

Numbers Chapter 15 – John Karmelich

1. My title for this lesson is "Now what?" This is one of those lessons where it is best if I just explain the key points of the chapter, and that will explain why I picked this title. Let me begin:
 - a) First, let's review where we left off. The Israelites were in the middle of the wilderness and just found out they have to stay there for forty years. Then, only their children can enter the Promised Land. That had to be discouraging to them to put it mildly.
 - b) The related question for us is what to think when we are stuck in our own wilderness experience and things are going from bad to worse. In other words, now what?
 - c) The good news to start Chapter 15 is that their leader Moses sought God at this point. God said to Moses in effect, "All of this is still worth it. Let Me (God) share with you a little about how good life will be in the Promised Land. Let Me share how your children are going to worship Me when they get there due the abundance of good things they will receive when they enter the Promised Land. At the same time, let Me also share with you what the punishment will be when your children mess up in the Promised Land and what they have to do to receive forgiveness. I (God) won't kick them out of that land if they agree to worship Me as I have already explained so far (as recorded in the bible so far). Then let Me explain to you what is a forgivable and unforgivable sin."
 - i) In fact, someone is sentenced to death in this chapter for an unforgivable sin. We will discuss why that punishment is necessary and what that means to us.
 - ii) God ends the chapter by stating in effect, "I want all the Israelites (probably the men) to wear a blue chord on their garments to remind themselves to obey Me."
 - d) So this whole chapter is in effect a bunch of laws that say in effect, do this and do that when one arrives at the Promised Land. Good for the Jewish people I guess. What does any of that have to do with your life or my life?
 - i) The first point for us is the concept that following Jesus is worth it. When we are traveling through our own wilderness experience (i.e., things are going wrong and despite our prayers nothing is getting better). God wants to encourage us with the idea that it is worth it. It is worth the effort to put up with the problems because we will be eternally blessed for making the effort now to follow Him.
 - ii) The second concept to get across is just because we are saved through God's grace, does not mean we can coast with Him. Just because we are trusting in Him for our salvation does not mean we are free to go sin all we want. To put it a better way, we can sin all we want, but why would we want to? If it were our desire to please God, why would we want to disappoint Him?
 - a) The related idea is when we are going through our wilderness experience we are not free to sin all we want just because we are suffering anyway.
 - b) That is one reason why an example is given here of a man being punished severely for violating one of the Ten Commandments. The point is there is a price to pay now, for being displeasing to God even when we are in our own wilderness experience. We probably won't die when we violate one of His commandments, but God won't let us get away with it either.
 - iii) The final point of this chapter is that once we end our wilderness experience and in effect, life is easy for a while. The temptation is to forget about God. The most likely time for us to get lazy with our relationship with Him is when things are going well. Therefore, He commanded the Israelites to wear a blue chord on their garment in order to remember to obey His laws. I don't believe Christian have to do exactly likewise. However, it is a good idea to do things to remind ourselves to be obedient. For me, it is my daily bible reading.

