



▸ *Rebellion and Judgment* ◀

GOD BRINGS JUDGMENT WITH CONSEQUENCES
ON THE DISOBEDIENT.

NUMBERS 14:11-24

Most every parent has asked their child at some point: “If everybody jumps off the cliff (or bridge, roof, or into a fire), does that mean you should do it too?” The implied answer is, “No. I would never do that just because somebody else did.” Despite parents’ disapproval and internal warning bells going off, we’ve all made decisions that, years later, we regret. We look back and say, “If I only had the chance to do it all over again, I would have chosen differently.”



How much does the opinion of others affect your decision-making? How much should it affect it?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

NUMBERS 14:1-45

Recall that Moses sent twelve spies into the land to scout it out and bring back a report (Num. 13:1-20). The report they brought back was not encouraging. They suggested that the obstacles in the land would be too difficult to overcome (13:21-29). Only two scouts, Caleb and Joshua, encouraged the people to go up and conquer the land (13:30). The others insisted the inhabitants were too strong to overcome (13:31-33).

When the Israelite community heard the scouts' negative report, they wept (14:1). They complained to Moses and Aaron, suggesting they should have stayed in Egypt. Some suggested a return to Egypt (14:4).

Moses and Aaron fell facedown (14:5). Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes in lament and encouraged the people to go up and take the land (14:6-9). But the people refused to listen (14:10).

Suddenly, the glory of God appeared at the tent of meeting. He expressed His displeasure over the people's failure to trust Him. He stated that He would strike them down and make Moses into an even greater nation instead (14:11-12). Moses urged the Lord to forgive the people, lest the nations hear about it and the act result in God's name being tarnished (14:13-19).

The Lord told Moses He would pardon the people, yet they would face consequences. The generation that had seen God's miraculous works in Egypt and the wilderness would not enter the land. Caleb and Joshua would enter, the others would not (14:20-24).

When Moses reported God's words to the people, they grieved and determined to go up and take the land after all (14:39-40). Moses warned them not to try because they would suffer defeat since the Lord was not with them (14:41-43). When some of the people tried to enter the hill country, the Amalekites and Canaanites attacked them and drove them away (14:44-45).



Read Numbers 14:11-24 in your Bible. Locate the appeals to faithfulness. How and why did God expect Moses and the Israelites to be faithful? How did Moses highlight the need for God to remain faithful?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GOD'S JUDGMENT (NUM. 14:11-16)

¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, “How long will these people despise me? How long will they not trust in me despite all the signs I have performed among them?” ¹² I will strike them with a plague and destroy them. Then I will make you into a greater and mightier nation than they are.” ¹³ But Moses replied to the LORD, “The Egyptians will hear about it, for by your strength you brought up this people from them. ¹⁴ They will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, LORD, are among these people, how you, LORD, are seen face to face, how your cloud stands over them, and how you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ If you kill this people with a single blow, the nations that have heard of your fame will declare, ¹⁶ ‘Since the LORD wasn’t able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them, he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.’”

VERSES 11-12

The question, *how long*, which appears twice in this verse, is rhetorical. God was not asking Moses about minutes, hours, or days. He was using it the same way a parent might say to a child throwing a tantrum, “Are you about finished?” Like the parent, God was saying, “I have put up with all of this that I’m going to.”

God accused the people of two things: they had despised Him and not trusted in Him. The Hebrew verb translated *despise* means to spurn or reject someone due to contempt. Despite the *signs* God had done, the people still did not trust Him. Signs always point beyond themselves. The *signs* included His parting the Red Sea, sending plagues that struck Egypt, and providing food and water in the desert. These signs demonstrated God’s love and care for His people. Despite this, they did *not trust* in Him.

Next, God made two promises. One involved the Israelites and the other, Moses. He would strike the Israelites with a *plague* that would kill both man and beast.

