

September 28, 2025

REBELLION AND JUDGMENT: NUMBERS 14:11-25

TEACHER'S NOTE: EACH QUARTER, THE ETB CURRICULUM SETS ASIDE ONE LESSON TO BE EXPLICITLY EVANGELISTIC. THIS WEEK'S LESSON IS THAT LESSON.

Introductory Activity (created by ChatGPT)

"In 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte led over 600,000 troops into Russia, confident of an easy victory. At first, everything went well — they won battles and pushed forward. But when they finally reached Moscow, they found it nearly deserted and burned by the Russians. Napoleon had counted on taking shelter and supplies for the winter, but there was nothing there.

Instead of turning back early, he stayed too long. By the time they retreated, winter had set in. The freezing cold, hunger, and exhaustion wiped out almost his entire army. Fewer than 100,000 soldiers made it back to France. Napoleon's hesitation — his choice not to retreat when he could — cost him dearly.

Connection: Like Napoleon, the Israelites were right on the edge of their "victory" moment — they could have entered the land and received God's promise. But their refusal to trust Him led to disaster. They lost the chance to enter for 40 years, and most of that generation never saw the Promised Land."

Transition: If you remember last week's lesson, Moses sent spies into the land to gather information to do the work of conquering the land and to bring back proof of God's great promises. Instead of bringing back information to help the nation follow God and take the land, ten of the spies proclaimed that there was no way the Israelites could conquer the people living there. In the first four verses of chapter 14, the people cry out in desperation. "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to die by the sword? Our wives and children will become plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ So they said to one another, "Let's appoint a leader and go back to Egypt." In response, Moses and Aaron fell on their faces and Joshua and Caleb began to encourage the people to follow the Lord. The people threatened to stone them in response. In verse 10, "the Lord appeared to all the Israelites at the tent of meeting." We are going to pick up in verse 11 and see what the Lord had to say about the situation. As we examine the conversation between the Lord and Moses, we are going to see that there are consequences for sin, but the Lord is also faithful to show love in the midst of discipline.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Numbers* (Preaching)
- *Exalting Jesus in Numbers* (Exalting)
- *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Numbers* (TOTC)
- *Numbers* (Harrison)
- *New American Commentary: Numbers* (NAC)

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

Read (or have someone read) Numbers **14:11-16**.

Explain: In our passage today, we see part of the conversation between God and Moses. First God speaks (vv. 11-12). Second, Moses prays (vv. 13-19). Third, the Lord speaks again (vv. 20-25). In verses 11-16, God declares their sinful actions. The Lord says that the people “despise” Him. That is a strong statement. “The word despise suggests deep contempt for someone.” (ETB LG, 50) Sam Crouch asks and answers the question we might be asking. He writes, “How did the Israelites despise God? Through their whining, complaining, disobeying, blaming, and ignoring God.” (ETBC, 42) God Himself cites their refusal to trust Him despite the ample evidence of His trustworthiness. He points to “all the signs [he had] performed among them.” Let’s back up a second and recall some of those ourselves.

Discuss: What are some of the great signs God had given to demonstrate His trustworthiness?

Explain: If we recall the “big” signs, we might look back two years prior, when He had defeated the false “gods” of the Egyptians through the ten plagues. We might also recall His mighty act of parting the Red Sea. He also provided manna daily to feed the nation. He had provided water in the desert on their journey from Egypt to Sinai. With their bellies full of that day’s Manna, they declare that God is not trustworthy enough to give them the land. In light of all the great signs that God had performed, Duguid asks the rhetorical question, “Does God do one dramatic series of miracles in the lives of his people only to fail at the last hurdle, leaving them tantalizingly short of what he promised? That doesn’t make sense?” (Preaching, 172) Before we get too down on the Israelites, we should remember that we, too, can refuse to follow the Lord in spite of his past demonstrations of trustworthiness.

Discuss: What are some signs you can point to that demonstrate that God is trustworthy and powerful to carry out His promises? (Answers might be personal examples of God’s faithfulness, or they might be examples from the Bible.)

Explain: The most revealing example of God’s faithfulness to fulfill His promises is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In Genesis 3:15, the Lord made a promise to the serpent and to Adam and Eve that He would deal with the problem of sin. The problem of sin is a very sticky problem because the solution would require the sacrifice of a sinless individual. In all of history, only one person fit that bill. Jesus, the holy God-man, came to earth to deal with sin. He did so by dying for humanity and taking responsibility for all of sin and sinfulness. God was faithful and powerful to fulfill His promise to Adam and Eve. Like the Israelites should have done, we can look back and see ample reasons to trust the Lord.

God promised the land, “all they had to do was receive it as a gift. Nonetheless, any major military undertaking requires good intelligence so that the best strategy can be evaluated. God’s promise did not eliminate the need for responsible action.” (Preaching, 167)

Rebellion and Judgment: Numbers 14:11-25

This passage reveals that they refused to do so, and they faced the consequences of their sin. In verse 12, God announces his plan to Moses. These people were so stubborn and despised God to such an extent that God declared that He would wipe out the entire nation and begin again with Moses.

