

# The Lord's Guidance for the Discouraged

## *Numbers 15*

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### **The Situation in the Wilderness**

Moses and the people of Israel are in a very dangerous situation. They have left Mount Sinai, traveled to the place where they will stage the invasion of the promised land, and because of their failure to trust the Lord, an entire generation has been told they will not enter the land. Back in chapter 1 of Numbers, while the people were still at Sinai, a detailed census was taken of every tribe. The summary is given in verses 45 and 46:

*“So all those listed of the people of Israel, by their fathers’ houses, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel — all those listed were 603,550.”*

It is this generation of over 600,000 fighting men who are told, in the last words the Lord speaks in Numbers 14:

*“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 of all 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.... 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.’”*

Can you imagine what it must have felt like to hear those words? And even for the young people — those not included in the census and who would eventually enter the land — the news of forty years in the wilderness must have been devastating. If there was ever a moment when the people of Israel felt discouraged, this was it. And it raises an urgent question: how are they to live in the wilderness without being crushed by that discouragement? How will their journey become one of joy and courage rather than despair?

Discouragement is the feeling that life is not going to get better. It is a loss of confidence, a loss of hope, a loss of any sense that what you do matters. I am sure there were some in that

generation for whom the presence of God dwelling in their midst was enough — whose joy was not diminished even by this terrible news. But as we will see as we move through Numbers, many were so discouraged that their response to God became: *what is the point?* Why should I worship you? Why should I obey you? Why should I follow you? What matters if my life is to be lived out in this wilderness?

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## **Discouragement in Our Own Day**

Have you been there? Have you ever felt like what you do does not matter? Have you failed and lost your confidence? Have you wondered what the point of it all is? Have you been so disheartened or demoralized that doing what is right or good seemed meaningless?

It seems to me that we are living in a day when people everywhere are discouraged. I think this pervasive hopelessness is behind the steady rise in suicides. I read stories in the news of people walking into workplaces and opening fire on colleagues — and I find myself thinking, *what must life have become for that person, that nothing mattered anymore?* That is the world out there.

But what about us — followers of Jesus? I think Christians are deeply discouraged today as well. I know I can be. I am discouraged when my values and beliefs are under constant attack. I am discouraged when the wider culture tells me that my convictions about marriage, sexual morality, the wonder of creation, and the sanctity of life are hateful, ignorant, backwards, and harmful. I am discouraged as a Christian and as a pastor when people are more eager to watch the next episode of a television series than to open God's Word. I am discouraged by reports that this past year more churches in the United States closed than were opened. I am discouraged when I see the faith hijacked by political agendas, when I see the gospel commercialized, when I see how quickly and easily people surrender to despair. Discouragement is always a downward spiral — disheartened leads to demoralized, and demoralized leads somewhere darker still.

So the question is the same for us as it was for Israel: how are we to live in the wilderness of today as God's people, without that ongoing, crushing sense of discouragement? How will our journey become one of joy and courage?

Numbers 15 is God's answer to that question. The people of Israel are discouraged. They do not want to be obedient to the Lord. They do not want to move forward. Many seem more prepared to die in the wilderness than to trust and follow. And so in Numbers 15, the Lord gives them — and gives us — three words of guidance for the discouraged.

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## First: Fix Your Eyes on the Future Promises of God

The first word of encouragement is found in Numbers 15:1–16. The instruction the Lord gives to discouraged people is to live now with their eyes fixed on the future hope and promises of God — trusting the Lord to fulfill what he has promised.

Here is how the passage opens:

“*The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land you are to inhabit...’*”

Do you see what the Lord does first? Before anything else, he directs Moses to get the people thinking about the land they are going to inhabit. And this instruction is addressed to everyone — to all the people of Israel — which suggests to me that even those who would not personally enter the land were meant to live in the present shaped by that future promise.

