

Ruled by grace

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- [0 : 0 0] as we are murdered by all these giants living in the land. You're not on our side. And so they pushed God to the side yet again as they cried, Egypt, Egypt, we want Egypt.
- It was them saying, we think you're rubbish, God. Get out of our lives. And sadly, by pushing God to the side, they reap the consequences.
- Right at the edge of the promised land, they decided they wanted life without God, and they get it. They now have to wander for 40 years in the wilderness.
- And at this stage, having seen what Israel was really like, it wouldn't be surprising if God decided to pull out of the relationship permanently.
- After all, if people heap verbal abuse on us constantly, we'll eventually say, enough, won't we? When God rescued Israel, he said they were his treasured possession, a holy nation.
- [1 : 1 8] Another way to put that is to say that Israel was reserved for him. He had specially set them aside. But now that we've discovered how rubbish Israel really is, it makes complete sense for God to cancel his reservation.
- But that might bring us renewed anxiety. Because think about it. All throughout, we've been saying that we are like Israel. They're a picture of humanity at large.
- They're a picture of us. Because in our more honest moments, we know what we're like. We do sometimes think that God isn't big enough.
- We do sometimes doubt that God wants to be good to us. And so we do sometimes grumble, or kick up a fuss, or give him the silent treatment, or choose not to follow his ways.
- We keep falling back into the same old sin, or running to the same ungodly things for refuge, and just failing, and failing, and failing again, until we finally wonder, has God had enough?
- [2 : 3 5] Have I crossed the line? Maybe God's decided that he can't take my sin anymore, and he's pulling out of the relationship. He's going to give up on us, and cancel his plans for us.
- We're afraid, to use the language of millennials today, that God will turn to us and say, you've trolled me once too many times. You're cancelled.
- Well, if that's you, then Numbers 15 is going to be a healing balm for you today. Now, at first glance, that looks pretty unlikely. After all, this chapter feels kind of out of place, doesn't it?
- We've been following the story of Israel's journey for the last few weeks with great interest, and now we're suddenly interrupted by a chapter that's all about law. Did the editors of the Bible make a mistake?
- Did they forget to put this chapter back in Leviticus? Why is it here? And the headings in our Bibles don't help. And remember, the headings are not inspired scripture.

[3 : 45] And in the NIV, it says, supplementary offerings. And most other English versions say something similar. Not the most inspiring of headings, is it? And actually, those headings don't capture the essence of the passage.

For today's passage, it's really a passage about grace. It's a passage about how God doesn't give up on us or cancel his plans for us.

At its heart, it's a passage about who God really is. And so this morning, make sure that Numbers 15 is open in front of you so that we can work our way through this passage.

And we're going to discover three things about God that is good news for us. And so let's dive in. And the first clue we get about who God really is can be found right at the beginning.

Look at verses 1 and 2. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them, after you enter the land, I am giving you as a home.

[4 : 56] Do you catch that? Don't forget. The basic picture in Numbers 11 to 14 has been rebellion, rebellion, rebellion.

And then we turn the page and God says, after you enter the land, I'm giving you as a home. What's he saying?

He's saying the relationship's not over. It's not the end of the story. The plan hasn't been cancelled. You will get into the land. Look down in verse 17 and you'll see the same thing.

The Lord said to Moses, speak to the Israelites and say to them, when you enter the land to which I am taking you.

So Israel, you are going to get there, even if it's not the Exodus generation that will step foot into their new home. I'm not going to give up, God says.

[5 : 56] I'll keep pursuing this relationship. I'm determined to be called your God. And as we read on, well, this desire keeps coming true.

Just look at verses 3 to 12 and notice what it's all about. Can you guess? Verse 3. And you present to the Lord food offerings, whether burnt offerings or sacrifices, for special vows or freewill offerings or festival offerings.

Verse 4. Then the person who brings an offering. Verse 5. With each lamb for the burnt offering. Verse 5 again. Prepare a quarter of a hint of wine as a drink offering.

Verse 6. With a ram, prepare a grain offering. I think you're getting the picture. God is giving them instructions on various offerings.

