

Numbers 14:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.

Analysis

The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression. Moses intercedes by quoting God's self-revelation from Exodus 34:6-7, following Israel's golden calf apostasy. This declaration emphasizes God's patience (erek apayim, literally "long of nostrils"—slow to anger), demonstrating that God's fundamental character includes restraint of wrath and extension of mercy to rebels.

"Great mercy" (rav-chesed, רָב־חֵסֶד) emphasizes the abundance of God's covenant love and faithfulness. Chesed represents loyal love, steadfast devotion, covenant faithfulness—God's committed, persistent love toward His people despite their failures. The greatness of this mercy means it abundantly exceeds what we deserve or expect.

The two terms "iniquity" (avon, עַוֹן—perversity, guilt) and "transgression" (pesha, עַבֶדֶת—rebellion, revolt) comprehensively cover both internal moral corruption and external covenant violation. God's forgiveness extends to all categories of sin, demonstrating the reach of divine mercy. However, the qualification "and by no means clearing the guilty" maintains God's justice—mercy doesn't ignore sin but deals with it through proper atonement (ultimately Christ's sacrifice).

Historical Context

This passage from **Israel's Rebellion and Judgment** must be understood within its ancient Near Eastern context. The wilderness period (approximately 1446-1406 BCE using early Exodus chronology, or 1290-1250 BCE using late chronology) represents a formative period in Israel's national and spiritual development. Archaeological discoveries from Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia provide important background for understanding Israel's experiences.

The wilderness wanderings occurred in the Negev, Sinai Peninsula, and Transjordan regions—harsh terrain with minimal water and vegetation. Ancient trade routes (like the King's Highway) passed through these areas, and archaeological evidence confirms settlements and fortifications in Edom, Moab, and Ammon during this period. Israel's request for passage and occasional military conflicts align with the geopolitical realities of these regions in the Late Bronze Age.

The incidents of rebellion, complaint, and judgment must be understood against the backdrop of ancient wilderness survival. Water scarcity, disease, dangerous wildlife, and hostile neighbors created genuine hardships. However, Israel's complaints revealed not just human weakness but spiritual failure—they questioned God's goodness and purposes despite abundant evidence of His power and provision. The contrast between God's faithfulness and Israel's faithlessness forms the central theme of this period.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does this passage's emphasis on unbelief deepen your understanding of God's character and His work in His people's lives?

2. In what specific ways can you apply the principles of rebellion to your current life circumstances and spiritual journey?
3. How does this passage anticipate Christ's person and work, and how does seeing Christ in this text transform your understanding and application?

Interlinear Text

עָזָן | נְשָׁא | נְשָׁא אֶתְנָה
 The LORD is longsuffering H3068 H750 אֶתְנָה H639 and of great H7227 mercy H2617 forgiving H5375 iniquity H5771

פְּגַזְעָן | יְנַקְתָּה | לְאָתָה | יְנַקְתָּה | לְאָתָה | יְנַקְתָּה | פְּגַזְעָן
 and transgression and by no means H6588 H5352 H3808 and by no means the guilty visiting H5352 H6485

עַל | שְׁלִשִׁים | עַל | אֶבֶות | עַל | בְּנֵי | עַל | בְּנֵי | עַל | שְׁלִשִׁים | עַל
 iniquity of the fathers H5771 H1 H5921 upon the children H1121 H5921 unto the third H8029

רְבָעִים:
 and fourth H7256

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 145:8 (Grace): The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy.

Exodus 20:5 (Sin): Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

Jonah 4:2 (Grace): And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenst thee of the evil.

Psalms 103:8 (Grace): The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.

Deuteronomy 5:9 (Sin): Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me,

Micah 7:18 (Grace): Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy.

Jeremiah 23:2 (References Lord): Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD.

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