What follows is a set of instructions that can only be carried out *after* the promises of God are fulfilled. The Lord goes on:

“*When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you, and you offer to the LORD from the herd or from the flock a food offering or a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed feasts, to make a pleasing aroma to the LORD, then he who brings his offering shall offer to the LORD a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil; and you shall offer with the burnt offering, or for the sacrifice, a quarter of a hin of wine for the drink offering for each lamb.*”

Notice what is embedded in these instructions. Fine flour from wheat — and wheat takes six to eight months to grow from planting. Oil from olives — and an olive tree takes roughly five years to begin bearing fruit. Wine from grapes — and it is three to four years from the planting of a vine to the first vintage. What the Lord is calling the Israelites to envision is not merely an abstract future, but a *specific, abundant* future: fields of wheat and barley, olive trees heavy with fruit, vineyards on the hillsides. Every ingredient in these offerings is a picture of God’s faithfulness made tangible. The instructions themselves are a promise.

If you are discouraged today, the first word of instruction is this: get your eyes and your mind off the things that are causing your discouragement, and fix them on what the Lord has promised you. The promises I hold onto — the ones that pull me out of discouragement — are these: that the Lord will never leave me and is present with me through his Spirit; that the Lord is *for* me; that he is active and at work in this world through his Church; that his way of working is different from the world’s way; that following and knowing him is the source of

real, abundant life; that death has been defeated, that this life is not all there is, and that there is a life far greater than anything we see now.

Somehow, these promises change everything. They breathe life and courage into the present, even when the present is hard. That is the first word of guidance for the discouraged: live now with your eyes fixed on the future hope and promises of God.

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## **Second: Your Failures Are Not Fatal or Final**

The second word of guidance begins at verse 17 and runs through verse 36. The Lord's instruction here is a reminder of his forgiveness — because one of the deepest sources of life-altering discouragement is the weight of our own failures and sins.

People ask themselves: Did I make the right career choice? Did I marry the right person? Did I wander from God's plan for my life? Have I wrecked everything with bad decisions? The answer the Lord gives here is that because of his forgiveness, your sins and failures do not have the last word on your life. He always provides a way back to himself. He is the giver and creator of life, over and over again.

We see this in the passage:

*“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land to which I bring you... But if you sin unintentionally, and do not observe all these commandments that the LORD has spoken to Moses, all that the LORD has commanded you by Moses, from the day that the LORD gave commandment, and onward throughout your generations, then if it was done unintentionally without the knowledge of the congregation, all the congregation shall offer one bull from the herd for a burnt offering, a pleasing aroma to the LORD, with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the rule, and one male goat for a sin offering...’”*

And dropping to verse 27:

*“If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.”*

The point is clear: through an atoning sacrifice, the Lord provides a way back to himself. Sin can be forgiven. Bad decisions are not the final word.

Now I want to explain what the text means by “unintentional sin,” and the best way to do that is in contrast with what comes next. Verse 30:

“*But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person 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 utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him.*”

There are two categories of sin in view here. I want to suggest that “unintentional sin” describes not merely the action — sin committed in ignorance — but also the *motive* and *consequence*. The unintentional sin is the sin that a person grieves. It is the posture of someone who says, *Lord, if I have done something that has damaged my walk with you, forgive me — I want a way back, I want to be near you.* The defining mark is repentance and a desire for restoration.

The high-handed sin is its opposite. It is sin committed as an act of defiance — a fist raised at God that says: I do not want you. I do not want your will. I am going to break your law as a deliberate declaration of my rebellion against you. It is this willful rejection of God that finds no forgiveness. This is what C. S. Lewis had in mind when he wrote about heaven and hell. Heaven is where a person says to God, *Thy will be done.* Hell is where God says to the person, *Thy will be done.*

Verses 32–36 give us a concrete example. A man is found gathering sticks on the Sabbath. It is not, in itself, a dramatic sin — and I think that is precisely the point. Something as small as picking up sticks on the Sabbath can be a high-handed sin if the motive behind it is rejection of God. Going out to gather sticks, make a fire, and carry on with the day is a public declaration: *I do not care about the Lord or his way.* That is what makes it high-handed — and this man receives no forgiveness and dies for it.

Before moving on, I feel I need to say something directly: if you are afraid that you have committed a high-handed sin and may be unforgivable, you are not. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul writes about a man in the church committing a sexual sin so egregious that he says it does not even occur among pagans. Paul commands the church to remove this man from their fellowship. Yet in 2 Corinthians 2, we read of the same man repenting — and Paul urges the church to forgive him and restore him, writing: *“I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”* This man was committing something far worse than gathering sticks on the Sabbath. And he was forgiven.

