

I AM THANKFUL...

For God's grace, *Numbers 21:1-3*

Considering our upcoming celebration of Thanksgiving, we are using some of our Sunday mornings this month to explore things for which we should be thankful. However, more than mere opportunism motivates this series; we are using the holiday as an occasion to focus on thankfulness because it occupies an essential place in our Christian identity (*cf. Philippians 4:6; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:18*). Therefore, this lesson explores another reason motivating our thankfulness:

I am thankful for God's unexpected and undeserved grace.

A story of unexpected grace

- Numbers begins with an account of God organizing the Israelites in preparation for their journey through the wilderness to the land of Canaan (*Numbers 1-10*). He arranged the nation in a series of three rings, with the tabernacle in the center ring.
 - **Ring 1** - The Tabernacle, the tent God instructed the nation to build for Him in Exodus so that He could dwell in their midst, offered the holy center around which the people revolved and could only be accessed by Moses and Aaron and Aaron's sons (the priest God chose to serve in His sacred space).
 - **Ring 2** - God populated the next ring with the Levites, the tribe/family group of Moses and Aaron. God tasked all Levites who were not descendants of Aaron with the responsibility of maintaining and protecting the temple grounds.
 - **Ring 3** - All the rest of the Israelites composed the third and outer ring of the camp. God arranged this group in an ordered circle around the tabernacle.
- Numbers 10:11 records the God-organized Israelite nation setting out from Mount Sinai one year after escaping Egypt. After a few (ominous) mishaps on their journey, they arrived at the boundary of the land God promised to give them and sent spies to assess the land, which initiated a series of three rebellions that moved through each of the three rings God used to organize the nation.
 - **Rebellion 1** - the people (*Numbers 13-14*)
 - 10 of the 12 spies brought back a "bad report"¹ that led to the nation's complaint against God, Moses, and Aaron (*Numbers 13:32-14:4*).
 - God responded harshly to the nation's rebellion, citing a pattern of "ten" rebellions that revealed their deep distrust of Him (*Numbers 14:11-12, 22-23*) - none of them (except Joshua and Caleb) would be allowed to enter the land He promised them.

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



- **Rebellion 2** - the Levites (*Numbers 16*).
 - God's judgment against the nation led to a rebellion among the Levites, who challenged Moses and Aaron's roles (*Numbers 16:1-3*).
 - God escalated the severity of His response because of the unique role He entrusted to the Levites - He caused the ground to open and swallow the rebellious priests (*Numbers 16:25-35*).
- **Rebellion 3** - Moses and Aaron (*Numbers 20:2-13*).
 - Even though the third rebellion happened less dramatically, it breached the innermost ring of God's people, the circle centered on His holy tabernacle.
 - Moses and Aaron "did not believe in [God], to uphold [Him] as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel" (*Numbers 20:12*).
- The failures of the entire nation - all three layers of the people God organized around His holy temple - prepare readers for a severe response. However, **God provided the Israelites with an unexpected grace**.
 - God gave them victory over the Canaanite king of Arad at a place "called Hormah" (*Numbers 21:1-3*).
 - Hormah was where the Canaanites previously defeated Israel when they tried to take the land against God's will (*Numbers 14:39-45*).
 - **God gave them victory at a place of their previous rebellion and defeat.**
- The unexpected grace God showed to Israel repeats a pattern throughout the Bible. For example:
 - God responded to humanity's return to sin by issuing an unexpected promise of grace through Abraham (*Genesis 12:1-3*).
 - Paul wrote that God responds to our sins by offering us unexpected grace through Jesus (*Romans 3:23; 6:23*).

Applications

We understand that God takes sin very seriously. We also understand that God's very serious response to sin involves offering undeserved and unexpected grace, revealing that He places greater emphasis upon His forgiveness than judgment (*cf. Exodus 34:5-7; Ezekiel 18:1-32; John 3:16-17; 1 Timothy 2:3-4*). Recognizing the grace that God extends ought to cultivate a response of thankfulness in us. However:

Our thankfulness for God's grace ought to motivate us to offer similar undeserved and unexpected grace to everyone around us.

May God help us show our thankfulness to him through the ways we treat the people around us.

