

NUMBERS

Lesson 16 - Chapter 14

Last week, beginning in Numbers 13 and moving on into Chapter 14, we began to look at the rebellion of the people of Israel, and what the consequences would be. And, the rebellion centered on the scouts of the 12 tribes going to Canaan to gather intelligence and bring it back to the decision makers (by the way, these scouts, themselves, were leaders so their reports were given with authority). Ten of the 12 scouts advised that to try and take the land from the various peoples who occupied it, would be suicide.

As word of the scouts' report circulated around the camp, the people began to panic. And, as happens when we let our guard down, the truth comes out: the people openly expressed their feelings that they wished the Lord had never redeemed them from Egypt in the first place. They preferred to stay in slavery to a cruel taskmaster in Egypt, than to have the opportunity to claim the inheritance God had set aside for them. Why? Because the task ahead seemed dangerous, and daunting, and unfamiliar. What was required of them was outside their comfort zone. In the leaders deciding not to enter the land, and the people agreeing with them, God saw this as rebellion against Him, of the worst sort.

RE-READ NUMBERS 14:1 - 12

In the first few verses we see something interesting that we'll get into a little later in the lesson. We see the people wailing and crying all night long, and though it doesn't say so, it was simply cultural and understood that they would have been crying out to God. Middle Eastern culture is so different than Western. Western Culture tends to be more reserved and emotions are outwardly limited to what is acceptable in our society. When we of the Western Church want to feel especially pious before God we'll attend church a little more often, maybe volunteer, talk about the Lord a little more, or go before our congregation and ask for prayer (not a thing wrong with any of that, by the way). In the Middle Eastern culture loud and public wailing and tears and flinging oneself on the ground is more the norm. When we look on the news about tragic events in Iraq and Israel and Afghanistan and we see people upset or in mourning we see all of what I just described and more going on. However culture is culture and sincerity is sincerity and they aren't necessarily connected; whether it's the actions of a Western or Eastern culture.

Thus we have the people of Israel wailing and crying out to God all night long, and at the very same moment they are grumbling and threatening rebellion against God's handpicked leader and ordained Mediator, Moses. And to boot they accuse God of not having their best interests

at heart; rather this whole exodus thing is just some cruel hoax being played on helpless folk.

I think we can say this much for the first 4 verses of Numbers 14: if you have a problem, or a worry, or even a bone to pick with God, these passages show us precisely the **WRONG** thing to do! And God's reaction to all this was going to be pretty predictable.

Verse 5 of Numbers 14 says that Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the congregation. No, they weren't worshipping the elders; they hit the dirt because they were expecting a **VERY** severe reaction from God. That, and they were in utter disbelief at what was happening before their eyes, such that their knees grew weak and they fell to the ground in utter despair. But, now enters Joshua and Caleb.

It is interesting that up to now Joshua apparently had been silent. It was actually a sign of mature leadership that he had let the others have their say, because he was already Moses' assistant and protege, so the people knew where he stood. Caleb had stated his position well, and Joshua had no reason to simply repeat it. But, now, as a team, Joshua and Caleb exhort the people to reconsider. They remind them how wonderful the land is; that if Israel will but obey God, trust Him, He will deliver the land over to them.

The pair turn the conclusions of the elders inside-out; the elders fear the people of Canaan, Joshua and Caleb say do **NOT** fear. The elders say disobey God, and stay out of the land, Joshua and Caleb say do **NOT** rebel against the Lord, go forward and take the land. In fact, they say that because the Lord has "removed the protection" from the Canaanites, that they are now "our prey". Pretty bold. **THIS** is the attitude that Our Father is seeking from us. Not foolish chutzpah based on a false sense of self-importance, or delusions of grandeur about our own abilities and strengths. Rather, absolute trust that when the Lord says, "He will", He will. That when the Lord says, don't worry, the game is fixed, the outcome is determined.....nothing can change that decree. However, the victorious outcome can, at times, be postponed out of fear and disbelief of God's followers. Or, the Lord will use other people or later generations to achieve His will, when the current one could have been blessed if only they had been obedient.