Because of God’s love and forgiveness, no sin you have committed has the last word. Your failures and sins are not fatal, and they are not final.

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### Third: Practice the Presence of God

The third word of guidance for the discouraged comes in verses 37–41, and it is this: practice the presence of God in your life. Live each day, each moment, with an awareness of his work and presence around you.

*“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. 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.’”*

Discouragement comes from the heart, and our hearts are deceptive. When our hearts are left to wander and fix themselves on the things of this world, we go astray and are led down paths of despair. So the Lord puts something physical and visible before the Israelites — tassels on the corners of their garments — to call them back, each day, to the memory of his commands, his salvation, and his presence. The purpose is holiness: *so you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.*

The blue thread woven into each tassel is particularly significant. In the ancient world, producing blue dye was extraordinarily difficult and expensive. Because of its rarity and cost, blue was reserved for the priesthood and for the fabric draped inside the tabernacle — the place where the glory of God dwelt. The blue thread was a visual connection to that holy place. To have it running through the tassel at the corner of your garment was to carry with you, every day, a reminder of the place where God makes his dwelling. You were marked as someone connected to the presence of God.

How do I practice the presence of God today? Through the practices of praise, worship, and fellowship — music matters, conversation about Scripture matters, hearing stories of God at work in people’s lives matters. Through time in Scripture, making it part of the rhythm of each day rather than an occasional event. Through prayer, not as a transaction or a discipline to complete, but as an enjoyment of God’s company. And through obedience — through staying attentive to the movement of the Spirit. Sometimes that means picking up the phone and calling someone. Sometimes it means stopping to help, or simply asking how someone is doing. Practicing the presence of God is not always dramatic or life-changing. Very often it is found in the small, ordinary acts of faithfulness.

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## A Word to Our Church

These are the three things the Lord gives as instruction and guidance for the discouraged: fix your eyes upon the future hope and promises of God; receive his forgiveness, because your failures are not fatal or final; and practice his presence in your daily life.

I want to close by applying these things to us as a community — because we as a church need to be doing all three. We need to fix our eyes on the future hope and promises of God. We need to practice forgiveness. And we need to enjoy the presence of God among us.

We have done two of these things together this morning at the Lord's Table — remembering his forgiveness, and seeking his presence. That is a good place to stand as we look toward the future.

And there is a future to look toward. We are coming out of a year of COVID-19, and there are real questions before us as a congregation: questions about our space, about the timing and format of our services, about creative ways to reach people in this community who will not walk through our doors, about how we support families. Many of our ministries were shut down or severely limited this past year. We are at a moment of reset, and it raises the question: where is God leading us? Who does God want us to be? How are we to be his people in this community?

I have a sense of where he is leading, but I want to hear from you — all of you, not just members, but everyone for whom this is *your* church, the place where you bring your time and talents and treasure. I believe that if the Lord is working in my heart, he is working in yours. So beginning next Sunday and running through the end of June, I would like each of you to participate in a small focus group. Not a large gathering where no real conversation can happen, but a small group where we can talk honestly about five questions:

What are your hopes and dreams for our church? How many times per week should the church provide teaching and learning opportunities — for children, youth, and adults? Should we offer one or two services on Sunday morning? What do you think of a specific ministry idea we will describe? And what ideas do you have for our church to be a blessing to this community where God has placed us?

Sign-up sheets are in the entryway. Focus groups will meet on Sundays at 2:00 and 3:30. Please write your name, phone number, and any preference for time. As people sign up, they will be placed in a time slot and contacted with the details.

One more thing: we need volunteers. This past year brought changes in many people's lives and seasons, and we cannot simply flip a switch and return to how we did church before. A big reason for that is people. We need volunteers — many of them — to help run Sunday school, AWANA, children's church, and youth ministry. Our safe church policy now requires two adults in every room, which has significantly increased that need. I know there are many ways

people serve the Lord, in this church and beyond it, and not everyone is a Sunday school teacher. But when we are thinking about the future generation — about the children and young people who are growing up right now — I am not sure there is much more important than investing yourself in what we are doing for them here. If we share the load, it becomes lighter for everyone. Lee is our point person for children's and youth ministry, and I am asking for your help.

Additionally, our sound team has asked for more people to be trained and brought into the rotation. If you would like to learn the sound board, please speak with Major Simms.