But why? Because God is still interested in relationship. They are going to get into the land. But because they are not yet the holy nation God called them to be, these offerings are necessary so that God can keep the fire of their relationship alive.

[7 : 22] No offering equals no possibility of relationship. And so if God wasn't interested, he wouldn't have bothered. But God's not done with his people yet.

And so we have verses 3 to 12. The offerings mentioned here are not so much to do with atoning for specific sins, but more to do with general fellowship with God.

The book of Leviticus tells us that. They are like the preparations beforehand to enjoy dinner with him. That's what God wants for us to sit at the table with him.

And God's generous grace comes true even in these laws. Did you notice that the offerings Israel brings are not small offerings?

For example, in verse 6, if they bring a ram, they need to bring a grain offering that's two-tenths of an ephah of the finest flour.

[8 : 29] I'm told that's equivalent to seven pounds or 3.2 kilograms today. And they need to give a third of a hint of olive oil and alcohol.

That's about 1.3 liters. And that's not even the biggest offering. These are not small offerings. You see, these instructions here are not all brand new.

A lot of them have been mentioned in the book of Leviticus before. But what's new this time round is the size and the scale. It's the first time, for example, that we learn that an outpouring of wine should accompany every burnt and peace offering.

It's lavish. But the reason, the reason why God could expect Israel to bring such big offerings is because they will live in an abundant land.

You've already noticed, I'm sure, that these offerings come from the herd and the flock, verse 2, or the finest flour and olive oil, verse 4, and from grapes.

[9 : 46] That's where the wine comes from. That's not accidental. You see, all those come from the land itself. The idea is that God's people will thrive and flourish.

They will have such healthy herds and flocks and be surrounded by such fruitfulness that such big offerings are made possible.

And so implicit in these instructions is God's generous grace. He provides what is required. These generous portions come from Him.

And in verses 13 to 16, well, we see His generosity in His inclusivity. We've already learned that there were some non-Israelites in this entourage from earlier chapters.

But even if you're a foreigner, you have to be treated like a native-born. Look at verse 15. The community is to have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you.

[10 : 58] This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the foreigner shall be the same before the Lord. God's saying, everybody has equal access to me.

Just follow what I ask for. The door is always open to anybody who wants to identify with God's people and with God Himself.

And so what can we say about God from all this? I think we can say that He is the most patient being in the whole universe. He really, really loves His people.

He continues to seek relationship with them even after they've treated Him so badly, even after they've sinned grievously against Him. It's a testimony that we find all across Scripture, don't we?

In Psalm 103, verses 10 to 11, the psalmist marvels. He does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

[12 : 08] For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love for those who fear Him. In Ephesians 2, verse 4 to 5, we read, John 21, which we looked at earlier this year.

So Jesus coming face to face with Peter, His betrayer, and gently restoring him to be His ambassador.

And so what we have is a picture of a God who is slow to anger and rich in love. That's the first thing we see today.

He's a God who is slow to anger and rich in love. He's very kind and patient. He's not at all surprised when He sees that in your fight against sin, it's often one step forward, one step back.

As J.C. Rao once said in his classic book on holiness, true Christianity is a struggle. And so He's not surprised to see us go back and forth.

[13 : 34] And when He sees us take two steps back, He doesn't abandon us. No, in fact, the truth of the Gospel tells us the opposite.

While we were still His enemies, God took the initiative to make the very first move. Here's 1 John 4.

This is love. Not that we love God, but that He loved us and sent His Son. Notice the basis for His action.

He loved us first. And so He made the first move. He sent His Son. He didn't wait around thinking, oh, I'll send Jesus only when they get around to loving me properly.

He didn't wait till we all look like spiritual supermodels or polished and shiny. No, He came when we were still covered in the dung and the slime of sin, throwing mud at Him.

[14 : 41] and so He will come when we stumble back into that slime. He's done it before. And here in Numbers 15, we discover that's what He's always been like.

God's the same in the Old and the New Testaments. He's never changed. Israel grumbled and rebelled and He says, I still want to give you the land.

And God's not like a landlord who gives you the keys to your apartment and then disappears overseas, never to be seen again for the next 12 months. No. God says, once you're in the land, I want to fellowship with you, to linger at the dinner table with you.

