

'Grace for sinners'

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[0 : 00] Okay, do turn back to that passage in Numbers, where we're continuing, as Steph said, on our series through the book of Numbers.!

That at this, your 18th birthday party, when you're having a good time, that someone told you, a prophet, tells you that you will not have a home to call your own until you turn 58.

And that's not because of cost of living and probably prices being too much. But that, worse than that, during this time, you will live in a tent.

And you will have to pack up every week or so in order to move to the next camping ground. You'll be a person of no fixed address.

Now, for some of you, that might sound like a great adventure to be on. But trust me, 40 years, by the time you get to, I don't know, 21 or something, you'll be sick and tired of it.

[1 : 22] So, it's a pretty demoralizing thought, isn't it? But essentially, that's what the young ones in Israel have just been told after last week's events, remember?

They were told that they were to wander for 40 years in the wilderness. Now, it's their parents that did the wrong thing, but they're suffering the consequences for it.

And so, it's not hard to see how a hopeless generation might emerge from all this waiting and wandering for 40 years in the wilderness.

And so, I think that's why Numbers chapter 15 is here. But these laws, inserted between the drama of Numbers chapter 14, and then we'll get to more drama in Numbers chapter 16 to 18 and beyond, these laws are actually a sign of God's continuing grace, providing, as you look at your outline, providing hope, providing forgiveness, and providing godly habits to help them in this journey of faith, this long journey, even though they have been, they are sinners and they are fallen.

So, let's look at the three sections then, and you'll see the verses associated with it. Let's look at the first one then, which are related to grain and drink offerings that are now added to the animal sacrifices.

[2 : 51] But, if you picked up on the reading, most importantly, these are only applicable when they enter the promised land. So, let's read verse 1. The Lord said to Moses, Speak to the Israelites and say to them, After you enter the land, I'm giving you as a home, and you present to the Lord food offerings from the herd or the flock as an aroma pleasing to the Lord, whether burnt offerings or sacrifices for special vows or freewill offerings or festival offerings, then the person who brings an offering shall present to the Lord a grain offering, a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour, mixed with a quarter of a hin of olive oil.

And with each lamb for the burnt offering or the sacrifice, prepare a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering. So, it's pretty clear then that these laws only apply once Israel is in the land.

And notice as well how God describes the land in a very evocative way. He's saying, I'm going to give to you as a home, right? Something to look forward to.

And the practical reason why the laws only apply when they get there is because the things required to make the flour and the grain offering and all that, the grain, the olive oil or the olives, and the wine, which comes from grapes, all these things are really produced from the land, which you can only kind of obtain when you're in a settled place, not when you're wandering in the desert.

You can't uproot your olive plant and take it with you, right? All those grape vines and all that. And, you know, you've been down to Yarra Valley for your romantic dates and stuff. You see how old those grape vines are, aren't they?

[4 : 38] Decades. And if you notice as well, the quantities, you look at your footnotes, the quantities are not small either. A tenth of an ephah is 1.6 kilograms.

A quarter of a hin is one liter. And in those days, there were a lot of those animal sacrifices. And as the animal sacrifices get bigger, look, when you get from the lamb to the ram to the bull, so do these amounts.

So these are a lot of flour, oil, and wine that they had to be carrying around if they were in the desert, which they can't. So as I asked at the start, the question then is, why are these laws here and given at this point, especially if they were still going to be wandering for another 40 years? Well, I think what's happening here is, and if you look at all the three sections, they all apply equally, this was an encouragement to Israel for them to look forward in hope beyond the 40 years of discipline to a time when God would actually reward them in the land and bless them, which he was already planning to do.

And you see that the grain and the drink offerings that accompany the sacrifices, they're not just for the sin offerings, they're also for the free will and festival offerings, which are celebrations.

[6 : 05] And so really, what God is trying to do here is to help them visit a time when they will be in the land, and each time they come to the temple, they will be bringing something to offer that is from the land as a reminder of God's blessing to them because they are now in this promised land.

And in the meantime, they are able to hold on to these future requirements as a basis of hope, because even as they're wandering in the wilderness and they do need to provide animal sacrifices for atonement of sin, they will think, oh, we haven't yet been able to bring a grain, a drink offering, but no, a time is coming, and we need to long for this time when yes, we will actually be able to bring our harvest with us in order to offer God as well.

And so in a similar way, our lives on this earth have the same kind of dynamic, isn't it? Because we too are in a temporary and sort of transient position on this earth.

