



## Numbers - Chapter Fifteen

### **III Numbers 13:1-19:22 - Forty Years Near Kadesh (continues)**

#### Summary of Chapter Fifteen

At each place where Israel encamped for a long time, laws were given: at Sinai (Exodus Chapter 20 to Numbers Chapter 9), Kadesh, and the plains of Moab (Numbers Chapters 28-36). The Kadesh laws are the briefest and are mainly clarifications of the Sinai laws. As well as dealing with the laws relating to offerings, they cover the penalties for violating the Sabbath and the need to wear tassels on garments to remind them of the laws of God.

#### **III.b Numbers 15:1-41 - The Law-giving at Kadesh**

Refer to the chapter summary above.

##### **III.b.i Numbers 15:1-31 - Various Offerings**

God amplifies and clarifies the laws on offerings to specify amounts of meat to offer along with the accompaniment of oil, bread and wine to be given. It is also stated that unintentional sin requires an offering of atonement but that unrepented sin will be punished by banishment or even death.

##### **III.b.i.1 Numbers 15:1-16 - Meal, Oil, and Wine to Accompany Sacrifice**

Leviticus Chapters 1-7, which explain how each type of sacrifice is to be conducted, does not explain that burnt-offerings (Leviticus Chapter 1) and peace-offerings (Leviticus Chapter 3) must be accompanied by appropriate quantities of meal, oil, and wine. This may be because such materials were not available in the wilderness. However, when the people finally arrived in the land the situation will be different. Then these other products will be available and, along with animal sacrifices, must be offered to God.

The imagery of sacrifice is drawn from that of a meal: the worshipper must act as the generous host and give to God all that he would give an important guest, as Abraham did when the Lord visited him (Genesis 18:1-8). It was not that God needed food, but these gifts showed the worshipper's devotion: <<*If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me*>> (Psalm 50:12-15).

The giving of these laws at this point is very telling. The entry into Canaan has just been delayed by nearly forty years, and an attempt to enter has failed (Numbers 14:20-45), so the question could be asked: would Israel ever enter the Promised Land? These laws emphatically answer yes. It is not a question of if they will enter the land, but rather when they will come in. In this way the laws reaffirm the land promise. Further, the continuing instructions show that God has indeed retained Israel as his people; refer to the comment made on 14:36-38. It is more than that, for the laws are an assurance that their harvests in the land would be abundant, as they stipulate that large quantities must be offered with each animal. The sacrifice of a lamb must be accompanied by about four tenths of a gallon or 1.9 litres of flour, two tenths of a gallon or 0.95 litres of oil, and the same amount of wine (vv.4-5). At least double quantities are needed for a bull (vv.8-10). Verses 14-16 allow Gentile immigrants to offer sacrifices, as long as they follow the same rules as the Israelites.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup> Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you, <sup>3</sup> and you make an offering by fire to the Lord from the herd or from the flock – whether a burnt-offering or a sacrifice, to fulfil a vow or as a freewill-offering or at your appointed festivals – to make a pleasing odour for the Lord, <sup>4</sup> then whoever presents such an offering to the Lord shall present also a grain-offering, one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour, mixed with one-fourth of a hin of oil. <sup>5</sup> Moreover, you shall offer one-fourth of a hin of wine as a drink-offering with the burnt-offering or the sacrifice, for each lamb.

### Numbers 15:1-5

When you come into the land you are to inhabit. God cared for Israel. These were commands that could only be fulfilled in the Promised Land. Inherent in these commands was the promise that God would lead them there, and would not leave them in the wilderness forever. God said: When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you. That is when and not if you come into the land. God has not, and will not give up on Israel. Many a believer under the rod of

God's correction has felt abandoned by God, as if he had given up on them, but God is always near to the believer under correction: <<**Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you'**>> (Hebrews 13:5).

Speak to the Israelites and say to them. Israel was at one of its lowest points in history. It had just rebelliously rejected God's offer to bring the nation into the Promised Land. God had consigned them to wander in the wilderness for a further 38 years, until the unbelieving generation had perished in the wilderness and a new generation of faith would then take the Promised Land. Yet, immediately after this stinging rebellion and the chastisement from the Lord, Israel received precious tokens of God's mercy, care, and help.