And hence that's why I command all these rich offerings. He's slow to anger and rich in love. When you struggle with sin, He moves towards you and not away from you.

He's not disgusted by you. Now, that doesn't mean that God is indifferent to sin. We're about to see that in the middle section of Numbers 15.

[16 : 05] He hates sin. He hates my sin. He hates your sin. It displeases Him. And God can't just ignore it because it dishonors Him and damages us.

He needs to deal with it. And so let's read on and see the second thing we can discover about God today. Verse 22. Now, if you as a community unintentionally fail, now notice the first word, now.

In some translations it might say, but either way the point is the same. You're going to mess up. Verses 22 onwards explicitly addresses the issue of sin and God says, you will stumble even if you don't plan for it.

And that can be quite distressing, can't it? Imagine if you're an Israelite and you hear that you're going to repeat the mistakes of Numbers 11 and 12 and 13 to 14.

But God says, well, here's the remedy. And then He gives several categories. In verse 22, He says, if you as a community unintentionally fail to keep any of these commands the Lord gave Moses, well, verse 24 tells you what to do.

[17 : 40] There's all these offerings to make. But what we want to notice here in particular is the sin offering of a male goat which hasn't been mentioned so far.

And if an individually unintentionally sins, then, verse 27, that person must also bring a sin offering, a year-old female goat.

Again, verse 29 tells us that that's true for everyone, whether you're a native-born Israelite or a foreigner. And then verses 25 and 28 tells us what the purpose of these offerings are.

It's to make atonement so that forgiveness can be won. No matter who you are, there's only one way to forgiveness, the shedding of blood.

That way has never changed. to win forgiveness, blood must be shed.

[18 : 51] And in the big scheme of things, animals don't cut it. God knew that. He didn't command these offerings as plan A, and then when that didn't work, he decided that he needed plan B and then call in Jesus.

Rather, Jesus was always plan A, and as part of that plan, God instituted the sacrificial system as pictures and pointers of what Jesus will do.

As the people brought sin offerings, they were really trusting that God will in time provide the proper remedy. And so when Jesus comes, we get it.

We understand his purpose. We know that God didn't just send his son, as an example of how to love. Numbers 15 rules that out. He didn't just send his son to be a positive moral influence.

Numbers 15 rules that out. If God simply sent his son to be a positive example or influence, then we still have to deal with our sin.

[20 : 04] And if that's so, then we're in deep trouble, because we simply can't. Numbers 11 to 14 has already established that our problem isn't just some external powers of evil, but the evil that lies within us.

And we have no remedy. But the good news is, God does. And he provides it. Well, let's just read 1 John 4 verse 10 again.

this is love, not that we love God, but that he love us and send his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin.

Because sin is so serious, blood had to be shed, not by an animal, but by God's son. But because God is so serious about relationship with us, blood was shed, not by an animal, but by God's son.

The Lord Jesus chose to offer himself as the perfect once-for-all sin offering so that forgiveness can be won.

[21 : 20] So what we have here is a picture of a God who forgives sin and rebellion. That's the second thing we see from this passage.

God wants to forgive. And he does so not by excusing sin, but by dealing with it so that we can know him. Again, Numbers 15 shows us that this has always been true.

God has not changed from the Old to the New Testaments. That's the kind of God he is. Not somebody who's waiting to shout, aha, gotcha, when we do something wrong.

Rather, when we're struggling with our sin or ashamed because we've fallen again, he gently nudges us to apply the gospel remedy. I provided sin offerings for Israel, he says, and I've provided the one to whom those sin offerings point to.

And you know him. And so when you sin, he says, come to me on the basis of your sin offering.

[22 : 35] Don't run away in shame. Stand on the foundation of the cross and let Jesus speak for you. You see, there's no safer place to be.

Let me just borrow an illustration from the great preacher D.L. Moody. Imagine you see a bushfire coming. It's coming at you so fast and quick, not even the fastest horse can escape.

So what do you do? You take a match and you light the grass around you. You take your stand in the burnt area and you're safe because stuff that is burnt cannot be burnt again.

