

Grace

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[0 : 00] The first reading is from Numbers chapter 15, starting at verse 1 through to 21, and on the Church Bibles that's page 147.

Numbers chapter 15, starting at verse 1. 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, and you offer to the Lord from the herd or from the flock a food offering or a burnt offering or a sacrifice to fulfil a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed feasts to make a pleasing aroma to the Lord, then he who brings his offering shall offer to the Lord a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil, and you shall offer with the burnt offering or for the sacrifice a quarter of a hin of wine for the drink offering for each lamb.

Or for a ram, you shall offer for a grain offering two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a third of a hin of oil, and for the drink offering, you shall offer a third of a hin of wine a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

And when you offer a bull as a burnt offering or sacrifice to fulfil a vow or for peace offerings to the Lord, then one shall offer with the bull a grain offering of three-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with half a hin of oil.

And you shall offer for the drink offering half a hin of wine as a food offering, a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Thus it shall be done for each bull or ram or for each lamb or young goat.

[1 : 37] As many as you offer, so shall you do with each one, as many as there are. Every native Israelite shall do these things in this way, in offering a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

And if a stranger is sojourning with you, or if anyone is living permanently among you, and he wishes to offer a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord, he shall do as you do.

For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before the Lord. One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land to which I bring you, and when you eat of the bread of the land, you shall present a contribution to the Lord.

Of the first of your dough, you shall present a loaf as a contribution, like a contribution from the threshing floor, so shall you present it. Some of the first of your dough, you shall give it to the Lord as a contribution throughout your generations.

[2 : 48] Our second reading starts from Numbers 15, verses 22 to the end, and that's on page 148, so starting where we left off.

But if you sin unintentionally, and do not observe all these commandments that the Lord has spoken to Moses, all that the Lord has commanded you by Moses, from the day that the Lord gave commandment, and onward throughout your generations, then, if it was done unintentionally, without the knowledge of the congregation, all the congregation shall offer one bull from the herd for a burnt offering, a pleasing aroma to the Lord, with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the rule, and one male goat for a sin offering.

And the priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the people of Israel, and they shall be forgiven, because it was a mistake, and they have brought their offering, a food offering to the Lord, and their sin offering before the Lord, for their mistake.

And all the congregation of the people of Israel shall be forgiven, and the stranger who sojourns among them, because the whole population was involved in the mistake. If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering, and the priest shall make

atonement before the Lord for the person who makes a mistake when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.

You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel, and for the stranger who sojourns among them. But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from among his people.

[4 : 40] Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off, his iniquity shall be on him. While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day.

And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation. They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him. And the Lord said to Moses, The man shall be put to death.

All the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp. And all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him to death with stones, as the Lord commanded Moses.

The Lord said to Moses, Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.

And it shall be a tassel for you to look at, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after.

[5 : 52] So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God.

I am the Lord your God. Thanks, Lizzie, for reading. Morning, everyone.

Lovely to have you with us. For those who don't know me, my name is Simon Dowdy, and I am the lead pastor here at Grace Church. We are continuing our series this morning in the book of Numbers, so do please be keeping Numbers 15.

We're also going to have a brief foray into Numbers 19 as well, so do keep your Bible open. Let me pray for us as we begin. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion on the day of testing in the wilderness.

Heavenly Father, we marvel that we can indeed hear your voice now, by your Spirit, through your Word. And we pray, therefore, please would you help us, unlike this Numbers generation, not to harden our hearts to what we hear.

[7 : 12] Please help us to be soft-hearted, and not hard-hearted. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, the question that this passage answers is, it's a simple question, but it is also a deeply searching question.

Might God give up on me? It's a question that I imagine most of us have asked at some stage. The person looking in on the Christian faith, would God have me?

Am I too bad? Might God then actually decide, I am too bad, and give up on me? Well, for the follower of Jesus, one of the tensions of the Christian life is that we've experienced the forgiveness of sin, and yet we continue to sin.

