

God Forgives

Bible Background • NUMBERS 14:10–23

Printed Text • NUMBERS 14:10–20 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 103:1–14

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **COMPREHEND** the significance of Moses' intercession for the people of Israel, **REPENT** of rebelling against God's plans and not trusting God's strength, and **ASK** for forgiveness for our sins.

In Focus

Even after counseling, Carla and her husband, Al, decided to divorce after twentythree years of marriage. Their teenage children, Nikki and George, wanted their parents to work out their issues and blamed their mother. Carla felt it was time to tell them the truth about why she was divorcing their father.

As Carla began to say why they were divorcing, George interrupted her. "We already know, Mom. You are so busy working at your fancy news anchor job. You are never home. Dad always made time to attend our school activities but not you."

"George, I am so sorry that I've worked so many hours. About six years ago, I discovered your father was having an affair. They have four-year-old twin boys. I tried to work it out with him, but he wants to be with her. Plus, your father spent all the money in your college saving accounts. So I've been working extra hard to replenish that money. Please forgive me for not always being there, and try to forgive your father." George hugged his mother. "Mom, I'm sorry. I didn't know the truth. I understand and forgive you. But it may take some time for me to forgive Dad."

Nikki shrugged her shoulders, "I don't care. I will never forgive you. I may even ask Dad if I can live with him."

How difficult do you find it to forgive others whom you love but have wronged you?

Keep in Mind

"In keeping with your magnificent, unfailing love, please pardon the sins of this people, just as you have forgiven them ever since they left Egypt" (Numbers 14:19, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Pestilence (v. 12) *deber* (Heb.) — A divine judgment of infestation with disease or pests

B. Pardon (v. 19) *salach* (Heb.) — Forgiveness from God

Say It Correctly

Manna. MAN-uh.

Jochebed. JAH-cuh-bed.

Elim. EE-lim.

KJV

Numbers 14:10 But all the congregation bade stone them with stones. And the glory of the LORD appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel.¹¹ And the LORD said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?

12 I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they.

13 And Moses said unto the LORD, Then the Egyptians shall hear it, (for thou broughtest up this people in thy might from among them;)

14 And they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land: for they have heard that thou LORD art among this people, that thou LORD art seen face to face, and that thy cloud standeth over them, and that thou goest before them, by day time in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night.

15 Now if thou shalt kill all this people as one man, then the nations which have heard the fame of thee will speak, saying,

16 Because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land which he sware unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness.

17 And now, I beseech thee, let the power of my lord be great, according as thou hast spoken, saying,

18 The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.

19 Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.

20 And the LORD said, I have pardoned according to thy word:

NLT

Numbers 14:10 But the whole community began to talk about stoning Joshua and Caleb. Then the glorious presence of the LORD appeared to all the Israelites at the Tabernacle.¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? Will they never believe me, even after all the miraculous signs I have done among them?”

12 I will disown them and destroy them with a plague. Then I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they are!”

13 But Moses objected. “What will the Egyptians think when they hear about it?” he asked the LORD. “They know full well the power you displayed in rescuing your people from Egypt.

14 Now if you destroy them, the Egyptians will send a report to the inhabitants of this land, who have already heard that you live among your people. They know LORD, that you have appeared to your people face to face and that your pillar of cloud hovers over them. They know that you go before them in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

15 Now if you slaughter all these people with a single blow, the nations that have heard of your fame will say,

16 ‘The LORD was not able to bring them into the land he swore to give them, so he killed them in the wilderness.’

17 Please, Lord, prove that your power is as great as you have claimed. For you said,

18 ‘The LORD is slow to anger and filled with unfailing love, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion. But he does not excuse the guilty. He lays the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations.’

19 In keeping with your magnificent, unfailing love, please pardon the sins of this people, just as you have forgiven them ever since they left Egypt.”

