

# 'Useful Servants for God'

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[ 0 : 01 ] Father, we thank you for your word, and we do ask that even as we look at this story, far away and long ago as it may have been, that it might touch our hearts as to what it means for us today.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, for those of you who are regulars with us, it's been nearly a year, I think, since we last left the book of Numbers.

And so for the benefit of those who are new, let me just do a quick recap of where we're at, because we started in the middle of Numbers, in the middle of a chapter.

So where we left off last time was in chapter 14 and verse 9. Now, those of you familiar with Israel's history will know that in Exodus, God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt.

They had overcome Pharaoh and his mighty army, so some of you have watched it on the movies. God had delivered them, parted the Red Sea. They walked through with nothing, no weapons or anything, and then the sea closed in on the mighty army and the chariots and the horses of Egypt.

[ 1 : 09 ] And then they went up to Mount Sinai, and God gave them the Ten Commandments there. Now, for those of you who have been around for a while, it might seem like many, many sermons ago, and it was probably two or three years ago.

But actually, for the people of Israel, it has only been a year since that event has occurred for them. And the last time we left Israel, that was in chapter 14, verse 9, they were at the southern border of the Promised Land.

And Moses had just sent 12 spies, one from each tribe, to go survey the land. And what they found, they brought back with wonderful reports.

This was a land flowing with milk and honey. There was a bunch of grapes that they brought back that were so huge that two of them had to carry it on a pole between themselves.

Now, unfortunately, though, for 10 of the 12 spies, they also poured cold water on the mission. They said that the inhabitants were too strong and too mighty, too fearful for them to conquer.

[ 2 : 23 ] And so, Moses, in that first nine verses of chapter 14, pleaded for them to say, No, we can do this. Trust the Lord. Don't fear.

But as we've read in verse 10, instead, what the whole assembly talked about was stoning them.

Now, that's a bit of a, wow, how could they have so quickly forgotten how God had delivered them?

It was only a year ago, remember, that they had come out of slavery. They've gone through the Red Sea. They'd seen the Egyptians defeated with their chariots. How could they, as well, forget that God was, even as he was, as they were being led, God was present even among them, right?

Because, as we know, they were being led day and night by the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire.

Now, also, they surely can't have forgotten the consequences of rebelling, because if you remember down at Mount Sinai, they had made a golden calf as an idol, and thousands of them were struck down that day for disobeying the Lord.

All of this are recent events, right? Not many years ago, but simply months, and at most a year ago. Instead, thanks to the timidity of the ten spies and consumed by fear, what we read here is that they wanted to stone Moses and Aaron.

[ 4 : 02 ] And so the Lord's anger is clearly aroused. And so we read, the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. And then we hear him speak.

How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.

And so what God says here is that their lack of faith is tantamount to contempt. Contempt for God.

Because it's not like they haven't seen God's power before.

All the signs that God has performed among them are repeated evidence of His power and His love for His people. And so now God actually declares to Moses that He will fulfill His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through Moses.

And if you were Moses, that seems like a pretty good offer, don't you think? You go from leading a nation, yeah, that's good, but a lot of work, to now being the father of a new nation, right?

[ 5 : 21 ] Henceforth, it's no longer God leading the Israelites. It would be the Mosesites, maybe, or the Mosians, one of the two. Not bad, right?

But if you go back to chapter 12 and verse 3, there is a reason why He is described as the most humble man on the face of the earth. Now that's, of course, before Jesus came along.

Because Moses did not at this moment think about himself or his name, but God's. And so, you know, he pushed back against God, saying instead, in verse 13, Lord, don't do this, because then the Egyptians will hear about it.

By your power, you brought these people up from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, Lord, are with these people, and that you, Lord, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.

If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, the Lord was not able to bring these people into the land He promised them on oath.

[ 6 : 38 ] So he slaughtered them in the wilderness. Now, none of this is news to God, right? I mean, this was a test which Moses passed as to his character.

And what Moses does is appeal firstly to God's name, and particularly for God's name to be glorified among the nations. Israel herself is being glorified when God's name is glorified.

Because after all, there are his people who take after his name, as it were. So Moses understood that when long ago God promised Abraham, in Genesis 12, which is on the next slide, to make him a great nation, the reason for that is so that all nations, right at the end, will be blessed through him. And that blessing comes when they too worship God as Israel does. And friends, as God's people, as individual Christians, that we're chosen and saved for that same purpose, not only just to be blessed ourselves, but also to bring glory to God by being a witness to the nations.

Here in Doncaster, here in Melbourne, in Australia, but also to the ends of the world. And so Moses' logic is that if Israel was destroyed, then all the nations will look on God and mock him instead, right?