So though you hear the flames as they come along, you do not fear. You do not even tremble as the ocean of flames surges around you. For over the place where you stand, the fire has already passed.

and there is no danger. And there is one spot on earth that God has swept over and that was 2,000 years ago on Calvary where Jesus died as your sin offering as he drank the cup of wrath.

[23 : 56] But when you stand on the cross, you are safe for all eternity. So stand there in your daily fight, with sin.

Stand there as the battle rages on. Stand there when you regret getting angry again, or when you catch yourself grumbling again, or when you look at the wrong thing on the internet again.

Have the same mindset as Paul does in Philippians chapter 3 verse 12. do you see that?

We can keep fighting to be godly because Jesus has already secured us in his hands. He is the perfect sin offering The safest place to stand on In Christ, God doesn't cancel on us But forgives sin and rebellion And when we know that God doesn't cancel our status as his children Well, we don't become complacent But we are free to live as those who bear his name Just like Paul But wait a minute, you might say What about verses 30 and 31?

But anyone who sins defiantly Whether native-born or foreigner Utters blasphemy against the Lord And must be cut off from the people of Israel Because they have despised the Lord's word And broken his commands They must surely be cut off Their guilt remains on them Good question So let's talk about that And in the process, discover the third thing about God What is verses 30 to 31 describing?

[26 : 07] The short answer is defiant sin But what does that mean? Well, perhaps the example in verses 32 to 36 will help us Now, at first sight, when Grace read that part We might have found the episode a bit embarrassing What's the first thing about God What's so bad about this man gathering wood?

Stoning him seems like a massive overreaction But notice, first of all That he's gathering wood on the Sabbath So he's breaking the law But more revealingly But more revealingly Why is he gathering wood in the first place?

There can only be one answer To light a fire on the Sabbath Which is also forbidden In other words This man was committing one sin So that he could deliberately commit another And that's the point He wasn't judged simply for gathering sticks But for pointing the middle finger at God It's like Adam and Eve The problem wasn't that they ate food It was that they were effectively telling God By their actions I make the rules I decide whatever I want You can get out And it's the same here The man was being defiant More literally Verse 30 actually says He is sinning with his hand held high Some English translations like the ESV will capture that

In other words He's shaking his fist at God He's wholeheartedly embracing sin Knowing exactly what he's doing But doing it anyway Or as verse 31 puts it He's despising God's word God says one thing But he doesn't care Now That might trouble some of us this morning We're thinking right now Is that me?

Have I sinned in this way? Oh no What about that time when I did this And then I kind of liked it? Am I going to be cut off? Well if that's you Let me just offer you A word of reassurance If you are thinking like that Then you don't fall into this category Because you are still concerned About your relationship With God Those who sin defiantly Don't even care They're not anxious at all If they do something That is displeasing to God The rough New Testament equivalent Of what we're talking about here Is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit Jesus calls that the unforgivable sin Why?

[29 : 15] Because how do you blaspheme the Holy Spirit? It's when you've seen the remedy Jesus himself And you reject him And you harden your heart Even though you know better In fact you think God sending Jesus Is of the devil That's blaspheming the Holy Spirit And that's what Defiant sin is It's when you persistently Stubbornly say God I know better I don't need Jesus At all And without Jesus Your guilt remains As Hebrews chapter 10 Verse 26 to 27 says If we deliberately Keep on sinning After we have received The knowledge of the truth That's the gospel No sacrifice for sins Is left But only a fearful expectation Of judgment And of raging fire That will consume The enemies Of God

And so the third thing We need to learn about God This morning Is that he does not Leave the guilty Unpunished He does not leave The guilty Unpunished That's what he does Both in the Old And the New Testament And this morning In a congregation This size It's quite possible That some of us Will need to hear This warning today You've been ignoring Jesus Maybe even for years Although you've been hearing About him And from him You've heard his word But you've persistently Chosen to go Against it But there's still time To come back The opposite of defiance Is repentance Repentance is a willingness To say God