There have been some interesting Midrashim by the Rabbis of old about what is meant by Joshua's statement that the Canaanites' protection has departed from them. Was this just an expression? Or did it reflect part of an ancient belief system? The Hebrew word that is here usually rendered "protection", is **tsef**; and it literally means **shade**. Like sitting under the shade of a tree. It indeed does give the impression of an umbrella of protection....in this case over Canaan. But, because the sentence in its plain Hebrew meaning is "their protection (meaning Canaan's) is gone and **INSTEAD** the Lord is with us"..... the obvious intention is to indicate that the former protection over Canaan was of divine nature. But, that divine protection has been lifted and so now Canaan is vulnerable and ripe for the taking. And, this is where the Rabbis go off into discussions of Guardian Angels of nations.

Now, this in and of itself is a fascinating subject. Because, in actuality, the bible says very little about the nature of angels. We get hints of spiritual beings.....godly spiritual beings..... who are assigned by the Lord to watch over a nation, or carry a message to a nation, or even fight for a nation..... but no details whatsoever. So, most of what we observe today and think today about

angels and demons comes NOT from Scripture, but from the writings of Rabbis. Point being that what Joshua is getting at is that God is on the side of Israel, and that there IS no longer any kind of spiritual protection over Canaan...whether evil or good..... that can prevent Israel from succeeding.

Now, is there good Scriptural basis for making this the proper interpretation? That indeed Joshua meant that the protection of a real and existing spiritual being over Canaan had been withdrawn? Yes. Turn your Bibles to Daniel 10.

READ DANIEL 10:1-14

I'll pretty much just let this stand alone. Here we see Daniel directly told of a confrontation between a prince of Persia.....meaning a spiritual force (apparently one in opposition to God) that had hold of Persia.....and this angel of God who received the help of the mighty Archangel Michael..... to overcome the evil prince. So, the idea that there are angels assigned to watch over people and nations of people.....not just God's people but other people as well..... is directly spoken of in Scripture.

Therefore, when in Numbers 14 Joshua says that there was no more spiritual protection over the people of Canaan, indeed he meant that literally.

Joshua's response to the people, and his siding with Moses and Aaron, brought the people's anxieties and rage to the boiling point. And, they threatened to stone Joshua and Caleb.....and presumably Moses and Aaron as well. The people had made up their minds, and they really didn't want to hear any more sermons to the contrary.

The Lord Himself now comes to the rescue, by His presence coming down upon the Tent of Meeting, so that all Israel could see it. This seems to have put a stop to the mob's murderous intentions. And, the Lord says to Moses: that does it. I'm going to wipe them all out, and start all over again with you. From you, Moses, I'll create a people of faith. In fact, the nation I make out of you will be even larger than the 3 million Israelites now alive.....but who about to be dead at My hand.

RE-READ NUMBERS 14:13 - 24

There are a couple of very fundamental God-principles contained within these few short verse and we'll discuss them both. And the first one is contained in Moses plea to God not to destroy so many people.

Moses pleads with Yehoveh not to annihilate the guilty adults of Israel. And, he uses the same basic argument to talk God out of destroying essentially the entire Hebrew race, as he used back in the Golden Calf incident when God determined to do the same thing. And, the argument was that when all the people of the gentile nations heard about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob destroying the very people He had raised up, the nations of the world would determine it was because God was not ABLE to do what He had promised.....to give Israel

the land of Canaan. Therefore, they would think that the God of Israel was a rather impotent God.

God responds to Moses plea in verse 20, by saying that He will relent and do as Moses asked, and pardon the people of Israel. What we're dealing with here is the matter of repentance of God's people: how to obtain it, and God's reaction to it. This is certainly something that ought to interest every Believer in the God of Israel, and especially those who call upon the name of His son, Messiah Yeshua.

Unlike the religions of their neighbors, the rituals of Israel were not operate and effective merely by observing them. While the desired ritual can be carried out precisely by a priest, that does not equal automatic forgiveness. Rather forgiveness is another step, if you would. Believer and priest carry out the ritual as ordained, but God then takes the definitive action of accepting (or not) the ritual and granting pardon. This is something that has become lost time and time again within Judaism, yet at the same time if you asked a Jew that merely by performing a ritual was he forgiven, usually he would say, "no".