We've committed ourselves to following Jesus, and yet are, at times, still committed to rebelling against him. We've been forgiven, yet so often we still spurn his forgiveness and his grace.

I don't know if you can relate to this, but certainly one of my greatest disappointments as I get older is that I haven't made as much progress in the Christian life as my younger self would have expected.

[8 : 32] And of course, if I'm disappointed with myself, then at some stage, I'm bound to ask the question, well, perhaps God is also disappointed. Will he, in fact, give up on me?

It's captured brilliantly in a poem written by 19th century poet Mariba Kelly called Without and Within, and I'm going to read it for us. It's a wonderful poem.

For those who like to follow, then it's up on the screen as well. The sun shines in my outer world, but darkness reigns within.

A fearful gloom enshrouds my soul, the nebula of sin. Dear Saviour, smile away this gloom and let the sunlight in. Sweet bird songs cheer my outer world, but anguish wails within.

Ambition, pride, and gross deceit have bound my soul in sin. Then, O my Saviour, break these bonds and let the sunlight in.

[9 : 38] Temptations throng my way without, remorse broods dark within. The chains that bind my tortured soul are festered err with sin. Dear Saviour, send thy healing balm and let the sunlight in.

While pleasure gaily smiles without, what torment reigns within, and still poor weakling that I am, I tread the paths of sin. My Saviour, I am lost if thou let not the sunlight in.

It begs the question, doesn't it, which will win? The darkness of my sinful heart or the sunlight of the Lord's grace and kindness and mercy?

Well, it's just where we are, of course, in the book of Numbers, because the last few chapters, why, they've been full of darkness, haven't they? Full of darkness. The grumbling of God's people, the turning away from God, of God's people, wanting to go back to Egypt, and finally, last week, their refusal to enter the promised land.

And yet, Numbers 15, remarkably, tells us that the sunlight of God's grace wins. The chapter divides into three sections.

[10 : 55] Each section begins with the Lord speaking to Moses, and we're going to look at each one in turn. First of all, verses 1 to 16, the grace of relationship. Now, I'm going to read verses 1 and 2 of chapter 15, and I want you to see if you can spot the surprise.

Chapter 15, verses 1 and 2. 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.

And then he goes on. Just turn to your neighbor and see if you can work out between you what the big surprise is. It shouldn't take very long.

It's a very good thing to look out for the surprises in the Bible, because God is full of surprises, and he doesn't think in the way in which we think, or should I say, we don't think, in the way in which he thinks.

Anyone spotted the surprise? It's the word when, isn't it? It's the word when. When you come into the land, and it's repeated again in verse 18, when you come into the land.

[12 : 13] It's a real kind of, oh, I wasn't expecting that moment, the kind of thing which is the plot twist you get in your favorite TV series or the latest novel you're reading, and you're kind of completely taken by surprise, because, of course, last week in Numbers chapter 14, God said that this generation of people who he had rescued from Egypt, they wouldn't enter the land.

They'd rebelled against him. They'd refused to enter, and therefore they'll wander in the desert for 40 years until they've died. And yet God's purposes for his people are still on track.

This generation won't enter the land, but future generations, their children, will. You remember how back in Genesis chapter 12, 400 years earlier, God had made his manifesto commitment to Abraham, the promise of a land, and that land is still on track.

What's more, the promise of blessing, and that is also still on track. That's clear in the verses that follow from the details of the sacrifices that they're going to make once they're in the land of grain, flour, oil, lambs, bulls, wine, and bread.

None of those things, of course, are available in the wilderness, in the desert. But they will all have those things once they've come into the promised land, a land full of blessing, a land flowing with milk and honey.

[13 : 39] And then there's the promise that Abraham's descendants will be a blessing to the nations. And that is anticipated in verses 11 to 13, where strangers, non-Israelites, will offer sacrifices in exactly the same way as the Israelites.

