

September 29 Lesson 5 (NIV)

FAITHFUL IN CONSEQUENCES

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 103:1–14
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Numbers 14:10b–23

NUMBERS 14:10B–20

^{10b} Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. ¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, “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? ¹² I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.”

¹³ Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, ¹⁶ ‘The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.’

¹⁷ “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: ¹⁸ ‘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.’ ¹⁹ In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.”

²⁰ The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked.”

KEY VERSE

In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.—Numbers 14:19

RESPONDING TO GOD’S GRACE

Unit 1: God Is Faithful

LESSONS 1–5

LESSON OUTLINE

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HOW TO SAY IT

Canaan*Kay-nun*.

Gomorra*hGuh-more-uh*.

Jericho*Jair-ih-co*.

Kadesh Barnea*kay-desh-bar-nee-uh*.

Rahab*Ray-hab*.

Sinai*Sigh-nye* or *Sigh-nay-eye*.

Sodom*Sod-um*.

tabernacle*tah-burr-nah-kul*.

Thessalonians*Thess-uh-lo-nee-unz*.

Introduction

A. The Great and Powerful God

In the classic movie *The Wizard of Oz*, the wizard is reputed to be “the great and powerful Oz,” who causes fear and trembling within those who dare to approach him. When Dorothy and her three friends (along with her dog Toto) come before the wizard, they react in the same way. But when Toto pulls back a curtain, the friends find an older man who is making himself appear by

means of trickery to be “the great and powerful Oz.” In reality, he is anything but great and powerful, and certainly no one to approach with fear and trembling.

Many have a view of God as a kind, grandfatherly figure who wouldn’t hurt a flea. It follows, then, that we humans don’t really need to take him seriously—when all is said and done, he will be merciful and simply overlook whatever sins we may have committed. But as the Israelites discovered at Kadesh Barnea, reality doesn’t support this position. The God of Israel is truly “great and powerful,” and his judgment of human sin and rebellion dare not be taken lightly. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of a truth that stands rock solid throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament and remains just as trustworthy today: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

B. Lesson Context

Today’s text follows immediately on the heels of last week’s. The discouragement brought about by the 10 spies’ report grew into a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. The text concluded with the congregation’s desiring to stone Caleb and Joshua (Numbers 14:10a). Today’s text begins with words even more ominous, as God comes in judgment to a people blinded by unbelief.

I. God’s Intention

(NUMBERS 14:10b–12)

A. Glorious Presence (v. 10b)

10b. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites.

God’s *glory* is referenced directly for the first time in the book of Numbers in this verse. The Israelites have already witnessed the *glory of the Lord* when he provided manna from Heaven to feed them in the wilderness (Exodus 16:7, 8; see lesson 3 commentary). His glory had appeared like a “consuming fire” on Mount Sinai (24:17) and filled the tabernacle upon its completion (40:33, 34).

One can only surmise how the people react when they see the glory approach, given how defiantly they have expressed their rebellion against the Lord and against his appointed leaders. However, their reaction after days of preparation suggests that nothing less than abject fear would be the response now (compare Exodus 20:18, 19).

B. Destructive Plan (vv. 11, 12)

11. The LORD said to Moses, “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?”

The questions raised by *the Lord* in this verse reveal his anger. *The signs* that he has displayed among the Israelites have been numerous, going back to the plagues that were brought upon Egypt (Exodus 7:14–12:30). These signs were followed by the parting of the Red Sea’s waters for Israel’s safe passage and bringing the waters back upon the Egyptians (14:21–28).

God further gave signs in the form of provision for his people in the desert (Exodus 15:22–16:15). The Israelites “saw [his] glory and the signs [he] performed in Egypt and in the wilderness” (Numbers 14:22). They have been granted the truly sacred privilege of witnessing mighty works

from the hand of the Lord. Yet they still react faithlessly to his promise that he will carry out another mighty work by bringing them safely into the promised land.

Furthermore, likely only a few weeks have passed since the display of divine majesty on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16–19). At that time, the voice of the Lord had been so terrifying that the people begged Moses to speak as the Lord’s intermediary (20:18, 19). Though their fear is meant to teach them to trust and obey the Lord, they still *refuse to believe*.

12. “I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.”

The people gathered before the Lord are in an extremely precarious position: the God who has promised to give them the land now determines to *destroy them*. Is his patience finally at an end? When the Israelites built a golden calf while God gave Moses the law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32), the Lord told Moses that he planned to do just what he is proposing here: destroy the people and create “a great nation” out of Moses instead (32:10).