20 Then the LORD said, “I will pardon them as you have requested.

The People, Places, and Times

Numbers. The book of Numbers is the fourth book out of five that compose the Pentateuch. It gives us an account of Israel’s journey from Mount Sinai to the plains of Moab on the border of Canaan, the Promised Land. The name of this book does not adequately communicate the book’s actual theme of faithfulness of God and the faithlessness of God’s people. The English name (taken from the Greek translation) refers to the fact that the book begins and ends with censuses of God’s people. In Hebrew, however, Numbers is called Bemidbar (beh-MEED-bar), “in the wilderness.” The Hebrew title is apt because it is actually about a familiar cast of characters (Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Caleb, and Joshua) who lead the Israelites through the wilderness for forty years.

Background

God had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 14). He provided all their needs as they journeyed toward Canaan. But before they entered Canaan, God had to prepare the people first. God had requirements the people had to agree to follow. So while the Israelites were camped at Mount Sinai for a year, they received all the laws and requirements needed to live as a new nation in a new land. All the people agreed to fully obey all God had commanded.

Before they could depart from Mount Sinai, Moses was commanded by the Lord to take a census of all the people. They had to determine how many men were fit for military duty, as they would soon encounter enemies in Canaan (Numbers 1–4). According to God’s command, Moses divided the men into various assignments for military responsibilities and what they would carry. The Lord also wanted the people to remain pure, so strict guidelines were given to Moses (Numbers 5:1–10:10). Moreover, Moses also had to oversee the dedication and consecration of the tabernacle and all its furnishings.

The Israelites set out for the Promised Land, and that is when the people started complaining. Their complaints included: (1) their general misfortunes (11:1), (2) lack of meat (v. 4), (3) jealousy of Moses’ authority (12:1–16), and (4) fear of battle against the men who inhabited the Promised Land (13:1–14:4).

How should we respond to God’s gracious acts of love and forgiveness?

At-A-Glance

1. The Israelites’ Rebellion (Numbers 14:10–12)
2. Moses’ Intercession (vv. 13–19)
3. God’s Response (v. 20)

In Depth

1. The Israelites’ Rebellion (Numbers 14:10–12)

Caleb and Joshua believed the Israelites would be able to defeat all the Canaanite armies. However, unbelief and fear spread among the people. How often do we doubt God’s promises? No one believed Caleb’s report. Everyone desired to go back to Egypt (14:4). Even after all God had done, they still did not trust Him. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces and interceded on behalf of the Israelites (v. 5). Caleb and Joshua tried to convince the Israelites to trust God and go possess the land. The Israelites responded with death threats (v. 10). Then suddenly, “the glory of the LORD appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation.” When we pray, God responds.

God spoke to Moses about the transgressions of the Israelites (v. 11). His questions reveal He has become impatient with the Israelites’ refusal to trust in His power to defeat their enemies and give them the Promised

Land. They have witnessed the signs of His power in sending the plagues upon the Egyptians, parting the Red Sea, providing manna from heaven, and more, but they still doubt. So God decides to enact a final judgment against the people, then start over with Moses and create people faithful to Him. We cannot expect God to continually allow us to rebel and not change.

How does one compare and contrast God's love versus God's justice?

2. Moses' Intercession (vv. 13–19)

Moses responds to God by arguing that it is important for Him to protect His reputation, especially among the Egyptians. If they realize God has removed His protection from the Israelites, He would suffer disgrace. The other nations, who know of His love for Israel and powerful presence that dwells with them, would now say God killed the Israelites because He was not able to fulfill His promise for them to possess the Land (14:15–16).

As Moses interceded for the Israelites, he quoted God's own description of Himself back to God. Numbers 14:18 is quoted from Exodus 34:6–7, when He revealed Himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In spite of the Israelites' rebellion, Moses pleads for God to show patience, love, forgiveness, discipline, and mercy. Even today, we each need to ask God to do the same for us. Our sins not only affect our lives but those we love as well as others.

When people harm you, do you pray for them? Why or why not?

3. God's Response (v. 20)

God's response to the prayers of Moses and Aaron is to pardon the Israelites. But He also disciplines the people so they wander in the wilderness forty years and do not enter the Promised Land. We must recognize that God hears our prayers and is willing to forgive us. But there are consequences for our sins. God loves us enough to discipline us, so we can learn from our mistakes and strive to live holy and be faithful servants of God (cf. Hebrews 12:6).