God would then enact His second promise—to make from Moses another, more powerful nation. This would reset God’s covenant with Abraham. God had made a similar statement when the Israelites had been worshiping the golden calf at the foot of

Mount Sinai (Ex. 32:10). With the golden calf, the Israelites had participated in blatant idolatry. Currently, they expressed a lack of faith. Fear, rather than trust, had shaped the report of the ten spies and the people's response. Saying He would destroy His people shows how offended God is when His people do not trust Him or His promises. The Lord's response is a reminder that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6).

The people were trusting themselves more than they trusted God. To not trust God is to doubt His truthfulness, and Scripture teaches that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

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VERSES 13-16

Moses's concern was not what the Egyptians thought about the Israelites. His concern was what they thought about God.

The Egyptians' telling how God had destroyed His people would discredit the Lord's name among ***the inhabitants of this land***, meaning the Canaanites. The Hebrew is unclear about who the second ***they*** are in verse 14—the Egyptians or the Canaanites. Some biblical scholars believe it was both. It was Moses's way of saying that everybody behind them and before them knew.

In Hebrew, the phrase ***face to face*** is literally "eye to eye." This idiom refers to being in the closest proximity to another. It meant that God revealed Himself in a close and personal way.

Moses would have known what had happened to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. He had seen firsthand what God did to the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. Thus, Moses knew the Lord could wipe out all the Israelites ***with a single blow***. This detail underscores the fact that all the people had shown a lack of faith (Num. 14:1-2,10).

Moses mentioned God's ***fame***. He knew that the Lord's protecting His people and providing for them was a testimony of who He was to the Canaanites and Egyptians. In essence, Moses was saying, "Lord, your reputation is at stake."

Moses next hypothesized what people would say about God—that He ***wasn't able*** to finish what He had begun. He had gotten the Israelites out of Egypt but couldn't get them into the land of Canaan. This would call into question God's power and reliability.

A generation later, Joshua picked up on this same theme when the men of Ai defeated the Israelites. Joshua said, “When the Canaanites and all who live in the land hear about this, they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. Then what will you do about your great name?” (Josh. 7:9).



What do you think about how Moses responded to God's threat to destroy His people? What adjectives would you use to describe Moses's words and attitude?



What impact does our faithfulness to God have on our witness?

GOD'S GLORY (NUM. 14:17-19)

¹⁷ **“So now, may my Lord's power be magnified just as you have spoken: ¹⁸ The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, forgiving iniquity and rebellion. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers' iniquity on the children to the third and fourth generation.**

¹⁹ **Please pardon the iniquity of this people, in keeping with the greatness of your faithful love, just as you have forgiven them from Egypt until now.”**

VERSES 17-18

Moses prayed for the **LORD's power to be magnified**. How could God's power be made even more evident? Moses did not have in mind God doing something new. Rather, he wanted God's power to be magnified by the Lord doing what He had already said.

Moses's words echoed part of what God had said about Himself when He passed in front of him on Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:6-7). The message that God is slow to anger and abounding in faithful love resounds throughout the Old Testament (Neh. 9:17; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3).

God's **faithful love** refers to His loyalty based on His covenant relationship with the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and

their descendants. It is a reciprocal relationship, meaning He has promised to be faithful to those whom He has called to be faithful to Him.

In Hebrew, the word translated *forgiving* means to lift or carry, meaning God would lift and carry away the sinner's punishment. This was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24).

Because God is holy and just, He punishes the guilty. God, however, does not punish children or grandchildren for the sins of their parents (Deut. 24:16). Breaking ungodly traditions may take generations; thus, the consequences continue.



KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son*

In His substitutionary death on the cross Jesus made provision for the redemption of men from sin. (See Romans 5:6-10; Colossians 1:14.)

VERSE 19

This verse brings us to the conclusion of Moses's intercession. Rather than praying for himself, Moses had been pleading with God to show mercy to the people. This is the picture of intercession—praying for someone else's needs with the same intensity that we would pray for our own. It is seeking God on behalf of someone else.

Because God had forgiven His people in the past—from Egypt until now—Moses was asking Him to do it again. This is an encouragement for us. Because God has extended grace and forgiveness to others in the past, we should be confident we can ask on our behalf as well.



