

The Perilous Journey Continues
Numbers 15 - 21
February 10, 2019

Next Week. Numbers 22-27

Proverbs 28:14. “Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.”

Wesley's Questions for Class Meetings. #5. Am I self-conscious, self-pitying or self-justifying?

What does the Bible Mean?

Chapter 15 is largely a collection of legal material pertaining to sacrifices and offerings when “... you enter the land I am giving you...” Leviticus and Ezekiel also prescribe details for making offerings and sacrifices. The addition of flour, oil and wine provided, “...an aroma pleasing to the Lord.” The pleasing fragrance of a *gracious deed*. Our gifts to God are fragrant when we give from our hearts. In Ephesians, Paul refers to the sacrifice of Christ as, “...a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

The chapter goes on to differentiate between unwitting sins and *defiant* sins. A defiant sin such as blasphemy reviles God and, “...his guilt remains on him.”

Questions.

What does this say about the nature of God and what he expects from us?

What do we think about giving? What do we give?

Do we give from the heart?

Read. Numbers 15:32-36

Here a man committed a defiant or highhanded sin when he collected firewood on the Sabbath. He was brought before Moses and Aaron and confined until they knew what to do with him. Exodus had prescribed death for Sabbath breakers but not the method of execution. The Lord told Moses to take him outside the camp and stone him.

Questions.

What is the difference between “defiant” and unintentional sins?

Might they differ from one of us to another?

Read. Numbers 15: 37-41

God tells the people to wear tassels on the corners of their garments as constant reminders of the Lord's commands so that they, “...may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own heart and eyes.” We also need reminders – perhaps a set time of day for devotion and prayer. Communion is “in remembrance of me.”

Question.

What “tassels” should we “put on” to remind us of what God wants from us?

Chapter 16 is a story of revolution. Today we know about revolutionaries. Korah, a Levite, and brothers Dathan and Abiram, and Onosn, Rubenites, rose up against Moses with 250 other well-known community leaders. They asked Moses why he set himself above everyone when, “the whole community is holy.” Dathan and Aberam accused Moses of not bringing them to the land of milk and honey and lording it over the people politically.

The challengers were questioning the priesthood as established by God and God's representative, Moses, as the political leader. Perhaps we can identify with the earliest expression of a priesthood of all believers and political challenge. However these men were challenging God's timing and plan for God's people.

Read. Numbers 16:1-7

Moses tells Korah and his followers that they “have gone too far!” According to a Jewish study Bible, they are “outside the scope of our calling.”

Question.

Are we ever “outside the scope of our calling?”
Why is that a danger?

Korah and his 250 followers lit censers the next day. The *censer* is an implement used to carry live coals and burn incense. It was an implement of atonement and the use was exclusively for use by the priesthood of Aaron. Burning incense was a holy act and this was an offense to God. The men had assumed the role of priests who were the ones to burn incense.

The glory of the Lord appeared. God told Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from everyone so the whole assembly could be destroyed. Moses and Aaron sought to intercede for the assembly, so God told them to tell everyone to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram where the men stood with their families. Moses and Aaron cried out to the Lord to not be angry with the whole assembly when only one-man sins. Then God instructed Moses and Aaron to move the entire assembly away from Korah and his followers and his families. As soon as they did it is recorded in verses 31-35 that the “earth opened ... and swallowed them, with their households and ... all their possessions” and fire “consumed the 250 men who were offering incense.”

This may seem extreme to us. But God knew that the people were facing a perilous journey. The people had to follow God's appointed leaders to survive.

But the next day the people grumbled or murmured again.

Read. Numbers 16:41-50

If/when we murmur about a pastor, how does God react?
What do our murmurings have to say about our level of trust in God?
How can we be more sensitive and supportive of subject to lots of criticism?

In Chapter 17, God tells Moses to get a staff from the leader of the twelve ancestral tribes and inscribe the man's name on each one. The staff was a symbol of the leader's authority. The staffs were placed in the tabernacle. The next day Aaron's staff representing the tribe of Levi had budded, sprouted and grown almonds! The staff was placed in front of the Testimony or Ark. The miracle was a sign that Levi and their leader, Aaron, were chosen above the rest in ritual affairs. "This will also show the Lord's vindication of Moses and Aaron following Korah's failed rebellion."

