

NUMBERS

Chapter 14

The People Rebel

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” 4 And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” 5 Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. 6 And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes 7 and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, “The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. 8 If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. 9 Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.” 10 Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel. 11 And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? 12 I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

14:1–4 The people complain with new vigor (cf 11:1) and prefer slavery to the challenges and responsibilities of freedom. (TLSB)

14:1 *congregation raised a loud cry.* The frightening words of the faithless spies led to mourning by the entire community and to their great rebellion against the Lord. They forgot all the miracles the Lord had done for them, they despised his mercies, and they spurned his might. In their ingratitude they preferred death (v. 2). (CSB)

This outburst of dissatisfaction exceeded previous murmurings. (TLSB)

14:3 *little ones.* The most reprehensible charge against God’s grace was that concerning their children. Only their children would survive (see vv. 31–33). (CSB)

become a prey. Enslavement or death. (TLSB)

14:4 *choose a leader.* Lit, “give a head”; as if they were saying, “Let us be headstrong and insist this time to have things our way.” (TLSB)

14:5 *fell on their faces.* Moses and Aaron begged the people to turn from their rebellion. (TLSB)

14:6 *tore their clothes.* Gesture by which Joshua and Caleb warned the Israelites that their action was equivalent to blasphemy (cf Mt 26:65; Ac 14:14). They continued to rally them to trust the Lord, but the contenders for the Lord barely escaped being stoned by the rioting people (v 10). (TLSB)

14:9 *they are bread.* Although the land “devours its inhabitants” (13:32), the Israelites would be able to overcome them as easily as eating bread. (TLSB)

the LORD is with us. There are no walls, no fortifications, no factors of size or bearing, and certainly no gods that can withstand the onslaught of God’s people when the Lord is with them. (CSB)

14:10 *the glory of the LORD appeared.* The theophany (manifestation of God) must have been staggering in its sudden and intense display of his majesty and wrath. (CSB)

14:11–12 *signs.* Miracles and acts of grace, through which God may create faith. (TLSB)

14:11 *despise me.* By refusing to believe in the Lord’s power, especially in view of all the wonders they had experienced, the people of Israel were holding him in contempt. (CSB)

14:12 *I will make you into a nation.* For the second time since the exodus, God speaks of starting over with Moses in creating a people faithful to himself (see Ex 32:10). (CSB)

14:1–12 The doubt of 10 spies poisons the entire camp. God has limits to His patience. The chief sin, as illustrated by the First Commandment, is lack of faith in who God is and what He has done. When you doubt and fail, His Word remains good. Call on Him in repentance, for He grants faith by grace through His precious Word. • Father, we long to follow You. Send Your Word and Spirit to gently lead us. Amen. (TLSB)

Moses Intercedes for the People

13 But Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, **14** and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people. For you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. **15** Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, **16** ‘It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.’ **17** And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, **18** ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.’ **19** Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.”

14:13–19 Account of Moses’ appeal to God for Israel. Moses admits that the Lord would be just if He were to “kill this people as one man” (v 15). He rested his appeal for divine forbearance entirely in God. The appeal anticipates God’s mission to the nations, based on His reputation as a righteous judge and redeemer. (TLSB)

14:13 *the Egyptians will hear about it!* Moses desires to protect the Lord’s reputation. The enemies of God’s people will charge the Lord with inability to complete his deliverance and will be contemptuous of his power. (CSB)

14:14–16 They would scoff, because in their view the defeat of a people was also proof of the impotence of their gods (cf Ex 9:29; 12:12; Jgs 16:24; Is 37:18–20). (TLSB)

14:14 *face to face.* For a similar expression. (TLSB)

14:17–19 Moses now moves from the Lord’s reputation to his character, presenting a composite quotation of his own words of loyal love for and faithful discipline of his people (see Ex 20:6; 34:6–7). (CSB)

14:18 “Even the saints have sins. The innocent shall not be innocent” (Ap V 208). (TLSB)