[ 8 : 08 ] Presuming, verse 16, that the Lord is unable to bring his people into the land he promised. But second, Moses also appeals to God's character and covenant love for Israel.

The Lord's strength is displayed not just in judgment over sin, but in showing grace and forbearance when his people do.

So verse 17, Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, he said, just as you have declared. How? The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving sin and rebellion.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. And many of you will know this, that when Moses says this, he's actually quoting God's word back at him.

Because in Exodus chapter 34, we can look at that later on, in your own time, verse 6 and 7, this was after the incident of the golden calf, and God was again giving the Ten Commandments a second time.

[ 9 : 15 ] He said that very things about himself, that he's slow to anger, abounding in love, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin, but also that he does not leave the guilty unpunished, but punishes the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

What Moses is doing here now is standing as a mediator for his people. Moses himself has not sinned, right? But he intercedes on their behalf.

Even, if you think about it, when his own life is being threatened, right? And I don't know about you, but when someone's trying to kill you, will you stand up for them and say, look, don't protect them and don't touch them?

But that's what Moses is doing, isn't it? And I wonder whether that reminds you of someone else as well. Someone who suffered worse, who actually wasn't even spared from death.

And he was doing it in spite of the fact that the people that were trying to kill him were the ones that he was trying to save.

[10:31] And you know who I'm talking about, right? The Lord Jesus. Perfect Son of God, mediating for sinners. And Jesus did not just intercede for us, that is, you know, ask God for forgiveness.

He offered himself, as was shared with the testimonies today, he offered himself as the substitute to take on the punishment of our three brothers, but also of all of us who believe in him.

And many of you will know, remember what Jesus said when he was on the cross. His sort of dying words. He said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

And here in verse 19, that's what Moses sort of asked as well, isn't it? In accordance with your great love, forgive the sins of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.

Now, Moses actually, he knows what the people are like, right? He's not saying, oh, Lord, forgive them. This is their first time. Oh, forgive them because they're just making an honest mistake.

[11:40] They didn't know better. No, he says, forgive them just as you've pardoned them from the time. How many times? Who knows? But from the time, the moment they left Egypt until now, forgive them as you've always been forgiving them.

And he's not appealing to the fact that Israel is our good people. No, not at all. He's appealing instead to God's character in accordance with your great love, he says.

The love that you promised in covenant to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Now, it doesn't mean that Israel then would go scot-free because Moses was quoting Exodus 34, wasn't he, when he said that the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished, but will punish them to the third and fourth generation.

And the point I guess I'm making is that sin always has its consequences, that even as the Lord does forgive, it does not mean that there are no disciplinary action or consequences.

And as we read in verse 20, this is how the Lord responds. He says, I've forgiven them as you asked. Pretty much to the point. But then he says, Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth, not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times, not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors.

[13:15] No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. So yes, they are forgiven, as in, not all are struck down immediately.

Yes, they are forgiven in that Israel as a whole, as a nation, will enter the land, but there is specifically punishment for this generation who should have known better because they had seen God's mighty hand at work and still chose to disobey.

You see, when God has revealed his glory to us, there are consequences. We have a choice to make. Do we believe God for who he is and be saved?

Or do we reject him and suffer the consequences thereafter? God has revealed his glory to us in the person of his son, Jesus.

And so all of us here have to make that decision. Will we believe and be saved? Or will we reject him and suffer the consequences? Now, God is always fair, of course, because next we read, he says, but because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, that's what God wants of us, I will bring him into the land he went to and his descendants will inherit it.

[14:37] Now, in case you're worried for Joshua, he's going to be mentioned in verse 30. He's also going to be saved, okay, so don't worry about him. But for everyone else, God reveals what will happen now.

They are barred from entering the land, verse 25. Since the Malachites and the Canaanites are living in the valleys, turn back tomorrow and set out toward the desert along the route to the Red Sea. In other words, turn around, head back into the wilderness where you will end your days.

Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, how long will this wicked community grumble against me? I've heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites. So tell them, as surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very things I heard you say.

In this wilderness, your bodies will fall. Every one of you, 20 years old or more, who has counted in the census and who has grumbled against me.

Not one of you will enter the land I saw with uplifted hand to make your home except Caleb and Joshua, the two spies that did not fear the enemies.

[15:47] So here's the irony, isn't it? Because in chapter 14, verse 2, instead of trusting the Lord and then, you know, just going into the land and let's go fight, the Lord is with us before we fall, they complain and as part of the complaint, what they said is, oh, we would rather die in the desert.