Discuss: How do you feel about God's pronouncement to wipe out all of the people?

Explain: While we look at the Lord's pronouncement with "modern enlightened" eyes and possibly question the just-ness of God's declaration, we should remember that God is inherently just. Therefore, any decision made by the Lord is just. Some might see this as circular reasoning, but it is true based on the revelation of God's character in the whole of Scripture. Therefore, when Moses enters the conversation to dissuade God from that course of action, he is not doing so because he questions the Lord's judgment. Instead, Moses asks the Lord to relent based on the Lord's reputation among the nations.

Reread verses 13-16

Explain: Moses knows that if God wipes out the Israelites, word will get back to Egypt. At that point, they would begin to "spin" the news to make themselves look good. Moses argued that they would spread the word that the God who defeated them was unable to care for His people. "The Lord of Sinai was already known and feared by those who had heard about the defeat of the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus...[Moses] was anxious to protect the Lord from embarrassment because of the default by His people." (Harrison, 213) The Lord's judgment would be just, but because the people refused to follow him and faced his judgment, *they* would make him look bad among the nations. Moses was concerned with the Lord's reputation.

To put it plainly: 1) The Lord's Judgment would be just, 2) people who do not understand the Lord and His holiness would ridicule Him, and 3) Moses did not want to see that happen.

While our situation might be different, we, too, should be concerned with God's reputation.

Discuss: What are some actions we can take or not take that will enhance the Lord's reputation among those around us?

Explain: Our Christlike actions, done in the name of the Lord, will bolster His reputation. Our actions that are not Christlike will damage His reputation, particularly among those who do not know or understand the Lord.

Summarize Transition: In this first interaction between God and Moses, we see God's demand for right actions and His justice. Moses did not want the Lord's reputation to be harmed because of the people's failure to follow Him. In the next passage, Moses is going to present another reason for God to relent.

Notes:

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

Read (or have someone read) Numbers 14:17-19.

Explain: Moses begins this second part of his appeal with the words "So, now." "So now often occurs when speakers are getting to the 'bottom line' of what they wish to say." (ETB LG, 52) If we want to track Moses' argument, we will see that in verses 13-16, he said that the nations would declare God powerless to care for the people if He judged them. Here, he states that God will show His power by relenting. To demonstrate, he paraphrases God's works back to Him. In Exodus 20, the Lord gave the first and second command to refrain from idol worship. There, He used language similar to Moses' in Numbers 14 (Exodus 20:4-5). He reminds God of His necessary justice, but he also reminds the Lord of His great mercy. In essence, Moses is saying, "Any lesser god could destroy people, but the Almighty God is powerful enough to forgive and restore." (ETBC, 45) God is a God of justice and mercy, and He balances those perfectly. In this case, Moses argues that it would be a greater display of God's power to forgive than to destroy. He was praying with the tension of God's character in mind.

Application: Duguid reminds us, "We should also pray with awareness of God's nature as a God of both justice and mercy. We often tend to reduce God to our size in one direction or the other. Either we conceive in our minds a God who is all justice, ready to condemn us for the least infraction and uncaring about the fate of those whom he created, or conversely (and more commonly in our culture) we think of God as being all love and compassion, easily placated by a cursory nod from us in his direction while we continue to live our lives in rebellion against him." (Preaching, 175)

Explain: Israel was in a weird place emotionally and spiritually. They wanted the blessings of God, but they refused to follow God in a way that would bring about those blessings. We might take a moment to consider the relationship between God and the people. At Sinai, the Lord established a covenant with the people. He would bless them with His presence and all that comes with His presence, and they would worship Him as He outlined in the Law of Moses. The covenant was the basis of Israel's existence and the reason they could inherit the land. By refusing to follow the Lord into the Promised Land, they were defaulting on their responsibilities as partners in the covenant. Harrison writes, "The Israelites seem to have gained the impression that the Sinai covenant was one of privilege for them without any responsibilities." (Harrison, 212) Again, God had every right to judge the people, but Moses appeals to God's faithful love. The word translated faithful love "*hesed*, [meaning] the Lord's covenantal faithfulness to his people." (Preaching, 174) Moses is not asking God to negate His justice, but he is asking God to place it in subjugation to His love at this time.

Application: In modern, Western culture, many can find themselves in a similarly confused place as Israel. We can see this in several types of people

Notes:

- The unbeliever who does not understand God's holiness and justice. People in this position do not understand the necessity of God to judge sin and sinfulness. They do not understand this for two reasons. 1) They do not understand the problem of sin or sin's existence. 2) They lean too far toward the love of God on the spectrum of His love and justice.
- The believer who falls into sin can also face a confused situation. 1) Those who sin and do not see a need for repentance focus too much on the love of God and forget His justice. 2) Those who sin and do not think the Lord can forgive them focus too much on the justice of God.