You're right I'm wrong I agree with your Assessment of me I need your remedy A repentant heart Leads to Jesus Who justifies The guilty But the defiant heart Leads to the guilt Remaining And therefore To be cut off From God And so Numbers 15 Paints a picture Of who God Is The Lord Is slow to anger Rich in love Forgiving sin And rebellion Yet He does not Leave the guilty Unpunished And I'm sure You've noticed already That's exactly How God Describes himself In Exodus 34 Verses 6 And 7 That fits With who Moses says God is

In Numbers 14 Last week That fits With the Psalmist With Jonah With Ezra Who all say The same thing They all quote Exodus 34 And that fits With our picture Of Jesus Jesus says If you've seen Me You've seen God And while he Walked on earth He was slow To anger And rich in love With his slow Disciples Even after They failed God Time and again To grasp His teaching He stuck With them And then he Showed his Absolute commitment To God's Forgiveness By bearing The cross He says He must Be killed And every Single move He makes Is made To fulfill That agenda And yet He never Held back On talking About hell

Either Sometimes you Might hear Christians say That we should Never talk About hell But Jesus Doesn't take Their advice In Matthew 25 Jesus explicitly Says that Those who do Not listen To him Will end up Cut off From God Into the Eternal Fire Those guilty As charged Will be punished That's Jesus That's God So how should We respond To this picture Of God Well we look And remember Who we belong To We remember That this is Who we are Reserved for And that's How Numbers 15 concludes In verses 37 to 41 The Israelites Are to wear Blue tassels Which are like Those loose Hanging cords Or threads That are Attached To the end Of clothing It's blue

[34 : 18] Because that's The colour Used inside The tabernacle As they did So They remember That they were Redeemed That's what Verse 41 Says But they also Remember That they are Now Reserved To be a Holy nation Verse 39 You will have These tassels To look at And so you Will remember All the commands Of the Lord That you may Obey them And not prostitute Yourself by Chasing after The lusts Of your own Hearts And eyes They are A people Reserve For God And God Isn't planning On cancelling His reservation Anytime soon So we don't Wear blue Tassels today Obviously But we need To keep Finding ways To remember How?

Well one Obvious way Is by committing To coming To the Sunday Gathering Week after week To hear the Gospel and Its implications Proclaimed But perhaps You can think Of other ways As well Perhaps you Could find A friend Or two And the Three of you Commit to Checking in With each Other throughout The week Sharing what You're learning In your quiet Times Perhaps you Could commit To memorising Some bible Verses A practice That doesn't Have to be Confined To Sunday School Perhaps you Could borrow A good Christian Book or two From our library And let that Nourish you With truth And encouragement By reading A chapter A night Perhaps you Could sign up To our Facebook page If you Haven't already Where we Try to share A couple Of articles Each week To help Us in A Christian Walk Whatever the Way God wants us Not to lose Sight of who He really Is The problem

All throughout Numbers Is that his People kept Having the Wrong idea Of who God is When we Don't see God as Slow to Anger Rich in Love And ready To forgive Well we Become reluctant To approach Him When we Sin And so we Deny ourselves The joy of Experiencing a Restored relationship With him Through Jesus When we Don't see God as The fair Judge Who will Punish the Guilty We can end Up thinking That we don't Have to take Seriously God's Word And we Deny ourselves The joy Of self Sacrificially Following in The footsteps Of our Master But when we See God Fully Well we Can be like Those Israelites Joyfully Reserving Their best Crops As an Offering As we See in Verse 20 We can be Like Paul Who in Philippians Chapter 2 Saw his

Life as One that Is poured Out like A drink Offering Not just For the Sake of Christ And for Others But also For their Joy We can Offer our Lives As an Aroma Pleasing To the Lord So let's Keep Jesus Before us Stand in The safest Spot And let's Live As his Holy Nation Let's Pray Father Father we Come Before you This morning And we Pray that You help Us Remember Help us To remember Who you Really are Not an Image of God that We have Made in Our own Minds But to See you As you Have revealed Yourself to Us In the Scriptures Thank you Lord that You are Indeed slow To anger

Rich in Love Ready to Forgive And we Can be Certain of That because Of Jesus Help us To remember To remember That you Are a Consuming Fire And that You will Punish the Wicked And will You help Us to Take seriously Your command To follow You all The days Of our Lives Thank you So much And we Pray all This in The name Of Jesus Amen