 16:4, 22; 20:6) as if they know what is coming.

^{vii} The spy story is central to the two censuses because of the spy debacle the second census is needed. It defines the theme of the book: the death of the old generation and the birth of the new generation. The story is recalled in the last section of the book in 32:11.