

NUMBERS

Chapter 14

The People Rebel

That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.² All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert!³ Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?”⁴ And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there.⁶ Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes⁷ and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good.⁸ If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us.⁹ Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”¹⁰ But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites.¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?¹² I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.”¹³ Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them.¹⁴ And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, O LORD, are with these people and that you, O LORD, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.¹⁵ If you put these people to death all at one time, the nations who have heard this report about you will say,¹⁶ ‘The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath; so he slaughtered them in the desert.’¹⁷ “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared:¹⁸ ‘The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.’¹⁹ In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.”²⁰ The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked.²¹ Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth,²² not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—²³ not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.²⁴ But because my servant Caleb

has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.²⁵ Since the Amalekites and Canaanites are living in the valleys, turn back tomorrow and set out toward the desert along the route to the Red Sea.”²⁶ The LORD said to Moses and Aaron:²⁷ “How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites.²⁸ So tell them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very things I heard you say:²⁹ In this desert your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me.³⁰ Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.³¹ As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected.³² But you—your bodies will fall in this desert.³³ Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert.³⁴ For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.’³⁵ I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together against me. They will meet their end in this desert; here they will die.”³⁶ So the men Moses had sent to explore the land, who returned and made the whole community grumble against him by spreading a bad report about it—³⁷ these men responsible for spreading the bad report about the land were struck down and died of a plague before the LORD.³⁸ Of the men who went to explore the land, only Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived.³⁹ When Moses reported this to all the Israelites, they mourned bitterly.⁴⁰ Early the next morning they went up toward the high hill country. “We have sinned,” they said. “We will go up to the place the LORD promised.”⁴¹ But Moses said, “Why are you disobeying the LORD’s command? This will not succeed!⁴² Do not go up, because the LORD is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies,⁴³ for the Amalekites and Canaanites will face you there. Because you have turned away from the LORD, he will not be with you and you will fall by the sword.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the high hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the LORD’s covenant moved from the camp.⁴⁵ Then the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah.

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 *all the people ... wept.* 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 *children*. 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 *treat me with contempt*. 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)

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)

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 *I will do to you the very things I heard you say.* 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 *these men responsible for spreading the bad report ... were struck down.* 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)

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)