2. With that whole speech out of my system, it is time to come back to my "now what" title.
 - a) The point is when we are stuck in our own wilderness experience, the "now what" is to keep our focus on Him because He does promise a great eternity to those who trust Him.
 - b) The "now what" is that obedience is required of God through our own difficult times as well as when life is going well.
 - c) The "now what" is that life can always be worse if we are disobedient. I am reminded of a movie scene where someone is complaining how bad his life was to another person. That second person then said, "Well, at least it is not raining". Then of course, the rain starts. The point is no matter how bad our life seems, by ignoring God's desire for our lives even during such times, He can make it worse for us, and it is always worth the trouble to keep trusting Him through such times. That is the "now what" here.
 - d) Finally, this chapter gives us the reminder that when life is going well, we should do something to keep our focus on Him, and not the blessings we receive at the moment.
3. With that somewhat optimistic speech out of my system, let me tell you what not to focus upon when reading this chapter: All of the detailed regulations of life for the Jewish people that they have to submit to in the Promised Land. In a lot of ways, this chapter reads a lot like a chapter from the book of Leviticus: That is, it is full of regulations on "do this and don't do that".
 - a) If one is interested in living like an Orthodox Jewish person, this chapter is important to study in that regards. However, I do write these bible lessons for the Christian to learn. That is why my emphasis is on these regulations apply to us today. That is the principal of "now what" as I have explained before. In other words, the regulations as taught in this chapter do apply to Christians but not in the literal sense of chopping up animals to put them on a barbeque pit to offer them up to God. They are here to remind us of both the rewards of following God and the punishment from turning from Him. If we get that concept down, we in effect, understand the purpose of this chapter.
 - b) With that overly long introduction completed, it is time to start the text itself.
4. Chapter 15, Verse 1: The LORD said to Moses, ² "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: `After you enter the land I am giving you as a home ³ and you present to the LORD offerings made by fire, from the herd or the flock, as an aroma pleasing to the LORD--whether burnt offerings or sacrifices, for special vows or freewill offerings or festival offerings-- ⁴ then the one who brings his offering shall present to the LORD a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil. ⁵ With each lamb for the burnt offering or the sacrifice, prepare a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering.
 - a) Speaking of not getting bogged down in specific ancient Jewish regulations, these verses alone are enough to scare most of us away from reading any further.
 - b) A few moments from now when you forget all of the specifics of the details as laid out in these verses. Let me share with you what you and I should remember: Know that these animal offerings have already been described in the books of Exodus and Leviticus.
 - i) What is new here is the idea of mixing fine flour and oil with those offerings.
 - ii) Let me put this another way: While the Israelites are out in the middle of the wilderness, lets say someone commits a bad sin and wants to sacrifice an animal in order to restore their relationship with God. There is not a lot of fine flour and oil to be found out in the wilderness. However, when they finally get to the land of Israel, it will be such a good land for producing such things, that it will be in effect an easy thing to offer that flour and oil with those animals.
 - c) Yes I can get into the specific's of when the Israelites offered a burnt offering to show their commitment to God, or a free will offering to show their trust in Him, or even the festival offering which is made during a specific Jewish holiday to show that they are trusting God to provide in the future. I can also describe how the amount of flour and oil is to be proportional to the size of the animal. However, I do suspect that in a short time, we are going to forget all of these details. So, let me focus then, on what is important today.

- d) With that said, let me first focus on why we Christians don't do these animal sacrifices today. After all, if God says we can have our sins forgiven by performing these rituals, it is necessary to understand why they are not done today.
 - i) For starters, there is no official Jewish temple in existence today. The Romans in 70AD destroyed the last one. Over the centuries, the Muslims have built an important mosque for their religion on that same site, and truthfully, if the Jewish people ever try to tear down that mosque, it would literally start a world war.
 - a) That is why religious Jews to this day, get in the practice of just confessing their sins to God and there are no more animal sacrifices for their sins.
 - b) My point is devoutly religious Jews today do not offer animal sacrifices for their sins, so it is not an issue for them either.
 - c) My point is also that they too, study the book of Numbers based on the principals to see how to apply it to their life and until the day that God allows them to rebuild their official temple, there are no animal sacrifices collectively for their sins. Therefore, we don't have to panic about God not forgiving us if we are not offering a physical sacrifice for our sins.
 - ii) This leads us to understanding our relationship with Jesus even more so. To trust in His complete payment for our sins, past, present and future is in effect trusting in Him as our burnt sacrifice. That trust represents our complete commitment to our desire for God to guide every aspect of our lives today.
 - a) The idea of the free will offering is that we want to spend time just being with Jesus and being with others who also desire to worship Him.
 - b) The idea of the festival offerings is about giving of our time, our money and our resources in order to say, "Dear God, I don't know how You are going to provide for my future, but I trust that You will. In order for me to put my money where my mouth is, take this offering as a sign that I do trust in You to provide for my future."
 - (1) Does that mean I want you to send me a check? No. God has blessed me with a good career and I don't do this for the money.
 - (2) Does that mean you should give to your local church? My view is that one should give where one is blessed and where one is seeing God work. I know of a lot of good Christians who only give to ministries where they already see Him blessing it. The idea is to think, "God is blessing this and therefore, I want to share in what it is He is blessing, so here is my gift to support that cause".
 - (3) My final thought on giving here is that one should treat giving a little like picking stocks in the stock market. That is, we want a good return on our investments. That is why I like the concept of giving where we can see God already working in the world.
- e) OK, enough of all of that. Time to get back to the text. The point here is that God does desire we make sacrifices, not in terms of literally offering animals for the forgiveness of sin, but that we actually put our money and our time where our mouth is when it comes to trusting Jesus to guide our lives. That is the idea here.
 - i) Further, when we go through periods where God does bless our lives financially, whatever that level may be, God says to us in effect, "add a little flour and wine" to that offering so as to share in that joy. In other words, use some of the resources that God has blessed us with in order to make a difference for Him in this world.
 - ii) Let me explain this concept another way: Suppose we are blessed with a good job at the moment. If we only use our income to buy stuff for ourselves, we are not using the resources God has given us to make a difference for Him in this world.
 - iii) If we want to be blessed, it starts with trusting Him now with what we do have.

