

Sacrifice for Sin

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Date: 21 September 2025

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[0 : 00] And please turn your Bibles back to Numbers chapter 15.! Our passage today is the whole chapter of chapter 15,! but we don't have time to go through the whole passage, so we'll leave the last five verses out.

So we'll cover verse 1 to 36. It's still a lot, but we'll try to do that. Well, last week we read about a significant event in the history of God's people in the Old Testament.

Just a reminder, God asked 12 spies to be sent to Canaan. They went there and returned. Ten of them said they shouldn't go into the land because the cities were fortified and the people looked like giants.

Only two of them, Joshua and Caleb, believed in God's promise to give them the land. As a result, all Israelites grumbled.

They wanted to go back to Egypt, or same old story. God became angry and wanted to destroy them all. And then Moses interceded.

[1 : 19] He appealed to God's character, who is merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, but is also just, and God forgave them.

He's not going to destroy them, but as a punishment, they would have to wander the wilderness for 40 years before they could enter the land. And straight after that, at the end of the story, at the end of the chapter, the Israelites rebelled again.

They wanted to go into the land this time and attack, even though God told them not to attack. And so at the end of the chapter, they were defeated.

Now, after that event, a natural question arises. The people still displayed rebellious hearts. What's God going to do?

Is the whole enterprise going to fail? And then chapter 15 comes, and here we see more clearly the character of God, who is merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, but he's also just.

[2 : 32] But this character is expressed, as Gwyneth said, in the most boring way possible. The opening in verse 1 to 2 is abrupt, but breathtaking.

The Lord said to Moses, That's astonishing.

Remember the chapter that came before. Chapter 14 ends with another rebellion and a defeat at the end of it. But here God immediately says after that, after you enter the land I am giving you.

He still holds on to his promise. In fact, in this passage, we see how many times God refers to himself as the Lord.

On the screen, I've tried to highlight all the occurrences in the first 16 verses. The Lord literally means Yahweh. It's God's covenant name.

[3 : 45] The name that says, I am your God, you're my people. It's a relational name. And in this chapter, God doesn't just refer to himself as I in the first person.

He refers to himself as the Lord. Look at how many times God refers to himself as the Lord in this passage. After multiple rebellions, God still revealed himself as the covenant God.

He still desired a relationship with his people. And indeed, this is highlighted further by what God says in the next verses.

The instructions that God gives in this passage relate to the food offerings, offerings, or literally, offerings by fire. Now, these offerings were necessary.

We've talked about this when we talked about Leviticus. These offerings were necessary to maintain a peaceful and harmonious relationship with God. Perhaps it's helpful to think of the offerings as like opportunities to bring meals to a king's party.

[5 : 02] You know, everyone is invited to contribute a meal, to have a feast, a fellowship with God. It's a privilege, isn't it?

Not only to be invited to come and to live with God as their king, but also to contribute to the celebration for the king. That's the idea here.

And that's why they are called, these offerings are called, an aroma pleasing to the Lord. These contributions pleased the king.

And it's amazing that in this context, even after that gross rebellion in the previous chapter, straight away, God gave them, reminded them, because we have talked about this in Leviticus, what reminded them, this invitation to please him.

God showed that he still desired fellowship with his people. He still desired to be pleased by his people.

[6 : 14] How gracious is he straight after that great rebellion? Now, even though the general instructions for these offerings have been given in Leviticus, here there are additional instructions.

Namely, that every animal that is to be sacrificed is to be accompanied by the finest flour, olive oil, and wine as a drink offering.

Now, why add these instructions now instead of in Leviticus? Well, I think, again, after what happened last time in chapter 14, these instructions are a good reminder that the land God was giving them was going to be good despite what they have done.

It's still going to be a land of milk and honey. It's going to be abundant. And out of their abundance, they were expected and they were going to be able to give in abundance too according to their means.

And so, as you can see on the screen, those who could afford larger animals were expected to bring more flour, oil, and wine. And those who had less and could only bring a smaller animal were expected to bring less.

[7 : 52] Either way, everyone could give. God is gracious. He kept His promises and His promises were still going to be good. Remember that in the previous chapter, the spies came back and then said that the land of Canaan devoured those living in it.

Here God insists, I'll show you that the land was going to be, will be abundant and you'll be able to bring offerings out of abundance.

You'll be able to bring the most expensive things, the finest flour, olive oil, and wine. God is gracious.

And then in verse 13 to 16, God extends this gracious invitation even further, not just to Israelites but also to foreigners living amongst them.