And you make an offering by fire to the Lord, whether a burnt-offering or a sacrifice. God was merciful to Israel, in that this section deals with sacrifice, sacrifice to cover sin and sacrifice as an expression of thanksgiving. Israel, at their point of failure, needed to be reminded of sacrificial atonement, and the need to give thanks, even in the wilderness.

The grain with the drink-offering of wine which was to accompany the blood sacrifice speak of thanksgiving and joy; believers really can have thanksgiving and joy in the Lord, even if they are hurting from their own failure and from the loving correction of God. This passage also shows how God helped Israel. This section reads just like the passages of law God had so patiently instructed Israel with at Sinai; now, after their failure at Kadesh-Barnea, God is taking them back to school, a time to be retaught the truth: they needed to be cleansed from their sins.

<sup>6</sup> For a ram, you shall offer a grain-offering, two-tenths of an ephah of choice flour mixed with one-third of a hin of oil; <sup>7</sup> and as a drink-offering you shall offer one-third of a hin of wine, a pleasing odour to the Lord. <sup>8</sup> When you offer a bull as a burnt-offering or a sacrifice, to fulfil a vow or as an offering of well-being to the Lord, <sup>9</sup> then you shall present with the bull a grain-offering, three-tenths of an ephah of choice flour, mixed with half a hin of oil, <sup>10</sup> and you shall present as a drink-offering half a hin of wine, as an offering by fire, a pleasing odour to the Lord.

#### Numbers 15:6-10

Choice flour mixed with one-third of a hin of oil. The offering of the ram and bull each needed progressively greater amounts of grain and wine to accompany them, because they were progressively bigger sacrifices. The greater the sacrifice to the Lord, the more thanksgiving and joy should come with the offering.

<sup>11</sup> Thus it shall be done for each ox or ram, or for each of the male lambs or the kids. <sup>12</sup> According to the number that you offer, so you shall do with each and every one. <sup>13</sup> Every native Israelite shall do these things in this way, in presenting an offering by fire, a pleasing odour to the Lord. <sup>14</sup> An alien who lives with you, or who takes up permanent residence among you, and wishes to offer an offering by fire, a pleasing odour to the Lord, shall do as you do. <sup>15</sup> As for the assembly, there shall be for both you and the resident alien a single statute, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you and the alien shall be alike before the Lord. <sup>16</sup> You and the alien who resides with you shall have the same law and the same ordinance.

### Numbers 15:11-16

So you shall do with each and every one. Everyone who made a sacrifice had to bring it with the thanksgiving of grain and the joy of wine; God did not want sacrifices brought to him that were given grudgingly or under complaint. If one could not serve <<*the Lord with gladness*>> (Psalm 100:2a), then God did not want their service at all.

An alien who lives with you. Everyone is encouraged to come into God's presence and make an offering for themselves before him. It was true of Israel; it is true of the church today.

### III.b.i.2 Numbers 15:17-21 - The Dough Offering

The Book of Leviticus, especially 19:24-25 and 23:10-11, insists that the first fruits of the crops must be given to God. This principle is now extended to baking. The first dough is given to the priests. Observant Jews today still remember this rule when they bake, by throwing a small lump of dough into the fire.

<sup>17</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>18</sup> Speak to the Israelites and say to them: After you come into the land to which I am bringing you, <sup>19</sup> whenever you eat of the bread of the land, you shall present a donation to the Lord. <sup>20</sup> From your first batch of dough you shall present a loaf as a donation; you shall present it just as you present a donation from the threshing-floor. <sup>21</sup> Throughout your generations you shall give to the Lord a donation from the first of your batch of dough.

### Numbers 15:17-21

After you come into the land to which I am bringing you. This shows how rich in promise and encouragement these commands are. God sets their mind on the

Promised Land, even though they are a long way away from it. Keeping their minds on his promise will help see them through the wilderness and prepare the hearts of the new generation to succeed where the old generation failed.

Throughout your generations you shall give to the Lord a donation from the first of your batch of dough. The dough offering is given to the Lord by presenting it to his priests: <<*The first of all the first fruits of all kinds, and every offering of all kinds from all your offerings, shall belong to the priests; you shall also give to the priests the first of your dough, in order that a blessing may rest on your house*>> (Ezekiel 44:30). This is a holy offering to the Lord; the blessing that is returned is therefore a holy blessing: <<*If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy*>> (Romans 11:16).