f) Before we return to the animal sacrifices, let me add one more thing on the important topic of giving. There is no "automatic" with God. I have a personal hatred of the type of ministries that claim, if you only give us ten percent of your income, you will be blessed with wealth beyond your wildest dreams. God is not here to make us all rich. He just wants us to trust Him with our lives. Giving of our income is one way of showing that trust. If one gives a big amount to one's local church now thinking that He has to bless us even more so because we wrote that check, the only thing that will happen is we will have less to spend on other things. My point is that giving should never be for the purposes of expecting more from God. The purpose of giving is to further the work of the kingdom and to show our commitment to Him.

i) Does that mean God will never bless us when we give? Hardly. I have seen some wonderful examples in my lifetime of God blessing those who trusted Him with some of their resources. The idea is kind of like God "giving with His right hand what He takes with His left". However, that is not something we should count on when we give. If He chooses to bless us financially or bless us in some other way, the point is, it is His business, and not ours as we serve Him and not the reverse.

ii) Meanwhile, it is time for us to get back to the barbeque pit. ☺

5. Verse 6: "With a ram prepare a grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a third of a hin of oil,⁷ and a third of a hin of wine as a drink offering. Offer it as an aroma pleasing to the LORD.⁸ "When you prepare a young bull as a burnt offering or sacrifice, for a special vow or a fellowship offering to the LORD,⁹ bring with the bull a grain offering of three-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with half a hin of oil.¹⁰ Also bring half a hin of wine as a drink offering. It will be an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.¹¹ Each bull or ram, each lamb or young goat, is to be prepared in this manner.¹² Do this for each one, for as many as you prepare.

a) John's very loose translation: When you (those Israelites) offer an animal up to God, the amount of flour and oil to be used with that offering is to be proportional to the animal.

i) In other words, "big animals, lots of oil and flour. Smaller animals - use less."

ii) Yes there are some nice little lessons about the type of animals to be offered and what is a "hin", and so forth. However, if you are like me, odds are pretty good that in a short time from now, we are going to forget all of these little details and just remember that God required oil and flour to go with these sacrifices.

iii) Again, part of the reason for this text to be here at this location is to show that despite the fact that God has sentenced this generation of Israelites to die out in the wilderness over the next 40 years, it is worth it. In other words, the Promised Land is a better life for their children than going back to Egypt. Let's face it: after the Israelites received the news that they could not enter the Promised Land, the temptation would be to go back to Egypt. God is in effect saying to them, "I know this wilderness is difficult. However, I will still provide for you (the manna) while you are stuck here and I have a wonderful future planned for your children, so let Me guide you through the rest of your time in this wilderness."

iv) If it hasn't sunk in by now, the point is God still wants to guide us through our own wilderness experience, as if to say to us, "Trust Me, I know life is difficult at the moment, but I still have a great plan for your future." As a hint to what that future will be like, let me describe how wonderful the Promised Land will be in that the materials will be there in order for us to worship Him as He desires.

b) So John, does this mean it should be the desire for Christians and Jews to move to the Promised Land (land of Israel)? While it is a great place to visit to study the past as well as learn about the present, that is not the issue. The idea of the Promised Land does not even represent heaven. The point is the concept of the benefit of trusting God with every aspect of our lives. It is a far greater way to live than anything else one can imagine.