Why was it important for Moses to appeal to God's character in his prayer for the people?



What are some appropriate ways of appealing to God's character when praying?

FUTURE CONSEQUENCES (NUM. 14:20-24)

²⁰ The LORD responded, “I have pardoned them as you requested.

²¹ Yet as I live and as the whole earth is filled with the LORD’s glory, ²² none of the men who have seen my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tested me these ten times and did not obey me, ²³ will ever see the land I swore to give their ancestors. None of those who have despised me will see it. ²⁴ But since my servant Caleb has a different spirit and has remained loyal to me, I will bring him into the land where he has gone, and his descendants will inherit it.”

VERSES 20-23

The LORD responded to Moses by granting forgiveness. His covenant relationship with His people would continue.

The Lord spoke in past tense; He had already ***pardoned*** them. God was saying, “You asked Me to forgive them, I have done it.” For God to pardon them did not mean they would not bear the consequences for their sin. This becomes evident in verses 22-23.

God spoke of those whom He had led out of ***Egypt***. He said they tested Him ***these ten times*** yet did not obey. The phrase *these ten times* is probably best taken figuratively. Using the phrase this way can mean time and again (see Gen. 31:7; Job 19:3). Or, *ten* could signify completion, as in the Ten Commandments. If this was the case, then God was saying He had His fill of His people rebelling.

In verse 23, God introduced the punishment of His unfaithful children. They would not see the land He promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Later in this chapter (vv. 28-35), He would describe the details: the Israelites would wander in the wilderness for forty years, one year for each day the spies had been in the land. Then, all aged twenty and older would die in the wilderness; their children would inherit the land.

Like the second bookend, God repeated the charge He introduced in verse 11—the people had ***despised*** Him. Interestingly, none of the spies had returned from their trek and said they despised God. None of the people said it. To despise someone is an internal thing, an emotion. God knew their hearts—plus, their words and behavior revealed their hearts. He saw the peoples’ not believing Him as treating Him with contempt. He was not going to leave the guilty unpunished (v. 18).

VERSE 24

God's turning His attention to Caleb in this way is reminiscent of how the Scriptures describe what happened with Noah. The text speaks of the great evil in the land and how God regretted creating mankind. Genesis 6:8, though, says, "*But Noah* found grace in the eyes of the LORD" (KJV, emphasis added) Noah stood in stark contrast to the culture around him. The same occurred with Caleb. He remained loyal amid a disobedient people.

God's calling Caleb *my servant* was an honor. Before this, the Lord had spoken only of Abraham and Moses this way. Centuries later, He would also refer to King David with the same title (Gen. 26:24; Num. 12:7-8; 2 Sam. 3:18).

This verse shows that God responds to the prayers of the faithful. Because he had brought back a favorable report and encouraged the people to proceed, Caleb was promised he would enter Canaan. Joshua, who had also brought a positive report, would be allowed to enter the promised land as well (Num. 14:6-9,30,38). Both men and their descendants would enter the land and receive what God had promised the patriarchs.



Since God is willing to grant forgiveness for our sin, why do you think He does not remove the consequences as well?



BIBLE SKILL: *Compare an Old Testament and New Testament passage.*

Read Numbers 14:11-24. Note how God pardoned the people, yet their unbelief brought sad consequences. The writer of Hebrews 3-4 referenced this story, drawing parallels between the Israelites' unbelief and his audience's struggle to believe God's promises. Read Hebrews 3:16-4:2,11. What consequences of unbelief and disobedience was the writer of Hebrews concerned about for his audience? What applications might we draw for Christian living today?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers honor God by trusting Him.
- + We can count on God to act according to His character.
- + We must understand that sin has consequences.

 **Moses was faithful in interceding for God's people. How might your Bible study group strengthen its prayer ministry?**

 What can you do to prepare yourself to remain faithful to God when the crowd around you wants to do the opposite?

Memorize Numbers 14:18a.

Prayer Needs

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