

Numbers 15

So welcome again to our virtual church gathering!

To help us listen together, I thought we could use the reactions in Zoom.

At the bottom of your screen there's a Reactions button - click that and you have two reactions: Clap, or Thumbs Up. 

We'll stick to Thumbs up this morning - you can save your claps for the NHS!

So let's test it out - if you've worked out the Reactions button, give me a Thumbs Up now.

If you couldn't work out how to use it, you know what - you've got real thumbs - feel free to use them! 

Great! So we'll use the Thumbs Up throughout to make sure we're all on track.

This morning is all about **A Change of Plans**

We've all experienced a **change of plans** with the Coronavirus lockdown.

Maybe there's something you were really looking forward to doing, but now the plans have changed.

Kids, you would have been planning to go into school, and now the schools are closed!

Give me a thumbs up who's happy about that?

But some of you will have a birthday coming up in the next few months, and you were maybe planning a party with friends... and now you're having to **change plans**.

Thumbs up if that's happened to you. Not so great.

A Change of Plans can be really hard.

Today we're looking at Numbers chapter 15 in the Bible. Numbers 15. If you have a Bible, go ahead and look it up.

We'll only read parts of it this morning, so please take the time to read the whole chapter later.

Only if you're not busy of course... 

The Israelites in Numbers chapter 15 have just had a huge **Change of Plans**.

We might have to wait months until life gets back on track for us.

But the Israelites were going to have to wait 40 years.

That's a huge **Change of Plans**! What happened?

Long story short:

God brought the Israelites, right to the edge of the Promised Land... but they didn't trust him to take them in.

God had promised them their own land, rescued them from slavery, and led them through the desert.

But they got scared by the people living in the land, with their strong city walls.

In the end they cried out, 'God should have just left us in Egypt, we were better off there! If we fight these people, we're gonna get slaughtered!'

And of course this makes God angry, we saw this last week.

Their key problem?

Reacting in fear, instead of acting in faith.

So God **Changes the Plans**.

He basically says, 'If you don't want the promised land, I'll give it to your children instead'.

And he sends them off to wander in the desert for 40 years, waiting for the older unbelieving generation to die out.

For most of the Israelite adults it's game over - they will never see the promised land.

That's hard right?

A **Change of Plans** can be really hard.

And we can't always control our reactions. But we can control our actions.

And in Numbers 15 we see how God gives the people actions to help overcome their reactions.

The chapter divides into 4.

3 reactions, and then finishing with 1 action.

Reaction 1: The Sulk

Thumbs up anyone brave enough to admit to being a sulker?

Here's a reason to sulk -

You have been promised a wonderful new home, with everything you need and more...

And now it's gone. The booking is cancelled. You've lost the deposit. It's not happening.

That's a bit like what the Israelites were dealing with.

And I think the **Change of Plans** with the Promised Land must have caused some of them to sulk.

So in y1-21, God gives Moses some instructions to cheer the people up.

Instructions about... offerings??

Offerings?? 🤔

When you read these verses, that's what they are:

Food offerings, burnt offerings, freewill offerings, drink offerings, peace offerings.

But the people already knew about offerings. In fact, we've already looked at these laws when we studied Leviticus.

So what's going on here?

Listen to y1-2:

'The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you..."'

See the change? God is pointing them forwards to the Promised Land.

Don't Sulk: Look Forward

Here's what I think God is saying:

Whether you'll live to see the Promised Land or not, you are still my people, and you still have a future.

The next 40 years in the desert don't have to be wasted. Because it's not just about you.

Have you ever watched a relay race?

The 4 runners each take turns to pass the baton on to the next runner.

And the last runner sprints over the line to win the medal and the glory.

It might seem unfair that the last runner gets the cheers of the crowd, gets to be the one holding the baton at the end.

But actually all the runners are important.

For the Israelites, the younger generation needed to learn to put God first, to give thanks to God, to offer their lives to God.

So here God tells the older generation to pass on the baton.

He gives them the task of instructing their children about all the offerings they can make, across every area of life.

And this speaks to us too.

We can view the lockdown as wasted time, a nuisance, a reason to sulk.

Or we can view it as an opportunity.

To renew our trust in Jesus, and remember that we belong to God - nothing can change that.

To pray for those who are journeying with us, to pass on the baton to those God has given us to care for - our church family, our children, our gospel communities, younger brothers or sisters in our family.

And to look forward to what really matters - living for his glory.

1 Cor 10:31 'Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.'

Reaction 2: The Shame

This is perhaps the reaction we'd expect from the Israelites.

The people have realised their wrong, they received their punishment, and now they feel shame. 😞

And it's also where their situation is different from ours.

We're not facing Coronavirus as some kind of punishment.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing for us to learn here!

If you're like me, this time in lockdown has made you realise some ugly stuff about yourself.

With the kids bouncing off the walls, maybe you're realised you're not as patient as you thought.

You might not be fighting over loo rolls in Tescos, but perhaps you've realised you're actually quite self-centred.

And in spite of having extra time, perhaps you're frustrated that you still find yourself wasting hours in front of the TV.

And when we realise those things, they bring a feeling of shame.

Shame is the feeling that there's something wrong inside me.