Have a look down at verses 14 and 15. And if a stranger is sojourning with you or anyone is living permanently among you and he wishes to offer a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord, he shall do as you do.

For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before the Lord. And you get a similar thing later on in the chapter as well. God's promises are still on track. It is completely amazing.

There has been, over the last few chapters of Numbers, there has been disaster on every side. Four chapters of grumbling, murmuring, rebellion, unbelief, utter turmoil to the point that Moses in chapter 12 was ready to die.

[14 : 51] And yet the door of a life-giving relationship with God is still open. That's the significance of these particular offerings in verses 3 to 16.

Just have a look at verses 2 and 3. Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, when you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I have given you, and you offer to the Lord from the herd or from the flock a food offering or a burnt offering or a sacrifice to fulfil a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed feasts to make a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

These offerings, they are food offerings, that they're burnt offerings, the idea being that the kind of smoke from the offering arises up to the Lord and does so as a pleasant aroma to him.

It is, if you can picture it, it's a picture of table fellowship. It's as if the Lord himself is participating in the meal with his people.

As such, it is a beautiful picture. I wonder when the last time was that you had a really memorable meal. Not memorable so much for the food, although it might have been memorable food, but memorable more for the company.

[16:09] You know, perhaps a best friend's party or perhaps a meal with a close family member, a parent or a child or perhaps a lovely meal for Valentine's Day. A very special occasion.

And yet, what could be more wonderful than to share a meal with the Lord God himself? In fact, this idea of a pleasing aroma comes throughout.

It's there in verse 7, verse 10, verse 13, verse 14. I wonder if we can see how good God's purposes are for his people.

To be his people. To be in relationship with him as his people. I don't know about you, but it's so easy to lose sight of that in the midst of all the ups and downs of life.

To lose sight of it, either perhaps when life is difficult and hard, when life is sad, disappointing, frustration, frustrating, exhausting, and uncertain.

[17:11] So easy, isn't it, to focus then on the difficulties and the hardships and the frustrations and to take our eyes off the fact that actually if we know Jesus, we know God.

We know him as our heavenly father. We have fellowship with him. He is with us by his spirit, not just at particular meals, but actually in every moment of life. Or likewise, when life is good, perhaps fulfilling, happy, healthy, successful.

Again, how easy to take our eyes off the fact that we have something far greater, far greater than all of that stuff. We know Jesus while he even calls us his friends.

The gift of relationship. Secondly, the grace of forgiveness. Verses 17 to 36.

Now, these verses contain the Lord's provision for the forgiveness of sins once his people have reached the promised land. And I've put the sections there up on the screen just to help us get our bearings.

[18:18] So, in verses 22 to 26, unintentional corporate sins. Verses 27 to 29, unintentional personal sins. And then verses 30 to 36, high-handed sins.

And I think we'll look at the high-handed sins first because that will clarify then what the unintentional sins are. So, have a look at verses 30 and 31.

Verse 31. For the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is a native or a sojourner, reviles the Lord and that person shall be cut off from among his people because he's despised the word of the Lord and has broken his commandments, that person shall be utterly cut off.

His iniquity shall be on him. In other words, there is no forgiveness for the high-handed sin. They are sins which are, if you like, the result of defiance.

It's really kind of shaking your fist at God. And verses 32 to 36 give us an example of that kind of shaking your fist, defiance, sin.

[19:31] Here is someone gathering sticks on the Sabbath presumably to light a fire, both of which were forbidden and it is defiant of course because it's so out in the open.

It's so, I couldn't care. How can you possibly gather sticks and light a fire when you're in a camp surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people and as if no one else would notice.

Now this is not done in quiet. This is defiant. It is a rejection of God. It's a rejection of God's words. Similar, I guess, to the refusal of the Israelites to enter into the promised land.

A different issue but actually exactly the same heart attitude to God behind it. And that is why as with this man so with the Israelites in the desert God's punishment is that they will die there.