The people were now afraid that anyone who approached the tabernacle would die. "Are we all going to die?" Chapter 18 includes an answer to their fears.

Read. Numbers 18:1-7

So, Chapter 18 deals with the priests and Levites including their portion of offerings and inheritance. They will receive the finest of the land – the first fruits. All given to the Lord is theirs. But they must in turn give a tithe of the tithe as the Lord's offering. The Levites will have no inheritance. In verse 19, God makes the guarantee of the offerings and inheritance an "everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord." A covenant of salt was a permanent one. Salt was played a central role at the solemn meal that sealed the covenant in Genesis 26:13, 31:54 and Exodus 24:11.

At that time Israel needed a priestly class. Without one the people would not have had discipline in worship or spiritual understanding. Yet special priestly privilege was the seed of spiritual deterioration. The Prophets thundered against the evils of the priests. Then Jesus came – not from the priestly line. His death caused the veil of the Temple to be split from top to bottom. Now God and his ways were open to all and Jesus became the high priest.

Chapter 19 deals in detail with the sacrifices of a red heifer. Probably red was the prescribed color because it represented the blood of sacrifice. The chapter continues with detailed rules for cleansing after being in contact with a dead body. The rules (of cleansing from contamination with uncleanness) even apply to implements in a tent (home) itself.

Questions.

Is it possible to live today and never come into contact with sin?
How do we avoid "contamination" by sin?
When we do sin, how do we feel?
How do we then restore relationships with God since all sin is against God?

Read. Numbers 20: 1-13

The people arrived at Kadesh in the Desert of Zin in the first month, but what year? It is likely late in the wanderings. Miriam died and was buried there. Miriam was the most significant woman in Israel, but we do not know how she died.

The place was dry. The people needed water, so the usual cries came to Moses. Why did you bring us to this terrible place? Why didn't we stay in Egypt? There's nothing to drink!

As was their way, Moses and Aaron took their problem to the Lord. The Lord instructed Moses and Aaron to use Aaron's staff or rod before the gathered community. They should then speak to the rock and water will pour out.

The incident was a key one to Moses and Aaron. God instructed them to *speak to the rock* and water would pour out. They expressed their exasperation with the people as if the people expected water to come from the rock. Moses *struck* the rock twice with the staff. Perhaps Moses' words and action did not give the glory of the miracle to God. In any event, neither Moses or Aaron would lead the people to the promised land in Canaan.

Questions.

When we are very successful with something, might we be likely to trust ourselves instead of God? Are we as likely to trust God long into our relationship with him as early in our relationship?

Read. Numbers 20: 14-21.

In Verse 14, “your brother Israel” refers back to Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau. Edom is the country of Esau's descendants and is south and east of Canaan. The King's Highway ran from the top of the Gulf of Aqaba north through Edom, Moab and Ammon and to Syria. It must have been a disappointment when a nation of blood relatives denied Israel's requests.

Read. Numbers 20: 22-29

Because *you* (plural) for Aaron and Moses rebelled, Aaron was to be gathered to his people. He died on Mount Hor (which is an unknown mountain today) and his son, Eleazar became the High Priest. The whole community mourned him for thirty days.

Questions.

What turning point in the desert wanderings does this passage suggest?

Read. Numbers 21: 1-3

The place of the victory, Hormah, means “utterly destroy.”

Read. Numbers 21: 4-8

The people resume their complaints and the Lord sent venomous snakes and many people died. The people repented so God had Moses erect a bronze serpent. The people could look at it and be healed. In John 3, Jesus referred to the bronze serpent as an implied comparison with his being lifted on a cross and then raised from the dead. To the ancients, snakes were a symbol of both death and danger and life and healing.

Chapter 21 continues. The people move from place to place over to the east side of the Dead Sea through the countries of Moab and Ammon.

Read. Numbers 21: 21-26

Israel asked Sihon, king of the Amorites to let them pass through. He refused and marched his army against Israel. The Amorites and their towns were defeated throughout the area overlooking the valley near Jericho and Israel settled in the land of the Amorites.