6. Verse 13: " `Everyone who is native-born must do these things in this way when he brings an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to the LORD. ¹⁴ For the generations to come, whenever an alien or anyone else living among you presents an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, he must do exactly as you do. ¹⁵ The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the LORD: ¹⁶ The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you.' "
- a) It's time for more of "John's very loose translation": Whether or not you were born to one of the tribes of the Israelites, or just desire to live like them, the regulations are the same.
 - i) In other words, if it is our desire to be pleasing to God, do these sacrifices.
 - ii) But John, you said earlier that Jews today, don't sacrifice bulls and goats like it is stated in this text. How do they and us "live like this"? What is the text saying?
 - a) That's the good news. The good news is that we are trusting in Jesus (that is God Himself) as a perfect sacrifice for all our sins and therefore we don't have to place any animals on a barbeque pit to show our loyalty to Him.
 - b) The idea is that the rules are the same no matter what is one's background: That rule today is about trusting Jesus and be willing to put our time and our money where our mouth is in that commitment.
 - b) Ok, then, what about religious Jewish people today? Are they saved? While I believe that their effort to seek God is sincere and I also believe they can and do live joy filled lives by obeying God's laws, they still miss the point. The point is they are saying to God, "Look at me, I am doing this and that, and therefore, I am worthy of entering heaven."
 - i) The view of the Christian is essentially, "No matter how hard I try, I will never be worthy enough to be pleasing to God." As I like to put it, the only way to know for sure what is God's standards for spending eternity with Him, is to have a standard of perfection. That way, we know what that standard is. No matter how hard we try, we can never be perfect. That is why we must trust in God Himself paying the perfect sacrifice for our sins." That is the Gospel Message.
 - ii) If that is true, why study all of these regulations? Why can't we just trust in Jesus' payment for our sins, and then never read the bible? The answer is, if we do love someone, we want to be pleasing to Him. If we do truly love God, and we do want to live a life pleasing to Him, then we do "put our money where our mouth is" and live to be obedient to Him. In other words, we don't do these things in order to earn points with God, but out of love for what He has done for us.
 - c) That wonderful little speech ☺ leads me perfectly back to these verses. The point is the same way God desires to be worshipped applies to anyone of any background.
 - i) Before I move on, I want to state something that occurred to me many years ago: When we get to heaven, there are no separate sections for people based on the color of their skin. One has to learn to get along with people of all races, financial levels, and nationalities as that is how we are going to spend all of eternity. If one doesn't care for someone based on they way they look or their background, know that one is in eternal trouble because if that other person is saved, we will be with them together with God in heaven. If we can't love a person now because of one of those issues, how can we expect to be with them forever?
 - ii) That idea does tie to these verses, because they say that the same laws apply to the foreigners that apply to the Israelites. If one ever wants any sort of proof that there is no bigotry allowed in Christianity (or Judaism for that matter) in any way, shape or form, here is your proof text in these verses. For a lot of people, which includes my own family background, this is a big stumbling block to get past. A Jewish man, (Dennis Prager) says, "If a group of black men were coming toward you alone, would you prefer they came from a bar or a Christian bible study?"

7. Verse 17: The LORD said to Moses, ¹⁸ "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: `When you enter the land to which I am taking you ¹⁹ and you eat the food of the land, present a portion as an offering to the LORD. ²⁰ Present a cake from the first of your ground meal and present it as an offering from the threshing floor. ²¹ Throughout the generations to come you are to give this offering to the LORD from the first of your ground meal.
- a) The good news here is we made it past the barbeque pit. Hopefully I made it interesting enough not got us bogged down in the sacrificial details that are no longer performed today. Again, it is the principals that are important, which is what I have been trying to emphasize so far in this lesson.
 - b) The related point is we have moved from the barbeque pit to the oven in these verses. If you don't relate to cooking analogies here, well, somebody has to prepare your meals and the idea is basic enough that we can all relate to these verses.
 - c) As for the verses, here, the idea is that the Promised Land will be such a good land for growing the ingredients needed to bake, and then one should not forget to honor God with that food. To this day, many religious Jews when baking, gives part of what they bake to God. That is in practice giving some of their bread to their local synagogue.
 - d) OK John, let's assume we don't bake or go to a synagogue. How do we relate? The idea is that when God blesses our lives, we should not forget about Him. The book of Numbers focuses so much on traveling through a wilderness, we forget it also includes passages like most of this chapter that say in effect, "When God is blessing you, don't forget about Him and make the effort to think about Him when times are good as well as when one is struggling through life." The easiest time to forget about God is when things are going well. That is why passages like this are here to remind us to keep our focus on Him when we do even simple things like baking things to eat.
 - e) So does this mean that if I bake or buy a cake, I should give part of it to God or at the least give it to my local pastor or priest? Not necessarily, but the idea doesn't hurt. ☺ An age old Christian and Jewish custom of praying before or after we eat does remind us that all the blessings we have in life come from Him, and that is a good idea here. I suppose a related idea is that if we can afford to buy good things for ourselves, we can also afford to be able to support others and that comes back to the concept of giving. God is teaching us in effect, if you really trust me, put your money where your mouth is and give a little to show that you trust that I will provide for your future.
 - f) OK, enough on all of that, time to move on.
8. Verse 22: " `Now if you unintentionally fail to keep any of these commands the LORD gave Moses-- ²³ any of the LORD's commands to you through him, from the day the LORD gave them and continuing through the generations to come-- ²⁴ and if this is done unintentionally without the community being aware of it, then the whole community is to offer a young bull for a burnt offering as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, along with its prescribed grain offering and drink offering, and a male goat for a sin offering.
- a) Verses 22 - 26 deal with the issue of unintentional sin. Consider the difference between manslaughter and murder. If we purposely kill someone, that is murder. If we do it by accident, that is manslaughter. It may be unintentional, but we still caused pain.
 - b) Before I get into the specific's of these verses, why this transition? Why go from a short discussion about giving part of our blessings to God when things go well to talking about the issue of unintentional sin? In other words, why are these verses here?
 - i) It is because whether or not we are in a wilderness experience or whether or not God is blessing our lives at the moment, we still have to be conscious about sin.
 - ii) To put it another way, when we try to keep our focus on Him, we can still mess up at times. Sometimes we can purposely sin even if we know it is wrong. That issue is coming up later in the chapter. A related issue is what if we commit some sort of sin, and didn't realize it was a sin until after we did it? How do we handle that?