14:19 *steadfast love*. See p 843. Moses knew this kind of daring wrestling with God for the life of Israel was valid only if God would “pardon the iniquity of this people.” In “forgiving iniquity and transgression” (v 18), His glory shines most brilliantly (Ex 34:6–9). (TLSB)

14:13–19 The nations inhabiting the Promised Land already know God’s name. His power and majesty have preceded Him. Moses argues that if God were to destroy the Israelites for their rebellion, God’s holy name would be defamed. So Moses appeals to God for mercy. And God is merciful; He hears the prayers of the righteous (Pr 15:29). What a blessing to know that our humble prayers are heard by the very Creator of heaven and earth. Because of Christ’s obedience, we dare to call Him “Abba, Father.” • Please pardon us, O Lord, according to the greatness of Your steadfast love, by which You delivered Israel. Amen. (TLSB)

God Promises Judgment

20 Then the LORD said, “I have pardoned, according to your word. **21** But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, **22** none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, **23** shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it. **24** But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. **25** Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.” **26** And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, **27** “How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me. **28** Say to them, ‘As I live, declares the LORD, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you: **29** 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, **30** 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. **31** But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. **32** But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. **33** And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. **34** According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.’ **35** 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.” **36** And the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation grumble against him by bringing up a bad report about the land— **37** the men who brought up a bad report of the land—died by plague before the LORD. **38** Of those men who went to spy out the land, only Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive.

14:20–23 God always forgives penitent sinners, even more than 70 times 7 (Mt 18:21–22). But the temporal consequences of disobedience to His will serve His purposes in the lives of His people. (TLSB)

14:20 *according to your word*. Moses’ prayer of intercession “has great power as it is working” (Jas 5:16; cf Gn 18:22–33). (TLSB)

14:21 *all the earth*. The Lord reveals the scope of His presence and mission through Israel. Ambrose: “[God is] present in all His fullness at one and the same moment, in heaven, in earth, in the deepest depth

of the sea, to sight invisible, by speech not to be declared, by feeling not to be measured; to be followed by faith, to be adored with devotion” (NPNF 2 10:218) (TLSB)

14:22 *ten times*. Perhaps to be enumerated as follows: (1) Ex 14:10–12; (2) Ex 15:22–24; (3) Ex 16:1–3; (4) Ex 16:19–20; (5) Ex 16:27–30; (6) Ex 17:1–4; (7) Ex 32:1–35; (8) Nu 11:1–3; (9) 11:4–34; (10) 14:3. But “ten times” may also be a way of saying “many times.” (CSB)

Round figure (our “dozen times”). Although the number of recorded murmurings approached this total, the measure of Israelite iniquities was full. The number 10 also corresponds with the number of unfaithful spies (cf 13:25–33). (TLSB)

14:24 *my servant Caleb has a different spirit*. Caleb seems to be singled out; perhaps the words of vv. 7–9 were his, and he was joined in them by Joshua. Caleb’s ultimate vindication came 45 years later (see note on 13:22; see also Jos 14:10). (CSB)

Cf v 6. Joshua was to be Moses’ successor. He and Caleb were the only ones not to be affected by the Lord’s decree. (TLSB)

14:25 *the way to the Red Sea*. Northeast arm of the Red Sea, now known as the Gulf of Aqaba. (TLSB)

14:28 *what you have said in my hearing I will do to you*. The people of Israel brought upon themselves their punishment. They had said that they would rather die in the desert (v. 2) than be led into Canaan to die by the sword. All those 20 years old or more, who were counted in the census, were to die in the desert (v. 29). The only exceptions would be Joshua and Caleb (v. 30). Only their children would survive (v. 31)—the children that the people said God would allow to die in the desert (v. 3). (CSB)

14:29 *all ... listed in the census*. Cf ch 1. (TLSB)

14:30–31 Irony. Helpless children would rise to defeat their enemies. (TLSB)