They too could bring offerings, they too could have a fellowship with God. And again, if we think of these offerings as invitation to contribute to the king's party, it's amazing that even foreigners were invited to do that as well.

[9 : 16] To God's feast. God is gracious. And then in verse 17 to 21, another instruction was given, this time to bring the first batch of the ground meal or the dough as an offering to God.

Again, if we think about this as an opportunity to contribute to a feast with God, here we see that even those not working in the fields but cooking and baking at home were also invited to contribute to the feast with God by bringing some of their dough again to have a fellowship, a relationship with God.

Perhaps think of it like a, I don't know, a potluck where everyone is invited to bring something to the table for the sake of the fellowship and everyone in Israel is invited to do that despite what they have done previously.

Isn't God gracious? Despite what all Israelites did in the previous chapter, God showed his faithfulness by promising to deliver them to the abundant land and he invited them to feast and have a relationship with him.

Isn't God merciful and abounding in steadfast love? And didn't God already show his mercy and steadfast love to us as well?

[11 : 14] We too have rebelled, haven't we? But he has shown us his abounding steadfast love by sending his son to die for us.

And so we no longer need to bring any bulls or rams or olive oil to the altar. Imagine that, having to bring a bull just to enter the church every single time.

That would be crazy. But we don't have to do that to have a relationship with God and that's the beauty of the gospel.

God's mercy and steadfast love have come to us, not because we climb up to his altar, ultimately we can't, but because he came down to us in Jesus.

In Jesus, God brought the altar of sacrifice to us on the cross. He provided the lamb, his own son, who ended the need for sacrifices once for all.

[12:22] As Hebrews 10 says, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. We don't need to bring anything else.

And so we can feast with God and have an eternal relationship with him. we don't even have to go to the Jerusalem temple because our relationship with God in Jesus is so intimate that his spirit lives in us and we in him.

How amazing is that? Now, if we bring anything to the altar, it's not an animal sacrifice, it's a sacrifice of ourselves as a response of thanksgiving.

That's what Paul says in Romans 12. Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Paul also talks about his life being poured out like a drink offering.

Not wine, but his life. life. So, even though everything has been provided in Jesus, our final sacrifice, and we can enjoy an eternal feast with God in an eternal relationship with him, we are still given the chance, the opportunity to bring something to the feast, and that is by bringing ourselves, our souls, our lives, our all.

[14:04] We bring them all to God in thanksgiving. That's our offering. And we want to do it because we love God and desire that relationship with him.

What does that look like in practice? It looks like a life of service to God. using all we have, our energy, our time, our money, our house, our pets, our intellect, everything for the sake of serving God.

Sometimes we serve God by cooking for our family. Sometimes we serve God by cooking for those in need. Sometimes we serve God by physically working.

Sometimes we serve God by physically resting so we might have the energy to work again or to serve again. Sometimes we serve God by giving money to mission.

Sometimes we serve God by going on mission. In all these ways, we bring our lives as living sacrifices, not to earn God's love, but in response to it.

[15:29] Because our relationship is already secured by the final sacrifice of Jesus and our offerings flow from knowing the God who is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

He has given us much and He will give us much more when we get to that promised land in the new creation. and so we bring our lives to Him.

But God is not just merciful and slow to anger, He is also just. And that's the focus of verse 22 to 36. In verse 22 to 26, God makes provision for communal unintentional sin.

I'll read it for you. Now, if you as a community unintentionally fail to keep any of these commands the Lord gave Moses, any of the Lord's commands to you through him, from the day the Lord gave them and continuing through the generations to come, and if this is done unintentionally without the community being aware of it, then the whole community is to offer a young bull for a burnt offering as an aroma pleasing to the Lord, along with its prescribed grain offering and drink offering and a male goat for a sin offering.

The priest is to make atonement for the whole Israelite community and they will be forgiven, for it was not intentional and they have presented to the Lord for their wrong, a food offering and a sin offering.

[17:17] The whole Israelite community and the foreigners residing among them will be forgiven because all the people were involved in the unintentional wrong.

And then, straight after that, in verse 27, God makes provision for personal unintentional sin. But if just one person sins unintentionally, that person must bring a year-old female goat for a sin offering. The priest is to make atonement before the Lord for the one who erred by sinning unintentionally and when atonement has been made, that person will be forgiven.

One and the same law applies to everyone who sins unintentionally, whether a native-born Israelite or a foreigner residing among you.

So, straight after showing that God is merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, God shows that He is also just. He punishes sins accordingly.

