

GOD IS...HOLY

“You did not...uphold me as holy”¹, Numbers 20:1-13

Even though it does not draw attention to its transition, Numbers chapter twenty begins the story of the second generation of Israelites, the children of the Israelites God rescued from Egypt (*cf. Numbers 20:28; 33:38*). God concluded the story of the first generation, which occupies the narratives of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, after their rebellion at the border of Canaan (*Numbers 13-14; 16*) and then skipped over almost all of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness to which He consigned them as punishment for their disobedience.

While Numbers chapter twenty may not draw attention to the transition between generations, it does draw attention to something else – it shows how, just like the story of the first generation of Israelites in the wilderness, the story of the second generation’s time in the wilderness began with a complaint against God (*Numbers 20:2-4; Exodus 17:1-3*).

The text highlights the similarities between the first and second generation of Israelites while emphasizing a difference in Moses. Unlike his faithful response to the first generation’s complaint about water (*Exodus 17:5-7*), Moses responded to the second generation’s complaint about water with anger, which led God to condemn him for failing to respect His holiness (*Numbers 20:10-12; cf. Numbers 20:11; 15:30*). God emphasized the seriousness of Moses’ failure by issuing a serious penalty – Moses, like the first generation of Israelites, would die in the wilderness rather than being granted entrance into the Promised Land (*Numbers 20:12; Deuteronomy 32:48-52*).

God’s response to Moses failure illustrates the importance He places on His holy identity, but what *is* God’s holiness?

- “Holy” describes God’s uniqueness, His singular identity as the good creator of everything that separates Him from every created thing including the angels (*Revelation 4:1-11*).
- While the Bible connects God’s holiness to His life-giving identity (*cf. Ezekiel 47:1-12; Revelation 4:1-11*), it also describes the distance that exists between God and His creation because His holy identity poses a danger (*cf. Isaiah 6:1-6; Leviticus 10:1-3*).
 - God’s holy identity demands respect and obedience (*Revelation 4:8, 11; cf. Exodus 3:5*).
 - Failure to respect God’s holy identity either disregards or challenges His sovereign identity and carries serious penalties (*cf. Genesis 3:1-24; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6*).
 - God’s holiness therefore presents a danger to us because humanity, as a whole, has rebelled against His Holy sovereignty (*Romans 3:9-18, 23; 6:23; Exodus 33:1-3*).

¹ Numbers 20:12. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- Even though a distance separates God from humans, He desires a relationship with people and consequently permits people access to His holy presence (*cf. Exodus 24:15-18; Leviticus 16:1-19; Isaiah 6:1-6*). Access to His holy presence, however, requires:
 - Purity (*cf. Exodus 3:5*).
 - Respectful obedience (*cf. Leviticus 10:1-3*).
- Moses, to whom God granted access to His holy presence and to whom He had entrusted the responsibility of representing Him before Israel, failed to respect God's holiness in Numbers 20 – he disregarded the instructions God gave him and assumed an equality with God that disrespected God's unique identity (*Numbers 20:2-12*).

Applications

- God protects His holiness, but He does so in ways that considers our circumstances (*Psalms 103:10-14; cf. Numbers 20:2-12; Leviticus 10:1-3*).
- God calls people into a relationship with Him, but we need to make sure that we do not fail to respect His holiness as did Moses. Properly respecting God's holiness requires us to balance intimacy with God against a respect for the distance that separates us from Him. The Bible offers insights into that balance, which involves things like:
 - Intimacy through things like prayer in which we open ourselves to God, expressing our struggles, concerns, fears, and joys to Him in response to our trust in His good sovereignty.
 - Respecting the distance between God and ourselves by submitting to His pronouncement that we are broken, rebellious people and submitting ourselves to His will so that we become transformed into different people through our obedience to Him.

For the coming week:

To help extend the lesson and to encourage you to make it personal, take time during the coming week to consider the following material:

Read, reflect, and pray

Read John's vision of God in Revelation 4:1-11 and reflect on what it would look like in your life to have the same submissive, praising response to God that characterized the heavenly beings John saw worshipping God.

Apply

Dedicate time this week to intentionally opening yourself up to God in prayer; focus on entrusting all of your fears, struggles, and plans to Him. Then work on allowing that same trust to motivate you to greater obedience during the week. Focus, in particular, on improving your obedience in one area in which you struggle.