

Numbers 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 April 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron.
- The whole congregation said to them, Would that we had died in the land of Egypt, or would that we had died in this wilderness? Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword?
- Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? And they said to one another, Let us choose a leader, and go back to Egypt.
- Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes, and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, The land which we passed through to spy it out is an exceedingly good land.
- If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land, and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord, and do not fear the people of the land, for they are bred for us.
- [1 : 0 6] Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them. Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.
- And the Lord said to Moses, How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.
- But Moses said to the Lord, Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people.
- For you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them, and you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night. Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them, that he has killed them in the wilderness.
- And now please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children to the third and the fourth generation.
- [2 : 3 1] Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people from Egypt until now. Then the Lord said, I have pardoned, according to your word, but truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times, and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers, and none of those who despised me shall see it.

But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. Now since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.

And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me.

Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you. Your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and all of your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.

[4 : 20] According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.

I the Lord have spoken. Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me. In this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.

And the men who Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation grumble against him by bringing up a bad report about the land, the men who brought up a bad report of the land died by plague before the Lord.

Of those men who went to spy out the land, only Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, remained alive. When Moses told these words to all the people of Israel, the people mourned greatly.

And they rose early in the morning, and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, Here we are, we will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned. But Moses said, Why now are you transgressing the command of the Lord, when that will not succeed?

[5 : 26] Do not go up, for the Lord is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies. For there the Amalekites and the Canaanites are facing you, and you shall fall by the sword, because you have turned back from following the Lord.

The Lord will not be with you. But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the Lord nor Moses departed out of the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites, who lived in that hill country, came down, and defeated them, and pursued them, even to Horma.

In Numbers chapter 14, everything melts down. The bad report of the ten spies is received by the people of Israel, while the good report of Caleb and Joshua is rejected so fiercely, that they would have stoned them, had the Lord not intervened.

The people believe it would be preferable, for them to have died in Egypt, or even to die in the wilderness, than to die at the hands of the warlike inhabitants of the land, leaving their wives and children as defenceless prey.

The rebellion with the golden calf came after Moses' ascension of the mountain of the Lord for forty days, and this rebellion comes after the spies ascended into the promised land of the Lord for forty days.

[6 : 35] Perhaps there's some connection to be developed there. The chapter begins with the people raising a loud cry, weeping, grumbling against Moses and Aaron, accusing them, and then moves to outright mutiny as they determine to choose a leader and return to Egypt.

The raising of a loud cry and weeping is a response of despair. It's the way that Esau responds to his loss of the blessing, or Hagar responds to the prospect of Ishmael and herself perishing in the wilderness.

It's utter desolation and hopelessness. David Foreman observes the way that the place of Egypt shifts in the course of the Israelites' statement. First, the prospect of death in Egypt is held alongside the prospect of death in the wilderness as fairly equal.

Next, however, they are wondering whether returning to Egypt wouldn't be the best option in the circumstances, and shortly afterwards they're putting that plan in motion. They had started out by recognising that Egypt and the wilderness were places of death, but before long they are wanting to go back there, convinced that it is a good option.

They might think themselves realist, but their plan is delusional. Also, we've moved far beyond mere grumbling at this point. The people have determined to reverse the exodus.

[7 : 51] Moses and Aaron fall on their faces before the congregation, imploring them not to proceed with such a disastrous course of action. In Numbers, this act of falling upon the face is taken in anticipation of God's devastating judgement upon the people's rebellion.

We see the same thing in chapter 16, verses 4, 22 and 45, and then in chapter 20, verse 6. Caleb and Joshua tear their clothes.

They express how devastated and appalled they are by the turn of events, and they desperately seek to dissuade the people, presenting a stirring exhortation of courageous faith.

Joshua now raises his voice alongside that of Caleb. Had he spoken up earlier, his association with Moses might have decreased the power of his witness, but now the situation is desperate and something has to be done.

The people are being given a chance to repent, one last chance, to receive by faith the encouragement of the faithful spies. For Caleb and Joshua, it's absolutely imperative that the people fear God enough that they overcome the fear of all the people of the land that stands between them and the fulfilment of the Lord's promise to them.

[9 : 01] Far from being devoured by the people of the land, they will be bred for the Israelites, easily consumed by the people of the Lord. Caleb and Joshua don't deny the details reported by the other spies.

What they oppose is the faithlessness of their counsel, their failure to trust in the Lord's power to bring them in. However, the response of the people is to seek to stone them. Gordon Wenham remarks that this probably wasn't merely mob violence.

Rather, the congregation had judicial authority. I was using this to condemn Caleb and Joshua for a capital crime, the process perverting the law also.