Well, God has given them their wishes, isn't it? They will indeed die in the desert and when the census was taken in chapter 1 of Numbers, God had said every man aged 20 and above is to be counted and what was the reason that He gave them?

He said, because these are the fighting men that will be available when we go take the promised land. So Israel knew from day one, from the start of Numbers, that they had to go into battle eventually.

This was not new to them as though, oh, you sprung it on us, Lord, you didn't tell us we had to do this. No, they knew. And now God is using this very same marker 20 years and above for men to be the separation between those who will die in the desert and the children that will follow.

As for the children, the Lord says, that you said would be taken as ponder, I will bring them into the land to enjoy the land you have rejected. But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness.

[17:09] Your children will be shepherds here for 40 years, suffering for your unfaithfulness until the last of your bodies lie in the wilderness. For 40 years, one for each day you explore the land, you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.

I, the Lord, have spoken. Now that's a sign of judgment there. Finality. I, the Lord, have spoken. And I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community which has banded together against me.

They will meet their end in this wilderness. Here they will die. And again, there is irony here, isn't it? Because they had feared that, oh, we go in the land, our children will be exposed, they'll be plundered.

Well, the Lord now is going to prove them wrong by preserving them in the desert and then giving them the land to enjoy only without the first generation, without the parents, without the grandparents.

And I don't know about you, but I think it's, it's so heartbreaking, isn't it? For these first generation because they're so near. and yet, so far, they can probably even see the land, right, at the edge, look into the plains and see what is before them to take.

[18:34] And yet, the Lord's saying, this is it, you're not going any further. Now, I know I've sort of painted it that, you know, this is a movie, you know, you probably have a tear for them or something like that.

But really, actually, we should not be pitting them. We should not be thinking that God's the one to blame because even though, yes, God's the one to hand it down the judgment, the folk lies wholly with them.

They were the ones who rebelled. They were the ones, actually, that Moses gave a second chance because he pleaded and said, don't do this. And yet, they did not believe.

They did not obey and rebelled instead. So yes, God forgives in that he forgives the nation as a whole, but the wicked who sinned suffer the consequences of their sin.

The first and second generation will die out, leaving the third and the fourth to enjoy the land. Now, for the ten spies, it's even worse, isn't it? Because verse 36, we see they are struck down immediately.

[19:40] Moses says that the men Moses had sent to explore the land who returned and made the whole community grumble against him by spreading a bad report. These men, who were responsible for spreading the bad report, were struck down and died of a plague before the Lord.

Of the men who explored the land, only Joshua and Caleb survived. And when Moses reported this to all the Israelites, they mourned bitterly.

Now, this should have been the end of the story, really, right? Case closed. The judge has spoken, and I don't know whether you've ever stood before a judge before, but if you ever get a chance to, hopefully not, and you're being found guilty, please don't argue back at the judge, okay?

Don't try and weasel your way out of the penalty and sort of negotiate. A judgment is a judgment. It's not a negotiation. You have no power. Except, what's happening here with the people?

Instead of heading back out to the desert as God instructed, taking their medicine as was being prescribed, what does verse 40 say?

[ 20 : 55 ] Early the next morning, not just the next morning, but early the next morning, they set out for the highest point in the hill country saying, now we're ready to go up to the land, the Lord promised.

Surely, we have sinned. Now, they have mouthed the words, we have sinned, right? But I don't think the actions reflect repentance at all, but defiance. What was really at the heart of their sin in the first place?

They had disobeyed the Lord because they did not believe in Him. They did not believe in His power to save. They did not believe that God loved them and therefore would protect them and make sure they entered the land safely.

And so, Moses said in verse 41, why are you disobeying the Lord's command? And you know, Moses didn't say it, but if I were Him, I would say again, this will not succeed.

Do not go up because the Lord is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies for the Amalekites and the Canaanites will face you there. Because you have turned away from the Lord, He will not be with you and you will fall by the sword.

[ 22 : 00 ] The people haven't learned, have they? They're still trusting and looking at themselves instead of the Lord. Because the first time around, when they saw the inhabitants and how strong they were, instead of looking to the Lord, they looked at themselves, right?

And they said, oh, we're too weak. So therefore, we can't do it. Now, they think that, oh, if we're determined enough, you know, if we have enough conviction, then we're going to defeat the enemy. They're not looking at the Lord again, aren't they? They're still looking at themselves. Now, why this change in heart? I suspect it's because they couldn't stand the thought of wandering in the desert for 40 years, right?

But it's still the same mistake, isn't it? That they're trusting not in the Lord, not believing in the Lord, not obeying the Lord, but again, looking at themselves. And Moses says that they will not succeed because the Lord will not be with them.