[18:27] Note that unintentional sin here doesn't mean accidental sin. Because later on, the opposite to unintentional sin is sinning defiantly or sinning spitefully or sinning stubbornly, sinning out of despire, out of spite, sorry, towards God.

And so here, unintentional sin seems to mean sinning without spite towards God. That is, when we love God and desire to live for God, but sometimes we still fail, don't we?

And in that case, there's provision. They could return to God by bringing sacrifices, and there would be forgiveness, because their sins were paid for by the blood of the animals.

God is just, He has to punish sins accordingly, but the blood of the animal pays for the sins. The animals died in their place.

But if the sin was high handed, verse 30 to 31, or out of spite, verse 30, but anyone who sins defiantly, or high handedly, or spitefully, whether native born or foreigner, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel, because they have despised the Lord's word and broken His commands.

[20:07] They must surely be cut off. their guilt remains on them. Now, notice that there is no provision for sacrifices when someone sins high handedly or stubbornly, because it assumes that they don't want to repent.

They sin out of spite for God. They don't even desire to obey. They rebel because they reject God. Perhaps like the spies, in the previous chapter, who died, they rejected God's salvation by wanting to go back to Egypt.

And so there's no forgiveness for them because they do it out of spite. They do it without repenting. And so the punishment in verse 31 is they must be cut off not only from the people of God, but also from life, because their guilt remained on them.

They did not return with repentance by bringing sacrifices, and so their sin was not to be put on the sacrifices, but on themselves.

[21:25] Now, what does that high-handed sin look like? Well, the story gives us an example of what a high-handed sin looks like.

In verse 32, while the Israelites were in the wilderness, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody because it was not clear what should be done to him. And the Lord said to Moses, the man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp. So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the Lord commanded Moses.

We might be confused at this point. High-handed sin, really? At first, what the man did seems harmless, gathering wood on the Sabbath day. But if we think about the context, this was a high-handed sin.

He was gathering wood for what? For lighting fire. And verse 32 highlights the context. They were in the wilderness, meaning they were living in tents, very close to each other.

[22:47] Everyone would have been able to see the fire or the smoke, meaning this man was planning to break God's law publicly without trying to hide it.

This was not a secret slip. He was trying to parade his obedience and basically making a statement that God's law meant nothing to him.

In addition, this is significant in the context of the previous rebellions, because every single time the Israelites rebelled, they always said, it's better for us to go back to slavery in Egypt rather than living in freedom with this God.

Now, by gathering wood on the Sabbath, this man was making the same statement. The Sabbath was given by God to free them from having to work seven days a week like slaves, which they had to do in Egypt.

And here, the man is saying through this act that he didn't want the freedom of rest that God had given him. This was, in that particular context, a high-handed sin.

[24:02] So not every single time that someone gathers wood on the Sabbath day is a high-handed sin, but in that particular context it was. And so the punishment applied to him.

He was to be cut off from the people and from life. God is not only merciful, he is also just.

And here, his justice was expressed through giving the man over to what he desired. You don't want my law, then you don't belong with my people.

You don't want my gift of life and freedom, then you will be cut off from life. And haven't we seen God's justice most clearly in Jesus?

When we sin, and we do that every day, don't we? But we return to him over and over again in repentance, because we still love him and desire a relationship with him.

[25 : 14] God is just, and God is just by forgiving us, because he has given us the means of atonement in the cross of Jesus. He is just by not punishing us, because the punishment has been done.

Jesus has paid for all our sins, once and for all. That's justice. justice. So we don't need to pay with our own death.

Justice has been served in Jesus. But if we continually reject Jesus, if we sin high-handedly, that is, if we despise him, we continually don't want anything to do with him, then sure, God is also just. if we don't want the payment for sins that God has provided for us in Jesus for free, then justice means we pay for our own sins with our death.

And that is hell. Hell is God saying to us, let your will be done, because we continually reject the payment made in Jesus.

[26 : 35] Don't let that happen to you. And so here in Numbers 15, God reveals both sides of his character.

He is merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. But he is also just, and he punishes those who reject him by giving them over to what they want.

And so now the question is this, knowing that God is merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, yet he is also just and punishing sin, will you turn to him and receive his loving mercy in Jesus if you haven't done so?

or if you have done so, will you continue to live in it? Or will you reject him continually and face his justice on your own?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that through this story you have revealed to us both sides of your character, that you are patient, you are merciful, you are slow to anger, you are abounding in steadfast love, but you are also the God of justice.

[28 : 04] And you have revealed them both, those sides of your character, most clearly on the cross of Jesus. In the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen.