

Numbers 14-15: The Path of Repentance

By
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“I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; “that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.”

-Deuteronomy 30:19-20

Last week we went over Numbers 13 and 14 where the nation of Israel rebelled against the upward call of God to live free in the land of their fathers. The result of their rebellion was for the nation of Israel to wander in the wilderness for forty years while all those who were above the age of twenty died, after which time the younger generation would be allowed to conquer the promised land in the place of their parents. After the forty years of wandering, Moses delivers a series of sermons that we have compiled for us in the book of Deuteronomy. In this section Moses is reinforcing to the nation the importance of obedience.

God doesn't make arbitrary commandments bent on denigrating His people, but instead He has called us to live in obedience to the commandments that will orient us towards our highest good, God Himself. Though sin always presents itself as the “easier” or “more pleasurable” path, it is always the path of short term gain and long term pain. The call of God, no matter the cost, is always for our ultimate good. It is a covenant with life itself, both for ourselves as well as our offspring. Which means that rebellion against God is a covenant with death and degradation.

At the outset of this study I wanted to emphasize this point, otherwise the judgement of God can seem overly harsh to us. God isn't some cruel tyrant who is lashing out at His people due to His hurt feelings. God is the loving Father who is zealously calling His children to the best possible life. And when they fail, God corrects them harshly to avoid a far worse fate that awaits them down the road. We will talk more about the potential consequences of the Israelites rebellion in a second, but for now this truth gives us a

good primer to understand the rest of Numbers 14 and all of Numbers 15, which seems out of place.

At the end of Numbers 14 we are able to read Moses' impassioned prayer for God to spare the people of Israel, which we talked about last time, but this time we will actually study his prayer and God's response. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, God lays out a couple of rituals for the nation to practice once they are in the land as well as a strange account of a man who is executed for breaking the Sabbath.

While this chapter might seem out of place, we will talk about its implications within the narrative of this book. God's main concern, both for His judgement, as well as Numbers 15 was to encourage the hearts of the youth of the nation that had been so badly discouraged by the fear of their parents. This is why it begins with this statement: *"When you have come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving to you..."* (Numbers 15:2)

The operative word in this statement is *"when"*, not if but *"when you have come into the land..."* It is probable that God is speaking this to a severely demoralized youth who are in need of encouragement that their parents failed to give them. I like how the medieval Jewish teacher Nachmanides explained the odd placement of Numbers 15:

"The younger Israelites might have thought, 'Forty years is a long time! Who knows what will happen? Perhaps (we) the children will sin as well (and suffer the same punishment as our parents).' So the Holy One thought it best to comfort them by giving them commandments that can be carried out only inside the land - thus (making it clear)...that they would indeed enter the land and take possession of it."
-Nachmanides - Commentary on Numbers

However, beyond these commandments being small encouragements to the youth, along with the prayer of Moses, these rituals would lay out a path for the youth towards God after their parents had failed to do this for them. Unfortunately their parents had modeled for them rebellion against God and an obedience to fear and envy. This doesn't mean that everything the parents did was bad, but since the parents never repented of these behaviors and attitudes, the children needed a path provided for them by God to succeed where their parents had failed.

Après Moi, le Déluge

"But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. 'But as for you, your carcasses shall fall in this

wilderness. *'And your sons shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and bear the brunt of your infidelity, until your carcasses are consumed in the wilderness.*

'According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know My rejection. 'I the LORD have spoken this. I will surely do so to all this evil congregation who are gathered together against Me. In this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die.'"

-Numbers 14:31-35

Which leads to the first point, what was the failure of the parents, and why did God judge it so severely? Within the Scriptures there is a special hatred by God for the failure of parents to protect their children. This principle is so strong that God will often show grace to children who have been led into folly by their parents. Consider this verse from the prophet Hosea:

"I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, Nor your brides when they commit adultery; For the men themselves go apart with harlots, And offer sacrifices with a ritual harlot. Therefore people who do not understand will be trampled."

-Hosea 4:14

God says this after systematically condemning all the corrupt authorities within Israel at the time. To put it another way, God shows mercy to the harlot because the men around her had led her into harlotry. This same basic idea is shown in stories like that of Lot who offered up his daughters to a mob of sexually charged men. After the destruction of Sodom, the daughters of Lot sleep with, and become pregnant by Lot. However, we are not told much about the heart of the daughters or given any clear condemnation of their behavior. Instead the story seems to be skewed towards the negligence and evil of their father who had failed to protect them and teach them correct sexuality.

We also see this in one of the Jewish judges named Jephtha in Judges 11, who offers up his daughter after a battle as a type of pagan sacrifice. And we see the same behavior in the most wicked king of Israel, Manasseh:

"Also he caused his sons to pass through the fire in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom; he practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft and sorcery, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger."

-2 Chronicles 33:6

This is a part of a long list of grievances against this wicked king as the author is trying to explain why God judges Manasseh by allowing His own people to be conquered and

displaced by the Babylonians. And this particular point keeps coming up within the narrative, that Manasseh “shed innocent blood.” However, even Manasseh’s rebellion was itself the product of his own father Hezekiah. After God performs an incredible miracle and saves, both the nation of Israel and the life of Hezekiah himself, Hezekiah is puffed up in pride and ends up becoming an ineffective king and father for the remainder of his life. This point is expressed in a statement made by Hezekiah after the prophet Isaiah tells him of the coming calamity:

“So Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good!” For he said, “Will there not be peace and truth at least in my days?”

-2 Kings 20:19

When we read the first part of the verse, it seems as though Hezekiah is bowing humbly to the edict of God, but in the second part we are told *why* God has pronounced collapse. Hezekiah is content, not because he has submitted to God, but because he is apathetic about the fate of his own son and kingdom. This attitude is summed by a French King named Louis the XV. When he was asked about what came next for the kingdom of France after his death, he, allegedly, responded “Apres moi, le deluge.” Which translates to “after me, comes the flood.”

In other words he is echoing the same attitude of Hezekiah. “Why should I care about what happens after me? That problem belongs to the next generation.” It is an abominable attitude that demoralizes children and denies them much needed care and direction. It is the same attitude expressed by any parent who would abandon their children because they don’t want to sacrifice their own desires to care for their children. It is an attitude of pure selfishness that will negatively affect children in some of the worst ways imaginable.

Provoking Children to Wrath

And this is unfortunately the exact attitude of the Israelites:

“Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” So they said to one another, “Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.”

-Numbers 14:3-4

As we spoke about last week, our cowardice never wants to admit to what it is. Instead it disguises itself as a virtue, but think about what is happening here. The men in the society have been promised victory by God, however they haven’t been promised that each individual would survive the coming battles. So, in their fear, they are rebelling

against God, and if they succeeded, they would lead their wives and children into the very slavery they had just escaped.

If this really was an attempt to “protect” their families from becoming “victims” this makes no sense. The nation of Israel had just left Egypt after the cataclysmic ten plagues of Egypt. Beyond that, the last contact they had with the Egyptians was when they literally tried to slaughter the nation but God instead drowned the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. What are the odds that the Egyptians would welcome the Israelites back into their nation with open arms? More than likely they would subject the wives and children of the Israelites to the exact form of brutal slavery that awaited them *if* the nation of Israel lost to the Canaanites in battle. This was not an attempt to “save” their children, but an attempt to save themselves.

This point becomes inescapable when the men go to war with the Canaanites after God told them that they would die in the wilderness. The punishment that God declared was, admittedly, severe, but again, it wasn't a punishment toward the children, just the adults. After running from battle to “protect” their children, the men of Israel now *willingly* place their own families in danger by fighting a battle that God has told them that they can't win. As much as they wanted to pretend at virtue, God saw right through their deceptive words and into their selfish hearts that have been displayed through all their various complaints towards God throughout this book.

Now that we have established the sin of the nation let's talk about its severity. In order to understand this, we have to see this as, primarily, a failure of the fathers, not necessarily the mothers. While the mothers may have shared a part of the blame here, remember, that it is the men who were called to fight and die in battle, not the women. This means that it was for the men to *answer* the call of God, not primarily the women of the society. So even if the women supported the men in their cowardice, the spies who brought the bad report were all men, and the ones who should have led the nation in battle were the men.

When the women of a society fail it does have a critical effect on children, we talked about this a little in the Numbers 12 when Miriam leads a minor rebellion against her brother, but it is men who are called to lead their families and when they fail the effects are much greater. Just as one example of this fact, take a look at this image from the National Fatherhood Institute:

The **Father Absence Crisis** in **America**

18.4

Million Children,
1 in 4, Without a Biological,
Step, or Adoptive Father
at Home¹

Research shows² when a child is raised in a father-absent home, they are affected in the following ways...



- ⊖ 4x Greater Risk of Poverty
- ⊖ More Likely to Have Behavioral Problems
- ⊖ 2x Greater Risk of Infant Mortality
- ⊖ More Likely to Go to Prison
- ⊖ More Likely to Commit Crime
- ⊖ 7x More Likely to Become Pregnant as a Teen
- ⊖ More Likely to Face Abuse and Neglect
- ⊖ More Likely to Abuse Drugs and Alcohol
- ⊖ 2x More Likely to Suffer Obesity
- ⊖ 2x more Likely to Drop Out of School

**National
Fatherhood
Initiative®**
www.fatherhood.org

¹U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Living arrangements of children under 18 years old: 1960 to present. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau.

²National Fatherhood Initiative® 2019. *Father Facts: Eighth Edition*. Germantown, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative®.

Those statistics are just some of the enormous amount of data that we have that reveal the severe negative effects of fathers who fail their children. This fact helps us understand a passage from Ephesians 4:

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise: “that it may be well with you and you may

live long on the earth.” And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.”

-Ephesians 6:1-4

Notice that the commandment to children is for them to obey their “parents”, meaning mothers and fathers. Yet the next exhortation is specifically to fathers not to provoke their children to wrath. This does not absolve mothers of their responsibilities to their children nor does it suggest that mothers aren’t responsible for all sorts of negative qualities that manifest in their children. It is merely to emphasize the outsized impact that fathers have on their children.

While a mother is, primarily, responsible for the nurture and the compassion that a child receives, a father is, primarily, responsible for the “training and admonition” of children. What does that mean? The word that is translated “training” in this passage is actually a hugely important Greek word, “Paideia”. This was an ancient word that referred to the total development of a student. Not merely educating their intellect, but their character, morals, values, and overall orientation.

This is why, traditionally, fathers have had an outsized role in the discipline of children and they are also the ones who sit down with their kids to give them advice and wisdom. But what is the “training” that the fathers from Numbers are giving to their children? Both through their actions and their words they are telling their kids to retreat in the face of adversity, to rebel against the call of God, to be thankless to the gifts of God, to complain, to revolt against leadership that you don’t like, and to protect yourself at all costs. Needless to say, God has to undo this toxic “training” in these young men so that they can succeed where their fathers failed.

Next, and arguably more importantly, a father is supposed to “admonish” their children. This word is a little more straightforward. It comes from the Greek word “nouthesia” which, in essence, means the exact same thing as the English word that is translated “admonition”, which is to encourage or exhort. What this means is that the father is primarily responsible for *encouraging* their children towards their potential. This makes sense. Since mothers are oriented towards nurture and compassion, they are absolutely necessary at helping children know that they are loved unconditionally. But it is the father, in their strength and ambition that “call” their children up towards their potential.

This is a way to understand Adam’s ability to name the creation in the Garden of Eden. To name something is to “call” it. To give shape and limitations to a particular identity. This is why, in fantasy, there are wizards who are trying to learn the “names” of things in order to command them in their spells. When this “power” is used appropriately, it is like

a magic spell, in the best possible sense. To be “called” by a father figure is to be raised up to your fullest potential, to be shown that your limitations are far higher than your current aim and your abilities far outstrip your current obstacles. This ability has its origin in God who is our Father in heaven.

Consider the story of Gideon in the book of Judges. At the beginning of the story, Gideon, like the rest of Israel, is hiding from the predations of the Midianites. However, when he is called by God, the angel of the Lord says this to him: *“The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!”* (Judges 6:12)

Gideon is not called according to his behavior, but according to his potential. God sees within Gideon something that Gideon doesn’t see in himself. And God is constantly doing this. This is God’s call to men like Abraham and Jacob to leave the comfort of his father’s home so that they might build a family and a legacy for themselves. It is the call of Noah to preserve his family from the coming flood. The call of Moses, who was living as an outcast from his own people for forty years, to lead those same people to liberty in God.

And it is the calling that God has given to His own people. The calling to let them know that they could be more than slaves for the people of Egypt. That they could live as free men and women in the land of their ancestors in peace and prosperity. But instead of answering the call of God, they instead run away from it and do the most damaging thing a father can do to their child, limit their potential. As I said before, the “power” of naming is the power to give shape or limitations to a particular identity.

This power does require a level of prudence, because it is destructive to call something higher than its potential. For instance, if a father encouraged their son who is only 5 foot 5 inches tall and naturally skinny to aspire to be an NFL linebacker, they would be doing their child a great disservice. But even that is less damaging than what the fathers in Israel are doing in this chapter. Because a name provides limits, to name something lower than its potential is to create demoralization.

In essence, these fathers are telling their sons that they are only fit to be slaves. They do this when they try to bring them back to Egypt, and then they do this again when they attempt a foolish assault against Canaan. This, I believe, is the most acute effect given to children when they lack the good fatherly role of Godly admonition.

Children who are never encouraged towards their potential will oftentimes, either wallow in self-pity and live constantly beneath what they could become. This builds within them internal resentment, bitterness, despair, and frustration. Still another portion of them will

be driven to success out of a need to “prove” themselves. In some ways this is a little more dangerous. Children like this will put the well being of others in constant danger as they perform reckless actions to gain the type of encouragement and meaning that was denied to them by their fathers. In rare cases, this reckless drive to “prove” themselves to a non-existent father figure can lead to success, but the success will be empty and hollow, it won’t actually fill the hole left in them from their father who never encouraged them.

It is this type of calamity that the pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer witnessed in the youth in Germany who ended up electing Hitler to office. He saw that after the loss of World War 1 the issue of fatherlessness in Germany became endemic. Instead of being raised by loving fathers who could encourage these young men towards success, they instead received political voices that told them the opposite. The Nazi’s became so popular because they highlighted the flaws of the society and told young men that they could never succeed in the system that they were born into. That the future that they longed for had been stolen from them by the failure of the elites and foreign immigrants.

In evaluating the bitterness of the younger generation that led them to elect a man like Hitler, Bonhoeffer says this:

“...the impotence of the entire existing political, intellectual, and religious ideology seemed to have been proven, and third, the millions who fell in the Great War, the revolutionizing masses of the postwar period, and the million-strong army of unemployed during the crisis must have given the younger generation a convincing impression of the meaninglessness and complete isolation of the individual and of the blunt power of the masses... A sense of the individual and the sense of true community seemed to have been completely destroyed... The lost war made this latent crisis obvious. Germany came apart at the seams. And the younger generation found itself more or less abandoned and having to fend for itself. The problem of the meaning of the defeat in intellectual historical terms was taken up and discussed, with the conclusion that the answer was to be found by overcoming the lack of community among Germans, and that the defeat had to lead to a new sense of community, to new bonds, new authority.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “The Fuhrer and the Individual in the Younger Generation”

When young men feel hopeless they turn to rage. Some men will turn this rage inwards and despise themselves, others will turn this rage outwards and strike at what they perceive to be the source of their despair. I use Nazi Germany as an extreme example to explain why God took this issue so seriously. As bad as it was to have an entire generation die in the wilderness, it would have been far worse to have a generation of

young men placed back in slavery by their own fathers. At best it would have neutered the generation and made them hate themselves within the chains placed on them by their fathers. At worst, it would have made them murderously violent. Either way, they would not have a cause to rely on God and pursue the calling of their Father in heaven.

I won't go too much into this right now, but we see a similar demoralization happen in the young men in our country. They have seen their elders betray them in numerous ways ranging from the handling of Covid to the many failures of the elites to protect the citizenry, to the lost wars in the Middle East. These things, amongst others, have produced in them a feeling that they need to fend for themselves, that they have been betrayed by the systems that are supposed to support and encourage them. When you add in the increasing lack of fatherhood in our country, it is no wonder that many young men are feeling demoralized and wrathful towards the systems that rule over them. But again, this is a topic for another time.