God has promised something better. Not physical land, but the Lord Jesus Himself, which we have in part spiritually, but there will come a time when God has promised that in our new home, we will be with Christ forever in an eternal kingdom, in the new creation.

And so many of the things that we do as Christ's body, and right now even, each Sunday, when we sing and we pray, when we encourage each other, all of these things are to fuel our hope for this new home that we have with Christ Jesus.

[7 : 53] And for example, even the Lord's Supper, which we'll celebrate next week, look at Matthew 26, verse 28 and 29, because Jesus said there, that this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. Can you see that even Jesus is saying that this Lord's Supper is a forward-looking thing?

He wanted them to think of the time when He will drink it anew with them in the Father's kingdom.

And so it's not just a remembrance of what Jesus has done on the cross, it's also a looking forward with hope into this new creation.

Now further, as we go on, these laws are also a reminder of God's common grace. And I'll get to that term in a minute. In that, they apply to all who live in the land, whether you're Israelite or you're a foreigner.

So verse 13 to 15 state, everyone who is native-born must do these things in this way when they present a food offering to the Lord. For the generations to come, whenever a foreigner and anyone else living among you presents a food offering, they must do exactly as you do.

[9 : 06] The communities have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the foreigner shall be the same before the Lord.

Now, in a way, this is almost the reverse of what happened in Egypt. Because remember in Egypt and they had the 10 plagues, God was actually judging Pharaoh, not the people of Israel, right?

But there were many plagues for which the Israelites themselves had to suffer. They were not excluded just because they were God's people. And so the same thing happens here, but in reverse, because the foreigner who resides with Israel, even though he's not part, he or she's not part of the covenant people of God, they are blessed along with Israel just by being among them. And Jesus himself described this common grace in the gospel when he said that God causes the sun to rise on the good and the evil, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

And again, that's the same today. God shows common grace to all humanity, even those who do not yet believe in Jesus. But when they come among us, and you may be one of those in our midst

today, we want to welcome you and give you a taste of God's grace.

[10 : 27] So whether you observe or you participate in our worship and our fellowship and discipleship, we want to actually, we want you to actually experience how great it is to be part of God's people and to have this hope of eternal life so that you might say, I want it as well.

But for us who are children of God, our thanksgiving then should not be just praying and thanking God for our salvation in Christ Jesus, which we should do all the time, but no, we should also thank God for all his care in every aspect of our life, for every provision, physical material, as well as spiritual.

And hence, you know, it's great to be part of an Anglican church, by the way, because we have the prayer of thanksgiving. So, and we say that at the start sometimes, but we're going to say it now, right now, because it captures exactly what I've been saying.

So let's say it together and then, you know, you know what I mean. Gracious God, we humbly thank you for all your gifts so freely given, for life and health and safety, for power to work, leisure to rest, and for all that is beautiful in creation and human life.

But above all, we praise you for our Saviour, Jesus Christ, for his death and resurrection, for the gift of your spirit, and for the hope of sharing in your glory.

[11 : 53] Fill our hearts with all joy and peace in believing, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. And so you see that, even there, at the right at the end, there is a prayer that relates to the hope, isn't it?

Thanking God for the hope of sharing in Christ's glory. And that's what we've been looking at, haven't we, with these offerings. Now, this section then concludes with one more offering, and again, it only occurs when they're in the land.

Verse 17, the Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them, when you enter the land to which I'm taking you and you eat the food of the land, present a portion as an offering to the Lord. Present a loaf from the first of your ground meal and present it as an offering from the threshing floor. Throughout the generations to come, you are to give this offering to the Lord from the first of your ground meal.

Now, here, the difference is this food offering or grain offering is offered independently of the animal sacrifices.

[12 : 58] And it's offered at the time when the grain is being harvested and being ground down to make flour or bread. In other words, this is an offering from the first fruits or the first produce of the land.

And the principle here is that God wants them to, prior to enjoying His blessing, harvest, they are to symbolically offer what comes first back to the Lord as an acknowledgement that actually everything, the whole harvest, not just the first fruits, all come from the Lord as His blessing.

And by doing that, what it stops them doing is attributing their blessing, their harvest to themselves and their hard work. You know, wow, look at me. I worked so hard today and this year and I got all this.

And it's also to stop them attributing this blessing to idols who say, oh no, it's the sun God that gave it to me or it's the rain God that gave it to me. No, all of it is from the God of Israel, the one that brought them out of Egypt.

And again, I think we can practice this principle as well, can't we? So, is our giving to the Lord, for those of us who are Christians, an afterthought or the first thing we consider when we get our paycheck or our bonus, when that pay hits the bank account?