Now, we may know that the New Testament has similar warnings. I've put Mark chapter 3 verses 28 to 29 on the outline where the Lord Jesus says, Truly I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man and whatever blasphemies they utter.

[20 : 45] But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin. Where of course to blaspheme against the Spirit means to reject Jesus, to reject the forgiveness that he offers and therefore, of course, if we reject Jesus there can be no forgiveness.

So that's the high-handed sins. What about the unintentional sins? Well, they're the opposite of this kind of high-handed defiance that shakes its hand at God.

And the verses show us the Lord's gracious provision of forgiveness. just follow through. In verse 24, the congregation bring a bull, a grain offering, a drink offering, and a male goat.

In verse 25, the priest makes atonement for the people. They're forgiven. And then a similar thing happens in verses 27 to 29 for sins committed by individuals.

They bring a smaller sacrifice, but again, verse 28, the priest makes atonement and they are forgiven. The point being that all sin requires atonement.

[21 : 56] All sin requires a covering, a satisfaction, propitiation, meaning the Lord's wrath needs to be turned away. We must never take sin lightly.

We must never take the consequences of sin lightly. See, I wonder if you can see what these verses are saying, verses 17 to 26. Just as the Lord is committed to ensuring his people are going to get to the land, so he is also committed to the ongoing provision for the forgiveness of their sin when they're in the land.

Not for those who sin high-handedly and shake their fist at God, but for all other sin, wonderfully, there is provision. So let's come back to the question we started with.

Will God give up on me? Well, we need to be clear that God doesn't forgive the sin of those who reject him. Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins and therefore if we refuse to repent, if we refuse to turn to him, there is no forgiveness.

And that may be a real warning to some of us here this morning and we need to hear it. But for all who do, there is. In other words, God's grace is not exhausted by our sin.

[23 : 32] Is that not a wonderful thing to hear? God's grace is not exhausted by our sin. He's not like some school teacher who is patient at the beginning of the day and yet actually by the third lesson their patience is completely exhausted.

I'm sure none of the school teachers present remotely like that, but perhaps they are on a bad day. Which means, of course, that if we're trusting in Jesus, our life is, and if I can put it like this, our life is to be lived under the kind of sky of grace.

That is God's grace, God's kindness, is to be the dominating theme of our lives. That poem I started with, Mariba Kelly wrote, The sun shines in my outer world, but darkness reigns within.

A fearful gloom enshrouds my soul, the nebula of sin. Dear Saviour, smile away this gloom and let the sunlight in. Well, if we know Jesus and the forgiveness of sins, then wonderfully the sunlight has indeed come in.

Jesus, the light of the world, darkness, no longer reigns. In fact, the very structure of the book of Numbers at this point underlines the fact that the sunlight of God's grace is stronger and greater than the darkness of our sin.

[25 : 01] I put the outline of chapters 15 to 19 there just on the, where it's up on the screen. So chapter 15, which we're looking at this morning, is a chapter all about God's grace.

Next week, chapters 16 to 18, we will see God's people again rebel and then chapter 19, again a chapter about God's gracious provision.

Rebellion in the middle, sandwiched on either side by God's grace and kindness and mercy. I'd encourage you to look at chapter 19 later on in the day to read through it as a chapter about the Lord's provision for ritual uncleanness.

There are going to be an increasing number of deaths as the Israelites wander in the desert over the next 40 years and contact with a dead body would make them ritually unclean.

They had to go outside the camp, excluded from God, excluded from God's people. And the chapter is all about the sacrifice of a heifer that was made, the ashes that were then sprinkled on the unclean person, so that the unclean person could be made clean and once again admit it to God's presence and admit it to God's people.

[26 : 23] God's grace is always stronger than the darkness of sin. And I take it that for some of us, that would be the most wonderful encouragement to hear and just what we need to hear this morning.

So the grace of relationship, the grace of forgiveness. Thirdly, remember who you are. Let me read verses 37 and 38.

the Lord said to Moses, speak to the people of Israel and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a cord of blue on the tassels of each corner.