The Lord has made it clear why not, and they needed to submit to God's word, even though they don't like it. And friends, I have to say sometimes that is our presumption, isn't it?

[ 23 : 16 ] That's my presumption sometimes, that when we're afraid, you know, we forget, you know, that it's actually not about us. God would like us to do something, we're too fearful to do it.

When we're afraid, we're actually saying we're not good enough or we're not strong enough. When actually what the Lord is saying is look to me because I'm the one who will empower you to obey. And the converse is true as well, isn't it? When we're successful, it's so easy to think, isn't it? Oh, that was good on me. I got that blessing because, you know, I sort of did the right thing.

But again, what's that? That's looking at ourselves again, isn't it? When we should be saying, thank you, Lord, it's because of you that any blessing comes into my life. And so, Moses pleads with them, but guess what?

Do they listen? Sadly, no. Again, verse 44, nevertheless, in their presumption, they went up towards the highest point in the hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the Lord's covenant moved from the camp.

[ 24 : 26 ] Then the Malachites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down, attacked them, and beat them all the way to Homa. They didn't humbly accept the consequences of their sin.

They weren't even thankful that they were spared, unlike the ten spies. No, what they thought was, we can make up for our sins our way.

We can undo the wrong in the first place so that we can bypass God's discipline, right? But friends, it does not work that way. Not with God, but when God in His abundant grace provides us with a way of forgiveness, we need to actually accept and obey His way, not make up things for ourselves. Because the sign of true repentance really is to swallow our pride and humbly accept what God provides. and for us, as has been, we've heard with the testimonies today, that way is Jesus Christ for all humanity.

Jesus Himself said in John 14, verse 6, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father. There is no forgiveness to be restored in relationship with the Father except through me.

[ 25 : 47 ] And praise the Lord, the three brothers that were baptized today testified that they have chosen Jesus as their way. They tried a few other things along the way, philosophy and can't remember what the others were.

It was not the way. Jesus is the only way back to the Father. And you know, friends, sometimes we can feel like we've fallen short. We can be guilt stricken even and yet we can be too proud to accept God's way, God's way of salvation.

We say, or at least we think, you know, thanks, but no thanks, God. I'll make up for it my way. You know, I'll redeem myself.

I'll work harder. I'll be a better person. Then I can pay you back. Friends, the Bible tells us that is not possible. God does not accept that.

Becoming a better person does not undo the wrong that we've done. God in His grace provides His Son instead, which is a better way, really, isn't it?

[ 26 : 54 ] The one who lived a perfect life to pay for our sins so that we don't have to be punished. We don't have to pay. And so, if you're here today and you've come to witness the baptism and not yet put your trust in Jesus, but you recognize that you've fallen short, then let me invite you to come and accept Jesus as the way back to God.

Now, of course, for those of us who already believe, we also have another lesson, and that is to be careful not to resist God's discipline when He imposes it on us. So, here, we need to know that as children of God, our sins are indeed forgiven.

But there may be consequences for our sin when we've done wrong still. Yes, we are forgiven, but there may be discipline. I mean, we might want to wriggle out of that discipline, but as children of God, the purpose for such discipline is no longer punishment, right?

It's no longer punitive because Jesus has paid for our sins. We need to know that. We're not trying to pay God back for our sins. Rather, when discipline comes on us, when we are children of God, God, the purpose is to train us in godliness.

And that was that reading in Hebrews chapter 12. God disciplines us to make us more like Jesus.

Or, Hebrews chapter 12, verse 7, endure hardship as discipline.

[ 28 : 27 ] God is treating you as His children. Like human fathers, God disciplines us because He loves us. So, verse 10, on the next slide, He does it for our good, in order that we may share in His holiness.

And so, even though it's painful, we are to endure it because right at the end of that reading, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.

Right? So, Jesus has already died for our sins. We don't have to pay for it. We have to gladly and humbly embrace that as God's only way.

But then, as we are being disciplined as His people, we need to know that He's doing it because He loves us as His children. And what He really wants for us, which is such a great blessing, is that we then ultimately share in His holiness.

We become like Him. It's no mean thing for God to allow us to share in His holiness. Right? And afterwards, to enjoy it because of the harvest of righteousness and peace that follows.

[ 29 : 40 ] Father, thank You that Jesus is our mediator. He took the punishment so that we don't have to pay or die for our sins. Thank You for this eternal life that comes through faith in Him.

Please help us not to reject Your way of salvation, nor Your way of discipline, but to submit to it for our good because we are Your children.

And will we be blessed by it, sharing in Your holiness and sharing and enjoying the harvest of righteousness and peace that follows. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.