So forgiveness is a divine decision and is not brought about merely by observance of a ritual. Equally so it is not enough to only hope and pray for forgiveness, man must submit himself before God, agree that he has wronged the Almighty, and then present an honest and sincere inner resolve to avoid that sin from here forward.

The Psalms especially show us that confession and true repentance must be part and parcel with any advance towards God (usually by means of prayer) asking for pardon. If the heart is not involved, if the conscience is left out, then no level of sacrifices, and wailing, and bitter tears, and being prayed over by others, and pleading, and monetary payments or tithing, fasting, or any other physical act will matter before God.

So there must be both inner change and outer behavioral modification; remorse must always be followed with deeds. And the works and actions must be observed on two levels: the ceasing of evil works and the doing of good works.

Let me say that another way: when it comes to repentance and forgiveness man has his part and God has His. Man's part consists of far more than private prayer or walking an aisle for public recognition. God's part is to observe the man and make a judgment: is this man sincere enough to diligently exert effort to change his actions and have his heart changed? If the answer in God's perspective is yes, that forgiveness is granted; otherwise it is not and the man's status before God as being out of favor remains.

Note this as well: Moses could sway the Father. This is a great and awesome principle for the people of God to grasp. Intercessors and Mediators can curb divine retribution. The implications of this are larger than we have the time to explore, here, today. But, catch this: this means that God is interactive with those who He has set in charge of things. All things are not necessarily decided in advance. God may KNOW all things in advance, but His plans and intents can be altered and moved when certain righteous men approach Him and ask for mercy and grace.

As the greatest Mediator who ever lived once said, while He was in the throes of death on that cross: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." One has to assume that Yeshua knew full well that Yehoveh was about to condemn those who had put His son to death, and so He asked for mercy for them. Your intercessory prayer counts. You **can** influence God.....provided of course that what you ask is within His will. The good news is that we are not hapless Marionettes, being manipulated by the Creator, simply dancing to a long ago predetermined tune. Otherwise where is the "relationship"? When one is a robot and the other it's operator there is no relationship. There must be a give and take, a meaningful communication between the two parties, in order for there to be a true relationship and I wish I had understood that when I was a much younger man.

I don't know how far I want to get into it, but there is a second rather significant theological principle that is revealed and demonstrated here in this dialogue between Moses and Yehoveh; one that is rarely discussed in a modern Church setting. And, the rabbis call this the principle of ***vertical retribution***. The concept is this: that God may, in His will, move the punishment a father is due, to his offspring. Or he may take mercy due to a father, and give it to his offspring. And, we find this principle in play in Numbers 14 when we hear Moses say to God in verse 18: "***Adonai is slow to anger, rich in grace, forgiving offenses and crimes; yet not exonerating the guilty, but causing the negative effects of the parents' offenses to be experienced by their children, even by the 3rd and 4th generations.***"

In case it hasn't struck you, yet, as to what Moses is asking, he is asking God to transfer some or all of the retribution due the adult Israelites for their rebellion, to their children and their children's children. Say what!? Yes, that is the case.

This vertical retribution concept was around long before Israel and Moses. We find mention of it in ancient Hittite documents when King Mursilis is quoted as saying: "And so it is, the sins of the father have come upon the son; and so my father's sins have come upon me." The idea is that an innocent party bears the divine punishment in place of the guilty party; but the parties are of the same family, just different generations. We cannot get away from this principle in the Bible. Noah declares a curse upon his grandson, Canaan, for what Canaan's father, Ham, did. Vertical retribution. Ahijah the prophet says that the sins of Jeroboam will be placed upon the head of his son, Abijah (1Kings 14). Vertical retribution. We're told that the sins of Baasha will be visited upon his son Elah (1Kings 16). Vertical retribution. And, there are many more places in the Holy Scriptures that quote this same idea that the sins of the father will be visited upon his children, down to the 3rd and 4th generation.