The threatened destruction is specified to come about by *plague*. Such a severe punishment had been promised previously by the Lord should the people continue to turn from his ways (Leviticus 26:21–25); it would be included as one possible consequence for disobedience and unfaithfulness once they were living in the land (Deuteronomy 28:21).

II. Moses’ Mediation

(NUMBERS 14:13–20)

A. Example Before the Nations (vv. 13–16)

13. Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them.

When *the Lord* stated his intention to destroy the Israelites for their rebellion at Mount Sinai, Moses interceded to the Lord on their behalf (Exodus 32:11–14). He noted at that time that if the Lord should carry out such an act, *the Egyptians* would question the Lord’s motivation for delivering his people from Egypt. They would conclude that he had brought them out from Egypt for the express purpose of destroying them (32:11, 12).

Moses then went on to cite the promise God had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob concerning their descendants. Destroying the people instead of multiplying them and blessing them would make God look faithless. As a result of Moses’ intercession, the Lord held back his judgment of the people (Exodus 32:13, 14).

Moses now makes a similar appeal before the Lord, serving once again as the Israelites’ intercessor. Even though Moses has become displeased at the people’s pattern of rebellion (Numbers 11:10–15), he cannot bear to see them suffer such a devastating punishment as the Lord proposes. But Moses knows that the Lord’s reputation is more important still.

14a. “And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it.

If the Lord completely destroys the Israelite nation, the Egyptians will not keep such news to themselves. The Egyptians will not know that Israel’s rebellion is the reason for the Lord’s destruction of his people. According to their misunderstanding of the spiritual world and their views of gods, a nation’s destruction or loss in battle reflects the weakness or apathy of the god or

gods of that nation. Those gods are thought to come to the aid of their worshippers if the gods possess power to defend their own reputations.

14b. “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.

The Lord’s reputation as the God of Israel has already been established. He is known for his presence *with his people*, for having *been seen face to face*, and for his special protection of his people by means of *a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night*.

The report that God has been seen face to face is noteworthy in light of God’s having forbidden Moses to see his face (Exodus 33:19–23; compare John 1:18). At the same time, Moses was allowed to see a portion of God’s glory (Exodus 33:21, 22; 34:4–6), and others besides Moses are described as having seen God (24:9, 10). The expression “face to face” is used of how the Lord spoke to all the Israelites (Deuteronomy 5:4) and of the special relationship that existed between the Lord and Moses (34:10). Thus, the phrase “face to face” is a way of describing the manner in which God reveals himself to his people at the time. His revelations occur strictly on his terms and are unlike anything that any other so-called god is able to do for their people.

15, 16. “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, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.’

News of such a massive destruction of the Israelites will quickly get around to the surrounding *nations*. Whatever reputation for power and glory *the Lord* has established for himself will be harmed, Moses asserts, if God proceeds to wipe his *people* from the face of the earth.

The Egyptians in particular, who experienced the pain of losing their firstborn sons (Exodus 12:29, 30), would no doubt take great pleasure in hearing of the demise of these people. The Egyptians will not see this as an expression of God’s righteous wrath and judgment; they will interpret it as a sign that he is unable to follow through on his intention to bring them into their own land.

Moreover, peoples such as those residing in Canaan will hear of this and reach the same conclusion. They too hear of the Lord’s great power and mighty acts, as Rahab in Jericho will later confess (Joshua 2:10, 11). Rahab will inform the two Israelite spies of this fact and how, because of who the Lord is and all he has done, “great fear of you has fallen on us” (2:9) and “our hearts melted in fear” (2:11). The witness of God’s people dying *in the wilderness* will give the nations the false idea that God is inept and callous.

B. Plea to Show Mercy (vv. 17–19)

17, 18a. “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: ‘The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion.

Instead of God’s demonstrating the greatness of his *strength* by judging the Israelites for their unbelief and disobedience, Moses now pleads with the Lord to manifest his strength by *abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion*. In so doing, Moses cites the Lord’s self-description at Mount Sinai (compare Exodus 34:6, 7). To ask that the Lord be merciful to a very wayward people is indeed a bold request! Moses’ intercessory pleading is reminiscent of Abraham’s concern for Sodom and Gomorrah (noted in lesson 1).

