

Numbers Chapter 15 – The Law-giving at Kadesh

Forty Years near Kadesh. The central section of the book of Numbers brings together events spanning 40 years, when the Israelites lived in and near Kadesh-barnea. Kadesh is a large oasis at the southern limit of the land of Canaan. When Israel arrived at that oasis, they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. But as a result of the rebellion prompted by the spies' negative reports, God punished the people by making them wait 40 years to enter the land (Numbers 13-14). A few important episodes from this period are recounted in chapters 15–19.

Chapter 15: The Law-giving at Kadesh. At each place where Israel encamped for a long time, laws were given: at Sinai (Exodus 20–Numbers 9), Kadesh (Numbers 15), and the plains of Moab (Numbers 28–36). The Kadesh laws are the briefest and are mainly clarifications of the Sinai laws.

Num. 15:1–16 Meal, Oil, and Wine to Accompany Sacrifice. Leviticus 1–7, which explains how each type of sacrifice is to be conducted, does not explain that burnt offerings (Leviticus 1) and peace offerings (Leviticus 3) must be accompanied by appropriate quantities of meal, oil, and wine. This may be because such materials were not available in the wilderness. But **when you come into the land** (Num. 15:2), the situation will be different. Then these other products will be available and must be offered to God along with the animal sacrifices. The imagery of sacrifice is drawn from that of a meal: the worshiper must act as the generous host and give to God all that he would give an important guest.

Num. 15:17–21 The Dough Offering. The book of Leviticus (19:24–25; 23:10–11) requires that the firstfruits of the crops must be given to God. After they enter the land, the rule will extend 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.

Num. 15:22–31 Sacrifices for Unintentional Sins. God reminds the people of the Law of atonement regarding sins by mistake (i.e., unpremeditated sins, or sins done when the person did not know the action was sinful; cf. Lev. 4:1–5:13). This Law will remain in effect “onward throughout your generations.”

Num. 15:30–31 Sins committed with a high hand refer to deliberate, intentional sins. A “high hand” suggests lifting up a hand in defiance against God, and such a sin cannot be atoned for (see Heb. 10:26–30). Those who sin consciously and deliberately **shall be cut off** (i.e., die suddenly and mysteriously as punishment from God; see Gen. 17:14; Ex. 12:15; 31:14; Num. 9:6–14).

Purpose of the Law-giving at Kadesh The people of Israel have just been banned from the Promised Land for 40 years, yet these laws given in Chapter 15 will apply only after they have entered the Promised Land (see 15:2, 15:18). Why does God give them this Law at this point in time? What discouragements must the people have been feeling that this law-giving would have soothed?

Application

When you sin or fall short, what discouragements do you feel? What encourages you during those times? Romans 8:32-34 and 1 Peter 2:9. The warning about sinning “with a high hand” prefigures apostasy from Christ. Hebrews 10:26-31

Read Numbers 15:32–36 A Sabbathbreaker Executed. This seems to be a case of sinning “with a high hand”—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. The mode of his execution underlines the importance of observing the Sabbath.

Read Numbers 15:37–41 Tassels on Clothes. In the ancient world, 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 (Ex. 26:31; 28:31). So the blue threads reminded the Israelites that they were “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). This meant they had to remember and do all my commandments (Num. 15:40). In particular, they had to avoid the mistake of the spies of following “after your own heart” (v. 39). There is a play on words with the expression to follow, for this verb (Hb. *tur*) means both “to spy” and “to follow,” and thus alludes to the danger found in following their own whims rather than the divine commandments.

Sidenote: Tassels were likely a part of Jesus' clothing in observance of this requirement and the “fringes” touched for healing by the sick may have been “tassels” (Greek *kraspedon* means “tassel” or “fringe”). See Matt. 9:20; 14:36.