[14 : 30] Is our giving to mission, for example, the first thing to go when times are bad? Or do we still offer our thanksgiving to God first because we're acknowledging that actually everything comes from Him?

And so, if things are bad, we can still trust God even after we've given back the first fruit to the Lord that He will continue to provide for us. And so, in that sense, this is not just an act of thanksgiving, is it?

It is also an act of faith when things are not going well. Okay, let's move on then to the second set of laws, verse 22, and these relate to unintentional and defiant sins.

And so, we read, 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.

So, that means it covers all of the laws, not just the ones in this chapter, right? Every commandment that God has ever given is covered. And if a communal sin is committed and they become aware of it, then the offering is a burnt offering, which is a young bull together with a grain and drink offering.

[15:52] I think that's only applicable once they get into the land. And a young goat for a sin offering. This is done for the whole community, it covers even the foreigners, and then everyone is forgiven.

If, however, it's just an individual who sins, verse 27, then that person alone must bring a young, a year-old female goat for a sin offering. And so, here, I think the only difference then is the size of the offering.

No burnt offering, no grain or drink offering, just the sin offering, which is a female rather than a male goat. Now, the contrast then, so these are the two for unintentional sins, corporate as well as individual.

The contrast then is with the defiant sin, which in verse 30 and 31 is as follows. But anyone who sins defiantly, 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, they must surely be cut off. And cut off means to be put to death. Their guilt remains on them.

[17:03] Now, to me, the best way to understand this, I think, is to understand that defiant and unintentional sins are mutually exclusive. There are two types of sins that are being spoken of here, right?

And because they sit side by side. And so, if you want to understand what unintentional sins are, you need to understand what defiant sins are.

unintentional sins are just the what's not defiant sins. So, defiant sins, I think, is much easier to define. And these are those where there's willful disobedience and a refusal to repent.

In other words, when a person knows that they've done wrong, they continue in that sin and even refuse to admit that they've done the wrong thing.

It's probably also why they only talk about individuals sinning defiantly because it would be a major thing for the whole nation to sin defiantly, which they have done and God's threatened, hasn't he, to cut them off or kind of eradicate them totally and Moses had to intervene.

[18:15] But, the consequences for defiant sins are severe, right? Guilt remains on them. So, here, the sin is not just disobeying the law, you've just done the wrong thing, the sin is also defiant against the lawgiver, despising the idea that this is the Lord's word, blaspheming the Lord, right?

You're actually thumbing your noses at the Lord and saying, who are you? And that is an affront to God, not just that you've done the wrong thing. Now, unintentional sins, I think then, are simply sins that are not defined.

So, it covers all sins which, when you realize you've done the wrong thing, leads to confession and repentance. So, really, if you think about it, God is here not so concerned about the nature of the sin, like what have you done specifically, but rather the attitude that goes with that sin, whether you are repentant for it or you continue to be defiant.

And so, I think, you know, some of you might be worried, how many times have I defied the Lord this week? Just calm down. I think it also covers things like failure of character. So, let's say, you know, you know you shouldn't lose your temper, but you do lose your temper, and, you know, we all do that, even me, or we're careless with our words, you know, or, you know, sort of, you're just in the spur of the moment, you do the wrong thing.

If, when that happens, and you realize you've done the wrong thing, you immediately say sorry and ask God for forgiveness, then I think that falls under unintentional sins rather than defiant sins.

[20:00] And, you know, as Christians, that should be our posture anyway, right? That we shouldn't be self-righteous all the time, but actually quite ready to say, oh, sorry, I have done the wrong thing here, and be in a habit of regularly confessing our sins as we do each week here, to say sorry to others so as to restore relationships.

And so, when we get to first verses 32 to 36, I think what this is doing here, because you might be wondering, why suddenly talk about a wood gatherer in the forest on a Sabbath day?

I think what we have here is a case study of what is defiant sin. So, let's read that. It says, 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. Then 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 death. So this is the description of what means to be cut off, take it outside and be put to death.

[21 : 12] Now, it's not exactly clear, but I think this man must have been found doing this sometime during the 40 years, wandering. But because it follows the definition of defiant sin, I think this is an example of what is considered defiant sin.

Now, that's not readily clear when you read the example. This guy's just gone out to the woods, just gathered a few twigs, yes, it's the Sabbath, and then all of a sudden, he's put to death.

So what's actually going on here? Well, I think part of it is that the people and the Moses actually did not know what to do with him initially. That's why they brought him, put him in custody, and then they waited for the Lord to pronounce the punishment.