The Unforgivable Sin

“But the person who does anything presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people. ‘Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him.’ Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died.”

-Numbers 15:30-36

Before we move on to the encouragement contained in the prayer of Moses and the rituals of God, I think the point we are discussing right now helps us understand, not only the judgement that God gives to the people of Israel, but also the judgement that God gives to the man described above at the end of chapter 15. The first verse that I quoted gives a warning about sins that are committed "presumptuously", which are distinct from the other sins that we find in the other verses of Numbers 15. Throughout the rest of the chapter, different offerings are given to the people of Israel to “absolve” them of sins committed in ignorance.

However, a sin done out of “presumption”, whether committed by a native-born Israelite or a stranger, seems to be “unforgivable”. Such a person is supposed to be cut-off from

the common wealth of the nation, which is another way to say exiled. A similar warning is given by Christ during His earthly ministry:

“Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”

-Matthew 12:31-32

While there is a lot of debate about the exact meaning of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”, to give a simplistic contextual answer, Jesus says this after the religious leaders reject Jesus’ signs and say that these signs actually come from Satan and not God. The warning seems to be something like, when God has expressed something so clearly that even nature itself is altered by the work of His Spirit, to deny this reality is to “spit” in the face of God. Such a sin *can’t* be forgiven because it is a sin that doesn’t *want* to be forgiven.

I want to be clear, this isn’t simply someone sinning who “knows better”, since we often have moral failings that are due to a lack of integrity of character. This would be a willing violation of God’s law with an *intent* to rebel against Him. So when we read about this man collecting wood on the Sabbath, we shouldn’t read this as an “innocent” action. This seems to be a man who has decided to ignore the laws of God *because* he was in open rebellion against God. This can even be seen in the fact that he was gathering firewood. The Sabbath is, in general, a reminder to God’s people of the “rest” of God. That we “rest” in God’s finished creation and so we spend a day giving Him thanks.

As a result, one of the cultural commandments that grew up in the Jewish people was that they weren’t allowed to light a fire on the Sabbath. Why? Because the Sabbath was a day to rest in the light of God, not a day to create light by our own efforts or strength. While this did get legalistic for the Jews, the intent was good and was loosely based on this story. It seems as though this man was rejecting the very “light” of God, wanting instead to create his own. Similar to the Pharisees who are rejecting the light of God’s anointed by attributing His miracles to Satan.

Even in God’s judgement, He seems to cite this as the reason why the generation of Jews could not be forgiven but had to die:

“Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?”

-Numbers 14:3

Like the Pharisees before them, they looked at the various miracles that God had provided for them to deliver them from Egypt, not as from a benevolent God, but a malevolent demon bent on their destruction. God answers this later on:

“Then the LORD said to Moses: “How long will these people reject Me? And how long will they not believe Me, with all the signs which I have performed among them?”

-Numbers 14:11

God is not merely judging their cowardice, but their open rejection of the light that He had offered to them. Even though their severe failure to their children merited wrath, it was the fact that this destructive behavior towards their children was done in conjunction with “presumptuous” sin and rebellion towards God, it couldn’t be “forgiven”. This doesn’t mean that the older generation couldn’t find personal forgiveness before God, we know from Moses’ life that this was still available for them, only that God was not willing to “pardon” their sin and allow them into the land, His punishment was permanent.

But even here there is an acknowledgement of mercy. At the end of the chapter there is a, seemingly, bizarre reminder of ceremonial tassels placed on the clothing of the Israelites. These “fringe” tassels, also known as “tzitzit” allowed for mixing of fabric at the margins of their garments. On a practical level, this “braid” would protect the garment from coming undone, but more than this it is a reminder of how God allows for a “remainder” at the margins. That while the bulk of the generation would be wiped out, God preserves a remainder at the margins through Joshua and Caleb.

This concept of the “remainder” keeps its relevancy throughout Jewish history. Even at times when the bulk of the nation rebels against God, God maintains a remnant of faithful men and women at the margins who preserve the goodness of God’s commandments and carry His truth in the midst of a rebellious generation.