- iii) I was trying to think of an example of an entire community committing a sin that was not intentional: Suppose a church group used some land that this group did not realize they were not allowed to use for some project. That use of someone else's land is a form of stealing even though the group didn't know it was stealing.
 - a) Even though the group didn't know they sinned, it is still a sin. Therefore, when the Israelites did something like that, it is well, time to back to the "barbeque pit" and offer up some animals to God for forgiveness.
 - b) The bull offering shows that one is still committed to God and knows that what one did is wrong. The bull is the strongest animal they had that can be domesticated, so it is used to show how we have been changed for Him.
 - c) Grain and drink offerings went with that sacrifice again, to indicate our commitment to God. It is a way of saying, God has blessed our lives and we offer up part of what we have on hand to show that commitment.
 - d) Also a goat was offered for their sins. Without getting into a discussion of why goats were used, just know they were used symbolically to represent our sins. Think of the term "scapegoat" and one gets the idea. The point is the goat is offered instead of us for our sins. It is a way of saying we are guilty of this sin, but may God accept this scapegoat instead of me, as I am the one who should suffer due to the sin(s) that were committed.
 - e) Verse 24 mentions that the goat must be male. I'll explain in the next set of verses why that is relevant.
 - c) Speaking of relevance explain how this is section is relevant to us. Obviously we don't offer bulls and goats for our sins anymore. Again, neither do religious Jews today offer such animals. There is more for us to learn that just the ancient practice of this religion.
 - i) First it is to understand that God takes sin seriously, even those we didn't realize were sins when we commit them. The important thing is that when we realize we have done something that is potentially offensive to God, we confess it and turn from it. It is the act of thinking, "What I did was wrong and what He wants me to do here is the right thing to do in the future".
 - ii) To state the obvious, these animal sacrifices have their fulfillment in what Jesus did on the cross for us. It is to say we don't have to offer animals today because the full price for our sins was already taken care of on the cross. My point here is we should never get in the habit of taking that lightly. The mistake Christians can make is to think, "I don't have to worry about the sin I just did, because I believe Jesus already died for that sin". God still wants confession on our behalf if for no other reason than just to realize what it is we have done to avoid it in the future.
 - iii) So if we don't have to offer animals for our sins anymore, why should we learn about all of the sacrifices here? For starters, each of the different sacrifices show different aspects of our relationship with Him. For example, the bull sacrifice is an example of our complete commitment to Him with our lives. The goat offering is to remind us that Jesus paid the price for us. The offering of produce with those sacrifices remind us that God wants us to give part of the blessings of our lives to show that we do trust Him to provide for our future.
 - iv) One of my favorite descriptions of the book of Leviticus (that focuses on the topic of sin) is, "This book reads like a manual on how to dispose of nuclear waste". (Phillip Yancy). The point is that God does not take sin lightly and neither should we. If one gets that concept, one understands the necessity of all of these details about how and why the Israelites offered up animals and food for their sins.
 - d) One quick New Testament quote and I'll move on. Paul compared his own life to a drink offering. (2nd Timothy 4:6.) Think of our life of commitment to Him as being that drink offering (as mentioned in Verse 24) mixed in with our trust in Him to guide our lives.