Now as you'll see, I haven't got tassels on my jacket today. We'll see why in a moment. This is not about how to dress without stress.

It's not kind of looking the parts. rather it's about remembering verse 39 and remember all the commandments of the Lord to do them.

[27 : 26] That's like it again in verse 40. So shall you remember and do all my commandments and be holy to your God. Why? Verse 41. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God.

I am the Lord your God. A friend of mine at school loved football. A number of friends of mine at school loved football. But one in particular was a great Watford fan, our nearest team.

And he had a season ticket. And every Saturday he used to go and watch Watford play. And he had a Watford scarf. And he insisted, I don't think you're allowed to wear it because it wasn't part of the school uniform.

But anyway, he always wore his Watford scarf to school. It was a statement about who he belonged to, about his identity. And these tassels here in Numbers did a similar thing.

So blue was the color of royalty, so it's a reminder that they belonged to God. They belonged to the king. He's their king. And they've been set apart as a holy nation to serve him as his people.

[28 : 36] people. Now, of course, we need to remember the differences between believers who lived under the old covenant in the Old Testament and those of us who belong to Jesus today.

We have received more grace than they have, wonderfully. Jesus has come as the perfect sacrifice for sin. There's no need for any of the sacrifices which we've been reading about this morning.

As the writer of the Hebrews puts it, 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, how much more will the blood of Christ?

So there are differences. But there are also similarities. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross doesn't mean we can now live a life of sin and just live how we want to live.

we too must live a life of obedience. Which means that for each of us there's a choice we need to make. And verse 39 helps us to see the alternative.

[29 : 47] The alternative is to do what my own heart wants to do. To follow my own heart and what is right with my own eyes.

That's the danger. It's the danger for me. It's the danger for each one of us. And that is where the tassels come in. To remind them of what they'd forgotten.

They'd forgotten that God was with them. Because when you remember that God is with you you remember that God wants a relationship with you.

That you have a relationship with him. When you remember that God is with you you remember that he is the one who provides forgiveness. The sacrifice for sin.

When you remember that God is with you you'll know that he will look after you and therefore you can trust him. When you remember that God is with you then you'll want to live his way.

[30 : 49] Does that mean we need to make sure we've got tassels on our clothes tomorrow morning? No. But it's a very good reason to do what the writers of the Hebrews encouraged us to do as we looked at at the very start of our series of numbers if we want to avoid the unbelief of this numbers generation.

To listen to God's word the Bible every day and to encourage each other not to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Do you know I guess the heart of the issue is really whether or not we believe that God is good.

Because the great sadness of the book of Numbers is that God's people didn't believe that he was good. And that is therefore what drove their pattern of sin.

They grumble about the food because they don't believe God is good. They refuse to go into the land because they didn't believe that God is good. What drove their sin is they fail to believe in the goodness of God.

God had good purposes for them. And we can be just the same can't we? When life is hard and difficult we can harden our hearts towards God and turn away from him and cease to trust him because we doubt his goodness.

[32 : 15] Or we can find ourselves overworking because we believe that the good that our job brings is greater and better than the good that God brings.

Or perhaps the Christian who goes out with or marries someone who's not a believer because they're disappointed with God and the way in which life has turned out. Or perhaps someone who refuses to put their trust in Jesus in the first place because actually they doubt God's goodness and they figure that life without God is better than life with God.

Instead let's remember God's goodness and kindness. Let's remember the sunlight of his grace and mercy. Let me pray for us.

Let's pray. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord your God. Heavenly Father we praise you for this extraordinary statement and we praise you therefore for the great privilege we have in knowing Jesus that these words also apply to us. We praise you for your grace and for your mercy. We thank you for your great goodness and your kindness that your grace is sufficient for the once for all time death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[33 : 41] on the cross. And we pray Heavenly Father for your mercy on us that we would indeed trust your goodness and kindness through all the ups and downs of life.

And we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.