### III.b.i.3 Numbers 15:22-31 - Sacrifices for Unintentional Sins

Sins by mistake, i.e. unpremeditated sins, or sins committed when the person did not know the action was sinful (Leviticus 4:1-5:13) may be atoned for by offering a sin-offering.

<sup>22</sup> But if you unintentionally fail to observe all these commandments that the Lord has spoken to Moses — <sup>23</sup> everything that the Lord has commanded you by Moses, from the day the Lord gave commandment and thereafter, throughout your generations — <sup>24</sup> then if it was done unintentionally without the knowledge of the congregation, the whole congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt-offering, a pleasing odour to the Lord, together with its grain-offering and its drink-offering, according to the ordinance, and one male goat for a sin-offering. <sup>25</sup> The priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the Israelites, and they shall be forgiven; it was unintentional, and they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to the Lord, and their sin-offering before the Lord, for their error. <sup>26</sup> All the congregation of the Israelites shall be forgiven, as well as the aliens residing among them, because the whole people was involved in the error.

#### Numbers 15:22-26

These verses recall the rule for a sin of the congregation, as recorded in Leviticus 4:13-21.

If you unintentionally fail to observe all these commandments. Significantly, the Bible talks about sins unintentionally committed. Many today think and live as if an

unintentional action cannot be sin. However, many of the worst sins are committed with the best of intentions. Intentions matter nothing when the result is sin and all sin requires atonement, ultimately the crucifixion of Jesus.

Especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, all sorts of horrific atrocities and terror have been committed by those dedicated to honourable causes; communism sought to establish a just, fair economy where each worked according to his ability and received according to his need, and became the instrument of the genocide of tens of millions of people. Today, in the church, many a gossip, many a talebearer, many a divisive person will claim the best of intentions. Even if it is agreed that they have the right intentions, they still may be in grievous sin. The same applies for a myriad of other sins that are often readily ignored or which people think lightly of, all on the basis of 'after all, they had good intentions.'

The whole congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt-offering. Unintentional sins needed blood atonement; a bull had to be sacrificed with the nation as a whole was guilty, and a female goat had to be sacrificed when an individual was guilty.

The priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the Israelites, and they shall be forgiven. This is a repeat of the earlier law: *<<He shall do with the bull just as is done with the bull of sin-offering; he shall do the same with this. The priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven>>* (Leviticus 4:20). Paul shows how this has now been extended to all who believe: *<<But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus>>* (Romans 3:21-26).

<sup>27</sup> An individual who sins unintentionally shall present a female goat a year old for a sin-offering. <sup>28</sup> And the priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the one who commits an error, when it is unintentional, to make atonement for the person, who then shall be forgiven. <sup>29</sup> For both the native among the Israelites and the alien residing among them – you shall have the same law for anyone who acts in error.

### Numbers 15:27-29

This is the rule for an individual, as confirmed by Leviticus 4:27-35. Minor changes from Leviticus are introduced, e.g. the congregation must offer a bull and a goat, not just a bull, while the individual may offer only a female goat a year old, not a lamb. The reason for these changes is unclear.

The fact that a sacrifice must be given even for the one who commits an error, or who sins unintentionally, implies that such sin still requires atonement, although it is not counted to be as serious as wilful sin. A non-Israelite, i.e. the alien residing among them, may also seek atonement for unintentional sin.

The Exodus was not just for the Israelites as they took with them many other nationalities, some who were probably fellow slaves and even some Egyptians who realised that the God of Israel was more powerful than their gods and the one whom they wished to serve.

You shall have the same law for anyone who acts in error. There was to be no exception. Sin is sin, and must be accounted as such, even if the motive seemed good.

<sup>30</sup> But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people.

<sup>31</sup> Because of having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt.

### Numbers 15:30-31

Sins committed high-handedly must refer to deliberate, intentional sins, since these are contrasted with unintentional sins. High-handedly suggests lifting up a hand in defiance against God, and such a sin cannot be atoned for: *<<For if we wilfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgement, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people'>>* (Hebrews 10:26-30). Those who sin consciously and deliberately shall be cut off, i.e. excluded from the community or more likely die suddenly and mysteriously as punishment from God; refer to Genesis 17:14, Exodus 12:15 and 31:14, Numbers 9:13 and the comment made on Numbers 9:6-14.