How often do you pray, repent, and seek forgiveness from God?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why was God impatient with the Israelites (Numbers 14:11–12)? What action was God going to take against the Israelites?
2. What characteristics of God are mentioned (v. 18)?
3. What reasoning did Moses give to God for forgiving the iniquities of the Israelites (v. 19)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Moses struggled as the leader of the rebellious people. What impact did his prayers make in the lives of the people? What impact have you seen in the lives of people you have prayed for?
2. How can your sins draw others away from God? How can you seek reconciliation with those you have harmed?
3. Often we are surprised by God's plans for our lives. How can we rely on our faith that God will accomplish His will for our lives?

Liberating Lesson

Moses believed intercession on behalf of the rebellious Israelites would make a difference in their lives. He understood that God is loving, merciful, and forgiving. God hears our prayers and will respond. So when we fail to obey God's commands, we can pray and ask Him to forgive us. We also should take the time to pray for others, including our communities and nation. Everything we do has a direct or indirect impact on someone's life. So when we are wounded by another person, we must forgive them just as God forgives us.

Forgiving those who have harmed us can prove difficult sometimes. For example, how can a young man forgive a police officer who shot him in the back due to mistaken identity? How can an innocent man forgive the justice system that gave him a life sentence in prison, only to realize twenty-five years later it was a wrongful conviction? The people's water in Flint, Michigan, was poisoned because of the actions of city officials in 2014, so many of them now have serious illnesses, and the water is still not drinkable. No matter the circumstances we must forgive and pray for those who have harmed us, even while we trust God to bring justice. God is just, so we can believe He will make sure the people responsible for harming us are held accountable. It frees us to live a life of peace and fulfill God's plans.

Application for Activation

This week take some quiet time in prayer to confess all your sins of thoughts, words, and deeds and ask God to reveal to you any other hidden sins so you can repent. Second, pray for your family and friends. Ask God to help you forgive any of them who have harmed you in any way. Pray for God to change their lives and bless them. And third, pray for your church, community, and nation. All our leaders need us to pray for them, whether we agree with their direction or not. Our communities and nation will only change when we intercede for God to convict those who are doing wrong to repent and do what is morally and spiritually right. Then the world will be a better place.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Numbers 14:10–20 10 But all the congregation bade stone them with stones. And the glory of the LORD appeared in the tabernacle of the congregation before all the children of Israel.

In their journey to the Promised Land, the people of Israel reached Kadesh Barnea (Deuteronomy 1:19). Upon the Lord's instruction, Moses sent spies to explore the land and come with a report that would give them the certainty of the promises of God. These were twelve leaders from each tribe of Israel sent to survey Canaan and give a report. Upon returning from spying the land, these men did not honor the Lord with their report. Out of their unbelief, they held the view that the Israelites could not overcome their Canaanite enemies. Moses and Aaron, the leaders, were in the minority, supported only by Joshua and Caleb, the only two spies who held a dissenting view. They had seen the scene depicted by the ten other spies, but they believed God to fulfill His promises by giving them the land. But the ten spies, who were among the leaders of their tribes (13:1–3), succeeded in convincing the entire congregation to follow their views. In their rebellion against the will of God, they decided to stone the leaders God appointed and follow their own course and probably return to Egypt. At the very moment when the lives of Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb were threatened, the Lord stepped in. The glory of the Lord describes the fire and cloud that descended on the tabernacle and is the visible manifestation of God's presence. It may have appeared at the door of the tabernacle or filled the tabernacle and

surrounded it for all to see. In any case, it prevented the people from attacking Moses and Aaron and was an occasion for God to speak to Moses.

11 And the LORD said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?

Repeatedly throughout the journey of the people in the wilderness, there was constantly a rebellious attitude. The children of Israel complain about hardships, and Aaron and Miriam oppose Moses (Numbers 11–12). The golden calf account (Exodus 32) describes to what extent the people could go in their rebellious attitude toward God.