The rebelliousness of the people has been gathering steam over the last few chapters. Started with judgments upon outlying parts of the camp, then the rabble complained, and then the people more generally, then Miriam and Aaron, and now the ten spies who represent ten of the tribes and the congregation as a whole.

At this point, the Lord intervenes to prevent their lives from being taken, the lives of Joshua and Caleb. The Lord speaks to Moses and declares that the people despise him.

[10 : 06] They fail to believe in him despite all of the signs that he has performed for them. The plagues in Egypt, the Red Sea crossing, the provision in the wilderness, the victory of the Amalekites, the appearances at Sinai, all these things.

The people are probably not so much questioning the Lord's power as his character, suggesting that he is a malicious deity who seeks to destroy them. They are seeking to undo his great act of deliverance, the deliverance by which his name would be made great among the nations.

This is apostasy of the highest order. As at Sinai, the golden calf, Moses responds by interceding for the people, and he presents a three-fold argument.

First of all, in verses 13-16, the Lord's reputation among the nations. Then, in verses 17-18, the Lord's promises to Israel and his revealed character and name.

He refers back to the theophany of the Lord in Exodus chapter 34. And then, the Lord's steadfast love, his track record of constancy with his people, in verse 19.

[11:07] Once again, there's nothing on Israel's side of the covenant to put forward as an argument in their favour. They've utterly broken it. They've shown nothing but faithlessness. And so, Moses must appeal to the Lord's purpose in the Exodus, to his revealed character, to his promises, and to his consistent course of action to that point.

Notice the way that Moses appeals to the Lord's self-manifestation of his character in Exodus 34 at the very heart of his argument. That statement in Exodus 34, verses 6-7 reads, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

Dennis Olson remarks upon the subtle differences that there are between this statement and the earlier statement of the Lord's character in Exodus 20, verses 5-6. I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

In the statement of chapter 34 of Exodus to which Moses makes his appeal, it's God's mercy and his love that are foregrounded, rather than his jealousy. God's steadfast love is extensively unpacked within it, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

God's steadfast love is presented as more generally expressed, not just limited to the obedient. God forgives iniquity, transgression and sin, and he's not justified by his justice.

[13:00] God's judgment has to be added as a sort of qualifier in Exodus chapter 34, because the emphasis upon mercy, steadfast love and forgiveness is so prominent, whereas in Exodus chapter 20, it's steadfast love that is more the qualifier.

The arguments that Moses makes here are similar to those he uses in Exodus chapter 32 to 34, but now the reputation among the nations isn't merely about the Egyptians.

It's about the nations of the land as well. The promise given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob isn't prominent here as it was in the Exodus account again. Rather, God's direct revelation of himself to Moses in chapter 34 of Exodus takes its place.

Moses also now appeals to God's constancy with Israel in a way that wasn't as possible in Exodus chapter 34, where there wasn't that same track record of God's dealing with his people in the wilderness in the way that he has dealt with them by that point.

The Lord's response to Moses' intercession is according to the revelation of his name. He forgives, but he does not clear the guilty. And the judgment is poetic.

[14 : 09] They shall not see the land that they refuse to enter. They said that they would be better off dying in the wilderness, and that would be their fate. They presented the well-being of their children as reason against entering, but they would be the ones preventing their children's well-being, as their children had to remain in the wilderness for decades on account of their father's sins.

The spying out of the land that led to this apostasy had taken 40 days. They would remain in the wilderness for a year for each one of those days. They are instructed to set out for the wilderness by way to the Red Sea, which, while it isn't the same place as they crossed earlier, literally suggests a turn back towards Egypt.

They are going in the direction that they want, but they are going to be wandering in the wilderness. The false spies are then judged and killed by plague before the Lord, while Caleb and Joshua are told that they will enter the land, they will be blessed for their faithfulness, and later on we see that they take the land with the same courageous faithfulness that they have demonstrated in these chapters.

The chapter ends with the people compounding their sin by attempting to go into the land without the Lord's blessing or presence, and they are soundly defeated. The liberation from slavery will now be the work of two generations.

The first generation was not ready for freedom. They lacked the courage and the faithfulness to grasp hold of it when it was set before them, and they would not as a result enjoy it.

[15 : 36] However, their children would, and there is an element of comfort to be found here. The tragedy of the Exodus generation does not ultimately doom their descendants, who can learn from the sins of their fathers and enter in.

Nevertheless, the events of this chapter cast a very long shadow and are often referred to in later scripture. For instance, in Hebrews chapter 4, today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

There is a challenge to us, as there is to all generations following the wilderness generation, that we learn from their negative example, and do not harden our hearts at the promise of God, that we enter in, that we grasp hold by faith, and that we persevere and receive the promises.

A question to consider. How can Moses' intercession in this chapter inform our own prayers?