14:33 *faithlessness*. Lit, “whoredoms.” (TLSB)

14:34–35 *forty years*. Two years had elapsed since the liberation from Egypt. During the remaining 38 years of wandering, this wicked congregation was to “come to a full end.” (TLSB)

14:34 The 40 days of the travels of the spies became the numerical pattern for their suffering: one year for one day—for 40 years they would recount their misjudgment, and for 40 years the people 20 years old or more would be dying, so that only the young generation might enter the land. Significantly, Israel’s refusal to carry out the Lord’s commission to conquer his land is the climactic act of rebellion for which God condemns Israel to die in the desert. (CSB)

14:35 *gathered together against Me*. Unlike other instances (e.g., Ex 32:26), the whole people were united in rebellion. (TLSB)

14:37 *the men who brought up a bad report...died by plagued*. The judgment on the ten evil spies was immediate; the generation that they influenced would live out their lives in the desert. (CSB)

Those who lead others into temptation have the greater sin (Mt 18:6–7). (TLSB)

plague. Lit, “blow,” “strike.” Describes the plagues of the exodus in Ex 9:14. (TLSB)

14:20–38 Those persons 20 years and older will not see the land God promised. Yet God will not bring destruction on all Israel for their disobedience. Caleb, Joshua, and the next generation will inhabit the new land. The awe of God’s mercy is evident. God does not deliver what the Israelites truly deserve for their insolence. Instead, He shows mercy by raising up a new generation to inherit His promise. • “Shepherd of tender youth, Guiding in love and truth Through devious ways; Christ, our triumphant king, We come Your name to sing And here our children bring To join Your praise.” Amen. (*LSB* 864:1) (TLSB)

Israel Defeated in Battle

39 When Moses told these words to all the people of Israel, the people mourned greatly. **40** And they rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, “Here we are. We will go up to the place that the LORD has promised, for we have sinned.” **41** But Moses said, “Why now are you transgressing the command of the LORD, when that will not succeed? **42** Do not go up, for the LORD is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies. **43** For there the Amalekites and the Canaanites are facing you, and you shall fall by the sword. Because you have turned back from following the LORD, the LORD will not be with you.” **44** But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses departed out of the camp. **45** Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them and pursued them, even to Hormah.

14:40 *heights*. Common places of prayer. (TLSB)

We will go up. Now, too late, the people determine to go up to the land they had refused. Such a course of action was doomed to failure. Not only was the Lord not with them; he was against them (v. 41). Their subsequent defeat (v. 45) was another judgment the rebellious people brought down upon their own heads. (CSB)

Revolting against God’s leadership, the people had just said, “Let us ... go back to Egypt” (v 4). Now they insist on giving evidence of their faith, but in their own way and in defiance of God’s direct command. Despair and presumption are two inevitable consequences of unbelief (cf Jer 17:9; Eph 4:22–23). (TLSB)

14:42 *the Lord is not among you*. The Israelites angered God so severely that He sentenced them to c 38 years of wandering in the wilderness, thwarting their high-handed attempt to penetrate the land at once from the south (cf v 45). (TLSB)

14:44 *the ark ... Moses*. Emblems of God’s presence and approval. (TLSB)

14:45 *Hormah*. Lit, “complete destruction.” (TLSB)

14:39–45 The Israelites completely change plans, but again ignore God’s Word. Sham obedience meets with God’s resistance. He knows the truth about human hearts. In view of this, do not persist in your sin, as Israel did, or be slow to repent. Hear God’s gracious call to repentance each day. Rejoice in the Word and in God’s forgiveness through Christ, the Savior. • “Savior, when in dust to Thee Low we bow the adoring knee; When, repentant, to the skies Scarce we lift our weeping eyes; O, by all Thy pains and woe Suffered once for us below, Bending from Thy throne on high, Hear our penitential cry!” Amen. (*LSB* 419:1) (TLSB)