Their attitude can hardly be understood in light of what the Lord had performed to show them who He is and assures them of His faithfulness in fulfilling His promises. All the signs He has performed in Egypt with the ten plagues, crossing the Red Sea, and later providing food and water during their wilderness journey were convincing proof of the Lord's presence with His people, which other nations heard of and were frightened. A sign is something that directs to someone or something beyond itself. The refusal to trust the Lord in spite of these signs is unbelief, and it brings disobedience, which in turn brings dire consequences.

12 I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they.

A pestilence is a divine judgment destroying either human or animal life. It is contrasted with the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 9:3–4). While the plague spared some lives, the pestilence was intended for utter destruction. The Lord not only suggests to Moses that He will not only destroy the people entirely but also disinherit or drive them out. The word used for disinherit (Heb. horish, ho-RISH) is the reverse of the related word yarash (Heb. ya-RASH, to inherit), and indicates that Israel will no longer be the inheritance of God. God's promise to provide an inheritance was an oath, a covenant He made with Abraham and renewed it with Isaac and Jacob. The Lord will forever cling to His covenant toward Israel, but He must also have a faithful covenant keeper.

When there is sin or rebellion calling for God's wrath, He expects people who will intercede in favor of the offenders. The Lord desires candidates who will stand in the gap and prevent Him from carrying on with His judgment of destruction (Ezekiel 22:30). God is asking Moses in this case—as in the golden calf situation—to intercede on behalf of the people. It indicates that God-directed intercession can stop divine judgment; in this case, God's desire to show mercy is greater than His desire to judge (James 2:13). The Lord proposes to Moses that He can establish a greater and mightier nation than Israel. While God offered the possession of the land to Israel through an oath, it was proposed to Moses through a question. The great destruction of the people God contemplated indicates the seriousness of rebellion.

13 And Moses said unto the LORD, Then the Egyptians shall hear it, (for thou broughtest up this people in thy might from among them;) 14 And they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land: for they have heard that thou LORD art among this people, that thou LORD art seen face to face, and that thy cloud standeth over them, and that thou goest before them, by day time in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night.

Moses responds to the challenge and stands in the gap for the Israelites, reminding God that His great reputation is at stake. The Egyptians who have witnessed the great power and might of God during the deliverance of the people of Israel will hear of it. They know the close relationship between the Lord and His people. Word will spread, and the Egyptians will inform the Canaanites. They were also aware of the visible manifestation of God by the pillar of cloud and fire over the people in the wilderness. Unlike the idols of the nations, the God of Israel was close to His people with the visible sign of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He was a personal God for them, guiding them and protecting them against their enemies, and it resulted in creating a fear of the Israelites from other nations.

15 Now if thou shalt kill all this people as one man, then the nations which have heard the fame of thee will speak, saying, 16 Because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land which he swore unto them, therefore he hath slain them in the wilderness.

God was suggesting the death of not only a few people that were involved in the rebellion but all the Israelites. Moses, therefore, continues his plea, asking the Lord not to destroy the people entirely. The phrase “as one man” echoes “all the congregation” and all the children of Israel (v. 10) to indicate that all the people heeded the word of the ten spies who disregarded the promises of God except four people: Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb.

Again the fame of the Lord was a concern for Moses. It is important that Christians today demonstrate the same concern about the fame and the name of God. The psalmist calls on God’s people to give glory to His name (Psalm 115:1). God’s fame and name are sacred and holy. We can never compare who we are with the glory of God. True intercessors are consumed with God’s glory. Moses suggests the nations will not credit the destruction of the people on God’s anger but on His inability to fulfill His promises by leading them to Canaan. The perpetuity of the covenant between the Lord and His people is expressed in pointing to the sun, the moon, and the stars (Jeremiah 31:35–36). If these luminaries could stop their operation, only then Israel would cease to be a nation before the Lord.

17 And now, I beseech thee, let the power of my lord be great, according as thou hast spoken, saying, 18 The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.