In addition to punishment, though, mercy can also be passed forward. Listen to Psalm 103:17-18: "***But the Lord's steadfast love is for all eternity towards those who fear Him, and His beneficence is for the children's children of those who keep His covenant and remember to observe His precepts.***"

Now, part of this principle of Vertical Retribution is that under certain circumstances, punishment due to someone is essentially postponed to a later time. In Bible terms, it is postponed to a later generation. And, that certain circumstance that legally allows God to postpone the punishment is the repentance and contrition of the one who has committed the

sin. So, if a father commits a sin, and then repents, acknowledged his wrong-doing, and asks for mercy, then God may, in His mercy, pass that punishment forward to a later generation. Listen to the case of Ahab in 1Kings 21:29: ***"Because Ahab has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the disaster in his lifetime; I will bring the disaster upon his house in his son's time."***

So, what Moses is asking of God is to show mercy towards the adult parents who rebelled against Him, by postponing the punishment due to the guilty parties. And, God kind of meets Moses halfway; He says that He will not summarily destroy those guilty parents, but in a postponed retribution He also will NOT permit those who committed this great sin against Him to ever enter the Promised Land. Their sin is so great.....AND..... they have shown NO remorse or contrition, that they will have to bear at least some of the punishment. So, they will die natural deaths, in time, out in the desert wilderness, with the punishment being that they'll never personally inherit the Promised Land. Further, in verse 32, however, there is another penalty to be paid, and it is the offspring of these guilty adults who will also pay a price for their parents' rebellion. As it says: ***"But you (you adult Israelites), your carcasses will fall in the desert; and your children will wander about in the desert for 40 years bearing the consequences of your prostitutions until the desert eats up your carcasses."***

So, the punishment upon the guilty was both postponed and at least partially realized, and the remainder placed upon the innocent children of Israel.

Now, let me talk about one other interesting aspect of this principle and we'll move on. And, it resides in the word "pardon" or "forgive" which we find in verse 19. In that verse Moses says to God: "Please forgive (pardon) the offense of this people according to the greatness of your grace, just as you have borne with this people from Egypt until now." Pardon, or forgive, misses the full richness and impact of the original Hebrew word used here: ***Salach***. Moses requests "salach" from the Lord. And, though it generally does mean, "pardon" or "forgive", salach is a divine kind of pardon or forgiveness that is not available from a human. That is, we would never hear of a man pleading for salach from another man. Salach, by definition, is an act of God.

Further, the word ***salach*** carries with it the idea that what is pardoned is ONLY the PUNISHMENT for the sin, but the offense itself is NOT pardoned. Further, there is an element of healing and reconciliation involved in the meaning of the word salach.

So, when Moses asks Yehoveh for ***salach***, and God says, OK, I give you ***salach***, what is happening is that God is saying He will pardon the punishment for the rebellions (by means of postponing it), and He will allow a continued relationship between those people who committed the rebellion and Himself. Even more, the reconciliation contained with the essence of the word ***salach*** points to the continuation of the Covenant made on Mt. Sinai. What a great mercy is hidden in the meaning of all this! Further, in verse 19 when Moses asks that God would grant ***salach*** "according to your great kindness", the English word kindness really misses the mark. In Hebrew, Moses says, "according to your great ***chesed***". The significance is that ***chesed*** does NOT refer here to kindness, but rather to the God's steadfast commitment to the covenants and promises He has made to Israel. In fact, the Hebrew word ***chesed***, as used

here, is almost a direct synonym for the word **B'rit**, which means covenant. So, Moses is actually beseeching God's mercy "according to your great covenant".

So, the sum total of what Moses pled with God for (on behalf of rebellious Israel), and what God granted, was that God would divinely pardon the punishment that was due the Israelite adults for their rebellion, that God would allow reconciliation with the people of Israel, and even more, that God would continue to honor the covenants He had made with Israel and allow Israel to maintain their relationship with Him. It was understood, however (and hear this please), that the sin, the iniquity of the people for what they had done would **remain** against them. Israel would remain as guilty people, and that guilt would NEVER leave them. That they'd always have to answer for this offense before God.

Understand, this deal between God and Moses as regards this particular rebellion, is but an example of the principle of Vertical Retribution. And, the principles behind this example are demonstrated in several other Bible stories.

Now, I went through all that as a means to point out the difference between the kind of forgiveness or pardon available to mankind before the advent of Christ, as opposed to after. This long explanation was intended to demonstrate the difference between the type of **salach** (the pardon, the forgiveness) that comes from the Father through our Mediator Yeshua HaMashiach, and the type of **salach** (pardon, forgiveness) that came to Israel by means of their Mediator Moses. Under Moses, the relationship with God could continue, and God would postpone the punishment and not destroy the guilty; but the sin itself, and all the guilt associated with it, remained forever.