And it could be that they were not clear whether this man's violation was intentional or whether what he did was in defiance of the Sabbath laws. But also, I think, it may not have been clear until God revealed what was in his heart, what was his intention when he did all these things.

And the fact of the matter is, God says that, yes, the Sabbath laws have been broken. If you read in Exodus, the breaking of the Sabbath laws are very severe.

[22 : 34] It is to be cut off or put to death straight away. So you see that in Exodus 35, verse 2, whoever does any work on it is to be put to death.

It's very, very clear. There is also this added thing which is highlighted, and that is that the law also says that you are not to light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day.

So this guy, he is probably out there in the woods. Why do you gather wood? To light a fire, right? I know you can make furniture out of it, but for them, it is to light a fire.

And now don't ask me why the Lord would think it's such a bad thing to light a fire on the Sabbath, because I don't know if it's dark or if it's cold, you would think it's quite reasonable, but the Lord is saying, no, don't do it, it's considered work.

And so this man has done this, and I think it required the Lord to actually pronounce this judgment, because the Lord is actually saying, even though his actions were not clear, that what was in his heart was unrepentant and defiant sin, and therefore the guilt remains on him.

[23 : 43] So, the point of this whole section, I think, is to say that God has graciously provided for the forgiveness of sins, but only for those who are truly repentant.

And for us, that is the same as well. We have the great privilege of not needing to bring any more animal sacrifices to be forgiven, because the Lord Jesus is that sacrifice.

God has provided his Son. As the writer of Hebrews says in chapter 10 verse 10, we have been made holy, that is, forgiven, through the sacrifice of the body of Christ once for all.

His death is the sacrifice that we need throughout our entire life to be forgiven. But in the very same chapter, in Hebrews chapter 10 verse 26, the writer also follows up by saying, if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of truth, that is, after you know that Jesus has forgiven you to his death, you keep on deliberately sinning, then no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

And that describes the situation where we continue to be defiant and unrepentant for our sins. So, repentance matters, doesn't it?

[25 : 10] Even though God has freely and graciously forgiven us in Christ Jesus. And if you think that this judgment on the man was so severe that you know, just go out to the woods and the next thing he's being put to death, I think we, in our modern day, underestimate how serious sin is to God.

Because it says here, even in Hebrews, that if we keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, this is not Old Testament scripture here, this is New Testament scripture after Jesus has come, then what is left is the fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Now, that's not to make us then be kind of so guilt-ridden, but it's to make us see how severe sin really is and drive us to the Lord Jesus and the cross every time we sin, to ask for repentance and to acknowledge our error and work hard to change our ways, because sin truly continues to be,

because he's a holy God and a front to him.

Now, that finally brings us to section three, because so far we've looked at how God's grace sustains Israel with hope, as they wander the wilderness, and then secondly how he provides grace through forgiveness, provided we repent, but thirdly, God also provides grace for godly habits to remind us, to remind Israelites to observe his laws.

So verse 37, the Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them, throughout the generations to come, you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments with a blue cord in each tassel.

[26 : 58] You will have these tassels to look at, and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lust of your own eyes and hearts.

then 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.

I am the Lord your God. Now friends, I wonder what you do to remind yourself of things in life. You know, that your, when your assignments might be due, or if you own a house, you know, when you've got to pay your bills.

Now in this modern day and age, all these paper reminders, I know some people probably still keep diaries with their little kind of calendar in it, but most of us now use Google Calendar, right?

And we put reminders in there, even though it's not a meeting, we just put a reminder. And you know, if you're like me, not just putting in the meeting, you have to put a notification as well, five days before it's due, then four days, then three days, two days, and then if you're like me, you still forget because you think, oh, I've got another reminder tomorrow, I'll do it tomorrow, and then until it's, you know, until your electricity gets cut off, that's the best reminder, isn't it?

[28 : 21] Then you pay it so that it gets turned back on. Now those are reminders for small so-called things in life, but what about the most important thing in your life, your salvation, and your eternal life?

What are the things that God has given us, gave Israel, to help them remember not to forget the Lord, not to rebel against his laws? Well, this final section, God gives them a small little device, isn't it, to help them remember.

It may seem small, it may seem pretty simple, but actually, the effect of it, the flow on impact, is actually quite significant, isn't it? So, these are the small blue tassels, I don't know how they look like, but they were to affix it onto their clothes, and I think what's happening there is that every morning when they get out of bed, let's say, and they reach for their beautiful garment or cloak, and they're about to tie it, you know, fasten it, they'll see the blue tassels, and they'll remind themselves, ah, I need to obey the Lord's command.