### III.b.ii Numbers 15:32-36 - Penalty for Violating the Sabbath

This seems to be a case of sinning high-handedly and publicly too so that the offender is actually executed, not just left to be 'cut off', which applied only when the offender escaped human detection. In this case it is clear that the man has sinned, since all work on the Sabbath is prohibited: <<*But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns*>> (Exodus 20:10), including lighting a fire: <<*You shall kindle no fire in all your dwellings on the sabbath day*>> (Exodus 35:3). However, in this case the people did not know what his punishment should be: <<*it had not been made clear what should be done to him*>> (v.34). The mode of his execution underlines the importance of observing the Sabbath.

<sup>32</sup> When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the sabbath day. <sup>33</sup> Those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses, Aaron, and to the whole congregation. <sup>34</sup> They put him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. <sup>35</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, 'The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him outside the camp.' <sup>36</sup> The whole congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death, just as the Lord had commanded Moses.

#### Numbers 15:32-36

They found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. This was an immediate example of dealing with someone who sinned presumptuously. All of Israel knew the Sabbath law, and this man acted outside the law, disregarding the will of God.

The man shall be put to death. God commanded the execution of this presumptuous sinner so that all might fear the consequences of deliberately opposing God's laws. This was so all would know that the social order and law of God are more important than any individual's right to attack or destroy that social order or law of God.

All the congregation shall stone him outside the camp. Responsibility for carrying out God's laws did not just lie with leaders or priests; it was for the entire congregation to participate in the just punishment, potentially including friends and relatives of the condemned man.

**The entire people of Nazareth tried to stone Jesus before his ministry had even started:** <<*They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff*>> (Luke 4:29). However, this came to nothing as it did at other times, for

**example:** <<At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come>> (John 7:30), and: <<He spoke these words while teaching in the temple courts near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized him, because his hour had not yet come>> (John 8:20). Eventually, his time for death came and he was taken outside of the city to be crucified: <<Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek>> (John 19:20).

### III.b.iii Numbers 15:37-41 - Fringes on Garments

In the ancient world, fringes, i.e. tassels, were worn by nobles and other high-class people. In Israel they are to be worn by everyone as a mark of their status as the chosen people. Blue was used in the tabernacle curtains and in the priests' vestments (Exodus 26:31 and 28:31). So the blue threads reminded the Israelites that they were <<**a priestly kingdom and a holy nation**>> (Exodus 19:6a). This meant they had to remember and observe all the Lord's commandments (v.40). In particular, they had to avoid the mistake of the spies who followed after their own heart (v.39).

<sup>37</sup> The Lord said to Moses: <sup>38</sup> Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. <sup>39</sup> You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. <sup>40</sup> So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. <sup>41</sup> I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God.

#### Numbers 15:37-41

Tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments, and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. These were intended to remind Israel to whom they belonged; they were God's people. Such reminders are an effective preventive remedy for sin. Perhaps a blue thread was commanded because the Ark of the Covenant was covered with a blue cloth, blue curtains adorned the tabernacle, and blue was in the high priest's garments. The colour blue was full of holy reminders.

It seems that tassels were part of Jesus' clothing in observance of this requirement and that the 'fringes' touched for healing by the sick in Matthew's Gospel would have been tassels, since the same Greek word used for tassel in

the Septuagint is also used in Matthew, Greek *kraspedon*; refer to Matthew 9:20 and 14:36.

So that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them. One might imagine an Israelite being tempted into some kind of sin, and then catching sight of his own distinctive garments, reminding him of who he is, and reminding him that others can see who he is: a child of God, and not a child of the sin he is contemplating. In this sense, Christian theme clothing and jewellery and such can indeed serve a purpose. Such things can remind Christians of who they are, and provide a kind of ‘walking accountability’ for their conduct. However, man’s instinctive pride always has a way of perverting such good and holy commands of God; in Jesus’ day, he directly rebuked the abuse of this command among the religious elite, speaking of how they would enlarge the borders of their garments: <<***They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long***>> (Matthew 23:5), making the tasselled area as conspicuous as possible, as an ostentatious display of their ‘holiness.’ The same can also be said of today’s Christian theme clothing and jewellery; it can also be abused in the same self-righteous, hypocritical manner.

And not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. There is a play on words with the expression ‘to follow’, for this verb, Hebrew *tur*, means both ‘to spy’ and ‘to follow,’ and thus alludes to the danger found in following their own whims rather than being absolutely loyal to the divine commandments.