Under Christ, punishment is STILL due to guilty party; but the punishment due the guilty party is borne instead by Jesus; more importantly, the sin itself is ALSO pardoned. The iniquity and the guilt of the sin is forgotten and dissolved. This is one of the reasons that Paul, who understood well this principle of Vertical Retribution, called the New Covenant a better covenant. Because, the New Covenant did things the earlier covenant could not do, because it was not designed to do it. No earlier Covenant saved, because they weren't designed to save; they were designed for other purposes. And, forgiving BOTH the punishment AND the sin itself was one of the great features of the New Covenant.

So, resuming Numbers 14, God announces that while He will not immediately destroy the rebels, as a consequence for their great apostasy they will not ever be allowed to enter the Promised Land. And, the Lord defines the group that shall not enter as those 20 years of age and up. Why that group? Because, they were the army, the fighting men, but they had refused to fight. In verse 24, God makes an exception. He says that Caleb, one of the two scouts who said that Israel should stand on God's promises and immediately take on Canaan, will be allowed to go into the land. Later, God makes specific mention of Joshua, as another that will be permitted to enter Canaan, because he too argued for Israel to go forward against Canaan.

RE-READ NUMBERS 14:25-38

In verse 34 the Lord explains why it is that Israel will wander a total of 40 years in the Wilderness; 40 years represents one year of wandering for each day the scouts were gone scouting out the land (they were gone for 40 days). Really, what is being demonstrated here is the principle of measure for measure: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Proportional and symbolic justice.

But, Yehoveh had a special punishment for those scouts who came back with the bad report, and convinced the people of Israel to go with their way of thinking and to rebel against God; they died immediately from a divine plague. Exactly what that plague was, we're not told.

You would think that the enormity of the tragedy of this situation.....along with all its consequences.....would have convinced the people of Israel that God is Almighty, He is sovereign, and He means what He says. But, allow me to re-read to you the last few verses of this chapter, which showed just how the people reacted to God's judgment upon them.

READ NUMBERS 14:39 - 45

Amazing. The peoples' response to all this is that they're going to continue to ignore what God has determined, and go ahead and do, now, what they should have done before: march on Canaan.

But, there's a problem. God didn't give them choice A, B, or C. God didn't give them the possibility of realizing their mistake, and being able to get out of the consequences He has pronounced, by NOW going ahead into the Promised Land. Moses knew full well this was not to be. So, Moses told the people not to do this. And, he said, you're certainly not taking the Ark of the Covenant with you, and neither am I going with you. The effect of neither the Ark nor Moses leading them meant that neither God's presence nor His Mediator would be with those who planned to march on Canaan.

The people basically said, who cares. And, then ignored Moses, and they ignored Yehoveh, and they lit out for Canaan on their own. The result was that the Amelikes and the Canaanites attacked this ill-prepared group of Israelites, crushing them.

Wow, what a lesson. Our parents, or our bosses or those in authority may pronounce a punishment upon us for our offenses against them, and we just might sweet-talk our way around it. We just might agree to go ahead and do what we should have done in the first place, after we found out just how uncomfortable the consequences were going to be, and then everything will be fine. In fact, within families, and organizations, even in our justice system, we'll see that very thing happen. But, it doesn't work that way with God.

He is not a man that He should change. It's one thing to go forward with God's blessing, in His timing, to attack a worthy task. It's quite another to approach that same task when God has deemed that it's time has passed, and He no longer is behind it...or has turned the task over to someone else..... for whatever reason.

God gives us windows of opportunity, and then they close. The timing is always His, not ours. How often we say, yes God, but not right now.....how about later? Right now really isn't good for me. It is foolishness to try and pry that window open at a later date, even though we might achieve what appears to be some small measure of success. More than likely, though, we will be utterly defeated, as were these Israelites who would not submit to God. Israelites who still had not learned to take God seriously. And, they paid a terrible price for it.

Next week we'll begin Numbers chapter 15.