18b. “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

At the same time, Moses acknowledges the reality of God’s judgment upon *the guilty*. The impact of one generation’s *sin* on *the children ... to the third and fourth generation* is found within the second commandment (Exodus 20:4, 5). There it is contrasted with God’s mercy being displayed “to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (20:6).

Here at Kadesh Barnea, the mercy of God will actually be shown to the very next generation, to the children of those who have rebelled against the Lord and against Moses and Aaron. That next generation will be permitted to enter the promised land (Numbers 14:31).

19. “In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.”

Moses now comes to the gist of his intercession for the Israelites. He notes that the Lord has had a lot of experience pardoning them already; he did *forgive the sin of these people* again and again, from the moment *they left Egypt* up to the present. An early example of this forgiveness was when God responded to the Israelites’ complaints about lack of food—not by punishing them but instead by providing them with quail and manna (Exodus 16:9–12; see commentary in lesson 3).

C. Plan to Pardon Israel (v. 20)

20. The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked.”

The Lord responds favorably to Moses’ intercession. Yet stern consequences will follow. Pardon does not mean the removal of all consequences resulting from the people’s unbelief and disobedience. Yes, the nation will be spared the immediate destruction that the Lord intended to bring upon them. But the unbelieving generation, consisting of those individuals who have constantly grumbled against the Lord, will not be allowed to enter the promised land (Numbers 14:21–23).

The people had “tested” God 10 times (Numbers 14:22), which may be a way of saying that the number of times the Israelites had refused to trust God’s guidance and provision is completed. He will wait no longer to judge the unfaithful nation. That generation will be commanded to turn back and travel toward the Red Sea, from which their journey toward Canaan had begun (14:25). Eventually all of them, age 20 and older, will perish in the wilderness (14:29, 30). Only Caleb and Joshua will be spared to experience the thrill and the blessing of entering the promised land (14:30; contrast 20:7–12).

In place of that faithless generation, their children will enter the promised land. Ironically, these were the individuals whom the unbelieving ones claim would die in the wilderness (Numbers 14:3). Instead, the Lord brings their own words back to haunt them: “As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected” (14:31).

As a final solemn affirmation of the Lord’s judgment, the 10 spies who had spread the “bad report” among their fellow Israelites (13:32) “died of a plague before the Lord” (14:37). What should have been an occasion for celebration and triumph becomes a day of great sorrow.

Conclusion

A. The Importance of Intercession

From cover to cover, the Bible reveals the devastating consequences of sin. When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he clearly told them, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Genesis 2:16, 17). Many are familiar with Paul’s declaration in Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.” The climax of that death sentence is specified in Revelation. According to Revelation 22:15, sinners will be outside of the holy city, the New Jerusalem, much as the Israelites were left outside of the promised land because of their unbelief.

Consider this tragic irony: the 12 spies brought back samples of the fruit of the promised land, fruit that could have been enjoyed by them and their fellow Israelites had they possessed the faith that God would give them victory over the land’s inhabitants. But they rejected that fruit and ate instead the bitter fruit that results from choosing a path of unbelief and disobedience.

Intercessory prayer for the sins of others, such as that which Moses offered on behalf of the rebellious Israelites, remains a vital ministry for Christians today. The person who prays for another stands between Heaven and earth, calling on the Lord to intervene on behalf of a person in need of his mercy.

When the prophet Samuel gave what amounted to his farewell address, he said, “As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you” (1 Samuel 12:23). Though his leadership role was changing, Samuel’s ministry of intercession for God’s people remained the same. The apostle Paul also wrote of the importance of intercessory prayer: “I urge then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people” (1 Timothy 2:1). Paul then urged this to be done particularly for those in positions of authority (2:2). But intercessions can and ought to be carried out on behalf of anyone (possible exception: 1 John 5:16).

How many times have we heard someone describe a problem or a crisis that the person (or someone he or she knows) is going through and we respond by promising to pray for that individual in need? How many times have we then failed to follow through on that promise? To pray for another is one of the most sacred privileges a follower of Jesus has. We must keep our promise to pray!

There is so much in our hurting, broken world that needs to be covered by the prayers of faithful Christians. Instead of ceasing to pray, may we “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

B. Prayer

Father, forgive us for the times when we take the privilege of prayer for granted. Our world, our nation, and our cities and communities need our prayers as much as they ever have. Stir us to be a people of prayer—as individuals, as families, and as churches. We pray this in the name of the one who modeled prayer for us: Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Let us pray—now as never before!¹