Explain: The reality is, we must balance the love and justice of God. Moreover, we must do so in light of the cross. God's justice requires judgment for sin and sinfulness. God's love satisfied that need for justice through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Summarize and Transition: In Christ, God functions in the manner in which Moses requested in Numbers 14. He proves His power and His love for mankind by taking on the sins of mankind. The word Moses uses for forgiveness in Numbers 14: "means 'to take, carry, or bear.' It is the picture of bearing the penalty of God's punishment." (ETBC, 46) That is what Christ did on the cross. Let's look at how God responds to Moses' plea in our next passage.

3. FUTURE CONSEQUENCES (NUMBERS 14:20-24)

Read or have someone read Numbers 14:20-24

Explain: In this passage, we see God balance his love and justice. Firstly, God said that He "pardoned" the people in response to Moses' words. We should be careful here and not equate God's forgiveness in this passage with a general forgiveness of their sinfulness. He is speaking only of their decision to disobey His command to enter the land. The Lord is expressing His decision not to follow through on the declaration made in verse 12 to wipe out the people. This is a demonstration of his faithful, covenant love for the nation. Nevertheless, God's justice cannot be denied. Harrison explains, "Even though God had thus been faithful to His essential Being. He also needed, as a 'jealous' God, to maintain his own rights under the covenant provisions. Accordingly, a sentence of gradual extermination was passed." (Harrison, 215) Those adults who had seen God's mighty acts in Egypt and the wilderness would not enter into the Promised Land. (See the Notes Box for any questions that might arise regarding the phrase "have tested me these ten times and did not obey me.") Practically, this means that the vast majority of people would die while wandering in the wilderness. They *would* not suffer immediate death because of their refusal to follow the Lord, but they forfeited the blessing of God. Moreover, while their children and grandchildren *would* receive the land, they too would suffer because of their parents' decision. If we want to consider their lives

Notes:

"The phraseology for forgiveness here, *sālaḥṭi kīdbārekā*, 'I have forgiven [them] according to your word,' utilizes the normal verb for forgiving or pardoning sin or the sinner; but in context it does not carry the meaning of total absolution from sin." (NAC, 232)

Note on "10 times"

"Some scholars understand **ten times** figuratively, describing the people's persistent sin. Others suggest God had specific incidents in mind." (ETBLG, 53)

"Though the Babylonian Talmud delineated ten specific occasions of Israelite sedition, the number probably was used figuratively and in contrast to the ten plagues that God brought against the Egyptians. Indeed those were the ten signs by which their deliverance and redemption was accomplished." (NAC, 232-233)

for a moment, we might see how they suffered. As children, they would not have been involved in the fighting to take the land under Moses' leadership. They also would have spent the majority of their lives living peacefully in the land. However, the decisions by their parents meant they would spend most of their lives wondering, and it would be their and their children's responsibility to fight the battles required 40 years later. The decision by their parents not to follow the Lord had ramifications for later generations.

Application: The Lord requires that sin be judged. That is the predicament of every person. However, the work of God makes it possible for men and women to address their sin problem. A person who is convicted by the Holy Spirit can confess their sin to the Lord and profess faith in Jesus, who died for their sins, and will receive forgiveness for their sins. The forgiveness of the Lord will ensure they do not face eternal punishment for their sins.

Those who come to faith in Christ still face the temptation to sin. Sometimes Christians will sin. The Lord is faithful to forgive them, like He did with the Israelites. However, sins have consequences. Some of those consequences are more dire than others, and some have ramifications that outlive the believer.

Summarize and Transition: The Lord responded to Moses in a way that balanced his justice and love. The people received God's mercy, but they also experienced the consequences of their poor decision. Their dire situation was concluded, but the problem of sin remains, and every woman faces a dire situation. The decision to follow or not follow Christ has eternal consequences that must be addressed through a personal decision.

CONCLUDE

The French army, led by Napoleon, faced the consequences of poor decision-making by their leader. The Israelites made their own decision and faced the consequences. The words of their leader, Moses, led to a lessening but not total removal of those consequences. We can be challenged to pray like Moses. Our prayers cannot cause God to forgive someone. However, in the mystery of God's sovereignty, our prayers can lead to God's divine intervention in the lives of others.

Guide the group to page 45 of their Personal Study Guide and ask the first question on the page. "Moses was faithful in interceding for God's people. How might your Bible study group strengthen its prayer ministry?" (EBT PSG, 45)

Like the Israelites, we are all subject to the pressure of others to disobey the Lord. The unfaithful spies led the nation into disobedience. Only Joshua and Caleb stood firm under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Verse 24 tells us that Calen had a different spirit and remained loyal. Harrison writes, "[He was] controlled by a different form of motivation...total obedience to the Lord." (Harrison, 215) We should have the same motivation.

Ask the second question on page 45 of the PSG. "What can you do to prepare yourself to remain faithful to God when the crowd around you wants to do the opposite?" (ETB PSG, 45)

Close in prayer