The Prayer of the Righteous

Now that we have a better understanding of the sin of the Israelites, let’s now talk about Moses’ prayer and the rituals that are prescribed to the younger generation. This form of prayer is known as “intercession”, this is when we pray to God on “behalf” of another person. Remember that Moses is not in danger of judgement here, only the people of God. Moses is speaking to God on their behalf, praying for mercy for those who had sinned against God. Here is his prayer:

“And now, I pray, let the power of my Lord be great, just as You have spoken, saying, ‘The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.’ “Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.” Then the LORD said: “I have pardoned, according to your word; “but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD—“because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, “they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. “But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it. “Now the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valley; tomorrow turn and move out into the wilderness by the Way of the Red Sea.”

-Numbers 14:17-25

We will talk more about the specific content of this prayer in a second, but for now I want merely to consider the power of intercessory prayer. In order to do that let's first understand this role in a divine context, and then we can better understand it in its human context. This might sound strange, but the office of “intercessor” or “mediator” is actually a divine one that God allows for His prophets to share in. We see this throughout the Old Testament, but it is shown most succinctly in a prayer made by the prophet Micah:

“Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; When I fall, I will arise; When I sit in darkness, The LORD will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of the LORD, Because I have sinned against Him, Until He pleads my case And executes justice for me. He will bring me forth to the light; I will see His righteousness.”

-Micah 7:8-9

In this prayer, Micah sees that his enemy, presumably a messenger of Satan, is “wielding” his shame to alienate him from God. But the fascinating thing about this prayer is that He sees the reaction of God in two different offices. There is one aspect of God that has indignation towards Micah's sin and desires to judge him for it. But another aspect of God is “interceding” for Micah, He is “pleading his case and executing justice for him.” Beyond that, this “Intercessor” is also guiding Micah by His light. Meaning that God is giving Micah direction in how to repent and restore a relationship with God.

For the Jews, this would have sounded quite strange. How could God be both the judge and the advocate of mankind? However, in the New Covenant that the church has with God, the mystery is revealed in Christ:

“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

-Romans 3:21-26

To be both “just and the justifier” God had to maintain His justice in the person of the Father, but also offer forgiveness in the person of the Son. It is God’s complex nature that allows for Him to be absolutely unified and singular in His being, but also to execute different “offices” through the “persons” of, what we call, the Trinity. My intent here is not to get into the complexities of this doctrine, but merely to show that the ultimate office of intercessor is fulfilled by God Himself as He mediates between us and the Holiness of God that we might be forgiven and not destroyed by the righteous judgement of God.

“My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

-1 John 2:1-2

“Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions.”

-Psalm 51:1

However, since in the Old Covenant God had not yet taken on flesh and died for the sins of His people, He allows for human prophets to “practice” this intercessory role. We see this in Abraham when he intercedes for the people of Sodom and Gamorrah, and we see this in Moses, both here and in Exodus 32 when Israel built a golden calf.

But we need to understand this point, otherwise the conversation between Moses and God can seem pretty odd. At first glance, it can look like God is vindictive and impulsive and Moses is more level-headed as he talks “sense” to God. But this isn’t what is happening. Instead we are seeing Moses function in the role that the Son of God was

already executing in glory. The Father can't compromise His justice and so He needs an intercessor to call for mercy on behalf of the guilty, and since He had not yet become man, He "needed" a man to fulfill that role.

This is a comforting truth for the Christian. We know that even when we fall to sin, we have an Intercessor in heaven, pleading our case and leading by His light to repentance and reconciliation with the Father. We must always remember that the grace of God should never become license to sin, but instead the grace of God is the power of God to lead His people to repentance and reconciliation.

However, just because God has fulfilled this role in an ultimate sense, it doesn't mean that Christians aren't supposed to intercede for each other.

"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

-James 5:16

We are told to hear the confessions of our fellow believers and pray for one another, or, intercede for one another before God. Doing this not only allows us to participate in Christ's office, but it also acts as a powerful "reminder" of this truth. A way to understand what we have already talked about with the fathers in Israel, is that a father is an "intercessor" for his children. When he is fulfilling his role properly, he is "advocating" for his children, both encouraging them when they fail, but exhorting them to better behavior. The father will even, at times, stand between their children and judgement. They don't do this to "insulate" their children from consequences (though bad parents do this) but to make sure that the consequences they receive will be used to move them towards contrition and true repentance, for we know that:

"...godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."