This is the only reason why the tassels is there, to remind myself that I need to obey the Lord. And then, you know, if they walk around, and you know, I see Joe Feng, he's got a blue tassel on his thing, and Joe sees Lashan, and he's got a blue tassel, everyone's got blue tassels, everyone's wearing blue tassels, we'll all be reminding each other, aren't we, that, hey, we're the Lord's people, we've got laws that we need to obey, right?

So, it's just a little, small little thing on everyone's clothes, but actually, the flow-on impact is significant, because the whole community will have daily, constant reminders that they are to observe the law.

[30 : 03] And, of course, it's sort of inexcusable, isn't it? Because it's everywhere you look, everywhere, everyone's clothes, there are blue tassels. Now, the thing to do, then, is to remember to obey God, but secondly, also, to remember not to prostitute themselves to other gods, or to lust after things of the heart and of the eyes.

Both of it is looking, isn't it? The tassels should catch our eyes, not the other lusts that are around in the world. And so, their motivation is important, what's in their heart, but God has also given them very practical aids to help them in their Christian life.

And so, that's why I often say to people, you know, and some of you do struggle with pornography or online gambling or something like that, such temptations. I often tell them, yes, you need to look in your heart, but then, it's also good to have practical aids in place, to have something that will take your focus away from that pornography or that gambling or whatever.

So, you know, find a good, wholesome activity as a hobby, as a distraction, yes, but it takes your mind away from those things. So, you know, let me offer you a suggestion, bike riding is a good

thing.

You can do it for two or three hours, and then when you're home, you're so tired, you don't want to look on the screens, right? Or, as some of you, others do, you know, learning a new language by using, I don't know, Duolingo, maybe, there's other apps nowadays, whatever.

[31 : 39] But, you know, that's a daily thing that you can do, that you do instead of doing the other thing, isn't it? So, there are practical things that we all do, and you don't have to use those two, but other things that you enjoy doing, like cooking or whatever, to get you away from these things that are the lusts of the eyes and the heart.

Because when it comes to our spiritual life, the simple habits in our life matter, okay? Like reading the Bible, or if you have a habit of listening when you're on your way to somebody's podcast, a sermon podcast, by good preachers only, by the way, not the dodgy ones.

If you commit to attending church regularly, come to pray with your brothers and sisters and study God's Word with them, these are little habits, right? If you drop one, it doesn't mean you're not safe, but together they build a lifetime by which you are able to guard your hearts and minds against sin and also then keep your eyes focused on the Lord Jesus.

Godliness is not a quick or silver bullet, a quick fix, but it's actually learned through little things, little habits and disciplines that you build up over time.

And for us who are Christians, God's grace extends even beyond just giving us blue tassels as remembrance aids because God has given actually himself in the person of his spirit.

[33 : 15] He came to us in his son Jesus to forgive us, but he also has given us the spirit of his son to dwell in us so that we then can have the power to obey him as people that are forgiven by him.

As a result, if you read in the New Testament, God's laws are now no longer just written on paper. God's laws are not just in that Bible. God's laws are now written in our very hearts by the Holy Spirit. We have it in us, the law of God by the Spirit, empowered by him so that actually we can obey the Lord. But of course, practical things, practical habits that we have in life also help us, used by God, to do that as well.

Now I want to just finish by going to that passage in Titus because I think it neatly sums up the three aspects of what we have been looking today. So let me read it. For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

The grace of God. It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age. While we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

[34 : 47] So can you see those three elements there? Blessed hope, what we looked at firstly. Redemption or forgiveness from wickedness and sin, that's the second thing we looked at.

And then finally, the ability and power to live upright lives, people of God who are eager to do what is good by the Spirit. And that's the third thing.

All three were in Numbers 15 and all three are in Titus chapter 2 as well. And so let us then, given that this grace of God has appeared to us and been poured out into our lives, let us draw on this grace so that we will finally reach our promised home, our promised destination, Christ's eternal kingdom, the rest, the eternal rest that will be ours when Jesus, our great God and Saviour, finally appeared.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for showing grace to us even though we are sinners. Thank you for the hope, forgiveness and the Holy Spirit which you've given to us to help us live godly lives.

Please help us not to forget, but remind us daily from your word, by your spirit, so that we will not fall under your judgment and defiance sin. In Jesus' name we pray.

[36 : 14] Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.