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Session 3 - The promise of God

Bible Passages

Numbers 15:1-41

Brief Notes

Why are we doing a study on this chapter?! Because it's here (and we believe 2Tim.3:16-17). A better question would be: Why is it here? Why interrupt a gripping (if tragic) story with a chapter of laws? Some commentators seem to think some pages must have got shuffled accidentally; or maybe these are some stray pages from Leviticus which didn't make the final edit, and rather than throw them away they were shoved into the book of Numbers (since who would look there and notice anyway?!). No, surely this chapter has been very deliberately placed here to comment and cast light on what has just happened. A number of times in the book of Numbers, laws or lists are placed in the flow of the narrative in a way that suggests a far richer meaning and relevance than simply the description of a law, and we see that here. It is important therefore to read these laws in their context.

Offerings in the land (verses 1-21)

The previous two chapters described the people's rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, refusing to go in to

take possession of the land, and the entire generation (Caleb and Joshua excepted) being therefore denied entrance. Their subsequent attempt to go up, in defiance of God's decree, ends in humiliating defeat. In context therefore, the opening words of this chapter are a wonderful and surprising reaffirmation of God's gracious promise: they will enter the land, and they will enjoy the abundance of the place. Judgement would not be God's last word. The repeated phrase "an aroma pleasing to the LORD" (vv.3, 7, 10, 13, 14) speaks of atonement, reconciliation to God, and therefore the enjoyment of fellowship with God. The references to the foreigner (vv.13-16) – even strikingly "you and the foreigner shall be the same before the LORD" (v.15) – look beyond the period of conquest, and might seem to hint at the Abrahamic promise of blessing to the nations. The offering of the first ground meal from the threshing floor (vv.17-21) was an acknowledgment that all the good things they enjoyed were from God. So these laws speak of God's grace promised to them.

Unintentional and deliberate sins (verses 22-36)

These verses draw a distinction between unintentional sins, for which atonement is possible, through sacrifice, and deliberate sin, exemplified by the Sabbath-breaker whose disobedience it seems was a brazen act of defiance, for which no forgiveness is possible. The context in which these verses are placed suggests that they are meant to make us reflect on what has just happened in chapter 14 (and indeed on what will happen in the following chapter). At Kadesh Barnea they were treating God and his word with contempt (14:11), but the fact that forgiveness was granted (14:20) suggests that "unintentional" perhaps covers more than we might suppose. Perhaps the spies who received their due penalty in 14:36-37 acted with defiance, whilst the people were simply fell into sin (again) through their encouragement.

This distinction is one we see in the New Testament too – consider for example **1 Timothy 1:13** (Paul's sins were clearly intentional in one sense, they weren't an accident, and yet it seems not the kind of defiant sin this is warning against), and **Hebrews 10:26-27**. It is perhaps a distinction we cannot easily make ourselves, but we are to hear both an encouragement here – the possibility of forgiveness – as well as a warning that such forgiveness cannot be presumed upon when we defiantly and determinedly we turn our back on God.

Remembering the LORD (verses 37-41)

The instruction about tassels might seem a rather obscure way to draw the chapter to a close, but it seems they were to help guard against the kind of presumptuous sin just warned against. Blue thread was expensive, used notably in the furnishings of the Tabernacle. The tassels would be a reminder of who(se) they were, and so "you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God".

This might not seem the most promising chapter to study but we too have been rescued that the

LORD might be our God, we too have not yet reached our promised land, and we too continue to sin. This chapter has lots to teach us about our God – his faithfulness, his grace, his holiness – and has lots to teach us about living as his people.

Discussion Questions

- After what has just happened, how might the opening section(vv.1-21) be a surprising and encouraging word?
- What repeated phrase suggests the purpose of these offerings?
 - What is the purpose?
- What is surprising in verses 14-16?
 - Does it bring to mind any echoes of God's promise to Abraham?
- What is the point of the instructions about the first of their grain?
 - Are there lessons for us?
- What is the distinction between unintentional and deliberate sin?
 - How is the Sabbath-breaker an example of the latter?
- How might this cast light on what happened in chapter 14?
- Is this a distinction that is made in the New Testament?
 - Have a look at 1 Timothy 1:13, Hebrews 10:36-37, and perhaps Mark 3:20-30. How do these passages help us better understand this distinction?
- What is the encouragement we should hear in these verses?
 - What priest and what offering should we remember as read this?
- Is there a warning we need to take to heart from this?
- What was the purpose of the tassels?
- We don't wear tassels any more (or least we don't have to!), but what do we need to remember, and how can be helped to remember?
- What does this chapter teach us about what God is like?
- What does this chapter teach about living as God's people?
- How does this chapter encourage or challenge you?

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