After he has presented the consequences of the divine judgment of complete annihilation of the people of Israel to the Lord, Moses now pleads for the Lord to manifest His compassionate and forgiving character. The power Moses calls on here is the power to prevent the destruction, stemming out of God’s faithfulness and patience. The intent of Moses, in this case, is to call on God’s heart of mercy and forgiveness. The word for mercy is *chesed* (Heb. KHEH-sed), which in this context can contain the idea of a prior relationship and loyalty between God and humankind, which becomes the hope for Israel against destruction. In this instance, Moses recalls God’s own proclamation of His character (Exodus 34:6–7). Some scholars have noted verse 18 is probably a liturgical confession. The confession is formatted at different places making abstraction of some phrases to suit the occasion. Some scholars argue that God was not canceling the judgment but simply delaying it in His mercy with the covenant faithfulness in view. God does not consider a guilty person to be innocent, but God can choose to delay or redistribute His judgment. God’s judgment includes the third and fourth generations of children who would need to be born to the fathers who created the iniquity. Therefore, God is not killing all of them right away because the future generations have not been born.

19 Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.

Moses asks the Lord to “pardon” (Heb. *salakh*, saw-LAKH) the people. When this word is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is often in the context of presenting an offering while confessing and repenting of sin. In doing these, one invites God’s great mercy (as Moses invokes here) and hopes for restoration of fellowship with God (the only one who can pardon). Since only Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb repent for a sin committed by the entire nation, God’s pardon here will fully restore His relationship with them, but He will deal with the rest of Israel differently. They will experience not the absolution of sin but the suspension of anger. The Lord, because of His mercy, turns His anger away from Israel even when they rebelled (Psalm 78:38). The word for “forgiven” in Hebrew is *nasa’* (naw-SAW), and it carries three meanings: to lift up, to bear (up or away), or to forgive someone. Some scholars argue that Moses is not asking the Lord to forgive the Israelites, but to “put up” with them so He can continue to keep His covenant.

Moses calls for God to continue to bear with His people by His covenant faithfulness as He was doing it since Egypt. Many times, they rebelled, and God in his mercy did not forsake them as His chosen nation. He held on to the covenant He made with Abraham. This is a reflection of the depth of God's forgiveness that covers not only the gravity of sin but also the multitude of sins.

20 And the LORD said, I have pardoned according to thy word:

The psalmist, referring to this instance, states that God would have destroyed the people if Moses did not stand for them in the breach to turn away wrath from them (Psalm 106:23). This is a call for our generation, where evil prevails in every segment of our contemporary society, to stand in the gap and plead with God to hold His anger and show once again His mercy to a rebellious and disobedient society. For even the church, like the ten spies, is afraid to tackle the giants of society, even when the Lord said He has overcome the world (John 16:33). A plea with God in favor of His people, bought by the precious blood of Jesus Christ shed on the Cross, would bring renewal and revival in the church. For the merciful God will hear and answer as He did in this case.

The fact that God pardons (Heb. *salakh*) expresses God's readiness to listen and answer those who intercede in favor of the unbelievers, the unfaithful, and the disobedient. A full pardon, however, would only follow full repentance and dedication to obedience. He will not treat the guilty as innocent. Instead of destroying them all as He first told Moses (v. 12), He will give them more years to wander in the desert until they all die without ever seeing the Promised Land. Their children, however, will receive God's abundant promises.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Bless the Lord Who Forgives
(Psalm 103:1–14)

TUESDAY

Jesus Forgives Our Sins
(Acts 10:34–43)

WEDNESDAY

God's Forgiveness Doesn't Allay Suffering
(Numbers 14:21–25)

THURSDAY

God's Forgiveness May Involve Harsh
Judgments (Numbers 14:26–30)

FRIDAY

Children Suffer for Adults' Sins
(Numbers 14:31–35)

SATURDAY

People Rebelled and Were Defeated
(Numbers 14:39–45)

SUNDAY

The Lord Says, "I Do Forgive"
(Numbers 14:10–20)