-2 Corinthians 7:10

Once again, when someone lacks an advocate, when someone doesn't have a person who intercedes for them, sticks up for them and encourages them, this has an incredibly demoralizing effect. However, as the church we can step into this void. We can intercede for those around us, which both provides the encouragement that someone may have been denied, but also to help someone understand the intercessory office of Christ within their lives. We aren't taking this office upon ourselves, or even "adding" to it, we are instead participating with it, manifesting its reality to the person who is downtrodden by their own grief and shame.

It is this exact truth that is shown to the younger generation through one of the rituals given to them by Moses:

“If you sin unintentionally, and do not observe all these commandments which the LORD has spoken to Moses—‘all that the LORD has commanded you by the hand of Moses, from the day the LORD gave commandment and onward throughout your generations— ‘then it will be, if it is unintentionally committed, without the knowledge of the congregation, that the whole congregation shall offer one young bull as a burnt offering, as a sweet aroma to the LORD, with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the ordinance, and one kid of the goats as a sin offering. ‘So the priest shall make atonement for the whole congregation of the children of Israel, and it shall be forgiven them, for it was unintentional; they shall bring their offering, an offering made by fire to the LORD, and their sin offering before the LORD, for their unintended sin. ‘It shall be forgiven the whole congregation of the children of Israel and the stranger who dwells among them, because all the people did it unintentionally.”

-Numbers 15:22-26

The term “unintentional” above doesn’t necessarily mean only sins done in complete ignorance, or to put it another way, a sin that is performed without the knowledge that the act is a sin. But instead this is to be understood in contrast to “presumptuous” sins. In other words, these are sins performed, not out of open rebellion against God, but due to a moral failing, slip in judgement, or a failure to resist temptation. Such a sin runs contrary to our will, meaning that we don’t “want” to do it in the strictest sense, which is also why such sins fill us with regret and sorrow making them “unintentional”. Even though these sins can be severe and cause great damage to ourselves and others, since it is “unintentional” it can be “forgiven” before God and man.

The ritual God gives to forgive these sins is a repeat of the sacrifices for sin and trespass given in Leviticus 5-7 so we won’t dive too deep into it here. Instead it is merely necessary to point out that these rituals were offered by a priest who acts as an intercessor. They take the sin offering, which is a token of the person’s guilt before God, and then offer up these animals to the Lord. The flesh of the animals are turned into smoke that ascends to heaven and God is said to be “pleased” by the aroma. Which means that God looks favorably on the sacrifice, or to put it more simply, God accepts their apology and forgives their sin.

Though this is a repeated ritual by God, it would be a necessary one for these children to hear to remember that God would provide people, like Moses, who would intercede for them, and that the sins of their parents excluded them from the land due to their

presumptuous nature. God did not expect them to live perfectly, but to constantly seek repentance before Him in the way that He prescribed. As we talked about when we went over these rituals in Exodus, the promise of forgiveness is a powerful remedy to guilt and shame. To remember that while our sins are indeed awful and worthy of judgement that God has made a way for His children to be forgiven by Him and restored to perfect fellowship with Him.

All Glory to God

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you have come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving to you, ‘and you make an offering by fire to the LORD, a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering or in your appointed feasts, to make a sweet aroma to the LORD, from the herd or the flock...”

-Numbers 15:1-3

We’ll end with this point. The main ritual that God gives His people is an offering, not of sin, but of thanksgiving. Remember that the main thing that the earlier generation had forgotten was the goodness and glory of God. They had become so obsessed with their lack that they began to despise the very provision of God and this led them to rebel against God when they became afraid of the Canaanites.

By placing this ritual here, God is reminding His people of the importance of giving Him glory for all things. To put this another way, when they entered the land, their first priority would be to give thanksgiving and glory to God for their victory. The ritual here is similar to the sin offering but with a different perspective. Like the sin offering, these offerings are burnt and offered by an intercessor, but the purpose is not to restore a relationship with God, but to “commune” with God. This is why, included in this passage is a drink offering:

“...‘and you shall bring as the drink offering half a hin of wine as an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD.”