Recently the hard drive on my computer started making a clicking noise.

And I had that awful feeling - oh no, something's wrong.

Shame is like that - there's something wrong in here [point to me].

But the clicking noise was actually a good warning- it gave me the chance to backup my files before the hard drive completely failed.

And similarly, shame is not always a bad thing, if it makes us realise that the answers are not gonna come from inside me, but from God.

That's why God speaks v22-31.

Don't Stay in Shame: Get Forgiven

These verses are instructions for the people, for what to do when they mess up.

How to deal with their shame.

Laws about unintentional sins.

They're a reminder that God has made a way to forgive sin.

For the Israelites, they could offer a bull and a goat to God.

For us, we have a far greater offering.

Jesus offering his blood in our place on the cross.

The lockdown can be a good opportunity to examine your heart - don't just ignore the clicking noises!

When you see that impatience, that selfishness in yourself - don't just blame someone else.

If there's something wrong, it's good to know.

But don't remain in a place of shame.

Jesus has died to set you free from sin and free from shame. †

Simply trust in what he's done. Own up to your sin and get forgiven.

Reaction 3: The Shrug

If we don't take our shame to God, this is what can happen - and it's deadly.

Let's read y32-36

While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. 33 And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation. 34 They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him. 35 And the Lord said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” 36 And all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, as the Lord commanded Moses.

A man is caught gathering wood for his campfire on the Sabbath day - the day where God had clearly commanded all the people to rest. And his punishment is to be put to death.

Now to us, this sounds harsh right? Gathering wood? What's so serious about that?

It's because of what it shows about this man's heart.

God has taken away everything this man was hoping for - the Promised Land is not happening.

But for this guy, he's not owning up to his own part in the guilt, his own unbelief.

Instead he's blaming God.

The Shrug. It's the reaction which says 'If God's gonna give up on me, then I'm gonna give up him. I

don't care anymore. I'm just gonna do what I want.'

He knew God had given the Sabbath as a day to rest, not work. He just didn't care.

Which is worse - to hate God or to not care about God?

Thumbs up if you think to hate God is worse.

Hating God certainly *sounds* worse doesn't it?

To hate someone is to wish they didn't exist.

But to not care at all about someone is to already treat them as if they didn't exist.

Surely that's worse isn't it?

That's why we get all angry as we hear stories of people barging past NHS workers to be first into the supermarket.

Or partying on the beach because they don't care about the lockdown rules.

They're not showing feelings of hatred.

It's worse, they're not showing any feelings at all.

The real opposite of Love is... Shrug.

It's serious. And so this man is put to death.

Don't Shrug: Keep Trusting

Let's take this section as a warning to us.

A **Change of Plans** can plant a seed of bitterness in our hearts. And when there's no-one else to blame, that bitterness can be directed at God.

When we feel ourselves starting to shrug... when we start blaming God. When our prayers dry up and our Bible reading grows cold. It's a warning sign.

What should we do then?

Let's finally look at the Action to follow the 3 Reactions:

The Surrounding

God's got a little fashion statement for the Israelites to help them out.

Tassels.

Check out v37-41.

37 The Lord said to Moses, 38 "Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. 39 And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whoredom after. 40 So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. 41 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord your God."

Give me a thumbs up if you've got any clothes with tassels on.

Give me a thumbs up if you've got any rugs with tassels on.

But it's right here in the Bible - tassels aren't just for carpets!

God instructs the people to attach tassels to the corners of all their clothes.

And not just any old tassels - they were to weave a blue cord into the tassel.

Why blue?

It actually wasn't a fashion statement.

Blue was a special colour - blue fabric was valuable.

And when the Israelites built the tabernacle back in Exodus, the special place for meeting with God, guess which colour was used throughout?

Blue.

So by putting a blue cord in the tassels on each corner of their clothes, the Israelites were surrounding themselves with reminders of God and his holiness, his value, his weight in their lives.

Surrounded by blue. Surrounded by God.

The Surrounding.

These tassels were not lucky charms, they were reminders - there was nothing magical about the material or the blue string.

But you can imagine how it would change their daily lives.

They'd go to collect manna for food, and as they crouched down - Blue. A reminder that God provides.

They'd be working, cleaning out their animals, wiping off the sweat - Blue. A reminder that God is my strength.

They'd be getting ready for bed, taking off their cloak - Blue. A reminder that God is my rest.

Every area of life, reminded to put God first, every corner of life, surrounded by God.

Maybe we could borrow this idea for our lives, particularly at this time?

What if you put a strip of blue tape on your TV remote? 

Then before you hear the latest death toll on the news, you'd have been reminded: 'God's in control'.

Or stick a Bible verse on your kitchen cupboard?

Then when you're worried about empty shelves, you'll be reminded: 'God provides'.

Or something on your bathroom mirror?

So when you brush your teeth and panic about your throat feeling sore, you'll be reminded: 'God cares for me'.

v39 is very honest - if we don't act to remind ourselves of God, we will naturally react in a way that leads us away from him.

Our hearts and our eyes will lead us to Sulk, to Shame, to Shrug - and to worry, stress, doubt, panic as well.

Let's put our faith in the truth of v41:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord your God.