-Numbers 15:10

Wine in the ancient world was a symbol of pleasure, joy, luxury, and prosperity. To “burn” the wine was a picture of “transmuting” a meal before God so that the individual could share in an act of celebration with the Lord. They would enjoy their material food and drink, and God would relish the “aroma” from the smoke offered “up” to Him. A similar offering is given for their bread as well:

“Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you come into the land to which I bring you, ‘then it will be, when you eat of the bread of the land, that you shall offer up a heave offering to the LORD. ‘You shall offer up a cake of the first of your ground meal as a heave offering; as a heave offering of the threshing floor, so shall you offer it up. ‘Of the first of your ground meal you shall give to the LORD a heave offering throughout your generations.’”

-Numbers 15:18-21

This is, once again, a picture of “sharing” a meal with God. When they make bread, they “heave” the offering before God. This phrase denotes, potential, a “lifting up” of the bread towards God, which is again, a picture of “sharing” with the Lord. This is prophetically a way for Israel to prepare for the time when they could physically share a meal with their Messiah, namely Jesus. But also for the Christian, we still celebrate this when we partake in “Communion” or “The Lord’s Supper”.

We are, in a sense, sharing a small meal with our Savior that is founded in, and representative of, His very blood and body that purchased that communion. To put this more simply, in these offerings God is teaching His children that:

“...whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

-1 Corinthians 10:31

In their complaints and fears, they had become so self-focused they had forgotten the “glory” of God. The “glory” of God is another way to say His “weight, significance, majesty, or splendor”. It is the sheer value of God and their appreciation for Him. It is this concept that Moses emphasized so much in his prayer, let’s read it again so we can see this:

“And now, I pray, let the power of my Lord be great, just as You have spoken, saying, ‘The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.’ “Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray, according to the greatness of Your mercy, just as You have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.” Then the LORD said: “I have pardoned, according to your word; “but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD—“because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, “they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. “But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants

shall inherit it. "Now the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valley; tomorrow turn and move out into the wilderness by the Way of the Red Sea."

-Numbers 14:17-25

Though he is concerned with the well-being of the people, his chief concern is the glory of God. He is very worried that the "name" of the Lord would be tarnished amongst the pagan nations. He is acutely aware that the people of God bore His name within them. That His glory was manifest in them and that, for this reason, he desired the people of Israel to succeed so that they might glorify God.

In our own culture that is very self-focused, this is a hard concept for us to understand. We focus so much on the love and goodness of God, that we forget He is, above all else, the Lord of glory. It is His splendor and majesty that hold the universe together, all things were made by Him, they consist in His power, and they exist ultimately for Him, and we are included in that creation.

This doesn't mean that God doesn't love His children, but we must not get this backwards or we will act as the Israelites did. God does not exist for us, we exist for Him. The reason why they were thankless towards God is that they had forgotten that fact. They weren't thankful for His provision because they felt entitled to it. When God called them to suffer for a time in the wilderness, they were incensed. God for them had become like a slave in their consciousness. They felt as though God existed to satisfy their wants, and never considered that the call of God was for His own purposes and ultimately for His own glory. Consider a similar passage from the prophet Ezekiel:

"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. "And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD," says the Lord GOD, "when I am hallowed in you before their eyes."

-Ezekiel 36:22-23

God's concern is not primarily for His people but His own glory. For a human being, this would be extremely narcissistic to say, but that is because the universe *doesn't* exist for us and doesn't hold together in accordance with our will. We exist to worship and glorify God and therefore to turn all attention and glory to ourselves would be satanic and destructive. For God to do this is right. Because His glory really is all that we need, to focus all attention on Himself, God is giving mankind an entryway to bliss and satisfaction.

Like the Israelites we can easily find ourselves unhappy, because we are serving unworthy objects of greed, lust, pride, and ambition. The freedom that God offers to His people is the freedom to be rid of all that. To be comforted in the arms of our Creator, satisfied by His presence, and forgiven for all our sins. God's hatred of the pagan idols wasn't out of some base jealousy that was born out of egotism and selfishness, but a genuine care for His people. To put this more simply, God doesn't reject idolatry because He arbitrarily hates it, but because the idols that we build can't actually help us, only God can. It is for this reason that the true follower of God seeks to give God all the glory and to worship Him as fully as we can, for in our surrender to Him, we find our greatest freedom.