9. Verse 25: The priest is to make atonement for the whole Israelite community, and they will be forgiven, for it was not intentional and they have brought to the LORD for their wrong an offering made by fire and a sin offering.²⁶ The whole Israelite community and the aliens living among them will be forgiven, because all the people were involved in the unintentional wrong.
 - a) Meanwhile, we have not finished this section about how to deal with unintentional sin.
 - b) The point here is that the high priest performed these rituals (the ones about offering the different animals mixed with a food and drink offering) and then the whole congregation was then forgiven of their sins.
 - c) A natural question to ponder is, if God did forgive them, why is it necessary for us to trust in Jesus? Can't we just perform this ritual on our own barbeque pit and then we will be forgiven that way?
 - i) First of all, trusting in Jesus is a whole lot easier than trying to find a Jewish priest, let alone a bull and goat for us to cut up and sacrifice. ☺
 - ii) Next, as I've beaten home the point by now, these rituals do point to what Jesus has done on the cross for us.
 - iii) Even today, since there is no official Jewish temple, religious Jews make the effort to verbally confess their sins to God since they can't do these rituals anymore.
 - iv) What if the official temple is ever rebuilt? Will God accept the Jewish rituals at that point for the forgiveness of sins as stated here in these verses?
 - a) Think of it this way: how would you think God would react to people who say in effect, "My Son's death was not good enough for you? You still want to prove your own worth to Me by sacrificing animals?" I personally want to stand a good distance away from anyone (no matter how sincere they are) who wants to prove their worth to God by their deeds and sacrifices.
 - v) Meanwhile, until God's Son came on the scene, these rituals were performed.
 - vi) With that said, we're ready to move on.
10. Verse 27: "But if just one person sins unintentionally, he must bring a year-old female goat for a sin offering."²⁸ The priest is to make atonement before the LORD for the one who erred by sinning unintentionally, and when atonement has been made for him, he will be forgiven.²⁹ One and the same law applies to everyone who sins unintentionally, whether he is a native-born Israelite or an alien.
 - a) If you recall, the entire ritual of the last set of verses was about group unintentional sin. These verses move on to the issue of individual unintentional sin. Coming back to my overly simple example of using land that didn't belong to us, suppose only one person did that act or a few people. I can think of things I have done wrong in my own life that I didn't realize until after I did them, that they offended others I love, and in hindsight, I should not have done those things. The question is in effect, "Can I be forgiven?"
 - i) The answer is of course one can, and that is the purpose of the verses here.
 - b) You may recall that when a goat was offered for the entire community's sins, that goat had to be a male goat. In these verses, when an individual is guilty of an unintentional sin, a female goat is to be offered. So is that some sort of male sexist thing? No and let me explain that one without getting into too much trouble here. ☺
 - i) As most Christians know God said that men are to lead. It does not mean men are superior beings, it just means that if two sexes are equal, one of the two has to be the leader. To share another of my favorite bad jokes, "When two lesbians slow dance, who leads? Do those two women determine that ahead of time?"
 - ii) The point as it relates to these verses, is that a whole group committing some sort of unintentional sin is a bigger deal than an individual committing that sin. That is why a male goat is used for the group sin and a female one for an individual.
 - iii) The bottom line is any individual can be forgiven if that person confesses that sin and goes through this prescribed ritual as stated in these verses.

11. Verse 30: " `But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people.³¹ Because he has despised the LORD's word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him.' "
- a) We now move on to the tough topic of intentional sin versus unintentional sin. First, let us understand that there is no forgiveness for that type of sin.
 - b) So does this mean for example, that if a person commits murder and they are happy that they killed that person, there is no eternal forgiveness? The answer is that it depends on whether or not that person trusts in Jesus for their forgiveness. That person should still suffer the consequences for that act, which is a separate topic of God forgiving them.
 - c) To understand these verses better, it is important to understand what is and what is not an unforgivable sin as far as Christians are concerned. Jesus blatantly stated that the only unforgivable sin is "blasphemy of the (Holy) Spirit". (See Matthew 12:31). The idea there is a lifetime denial of Jesus as God. If you think about it logically, it makes sense. That is the only unforgivable sin is to deny that Jesus paid the price for one's sins. That is why to fail to accept that concept is an unpardonable sin.
 - i) OK, and what does that have to do with these verses here in Numbers? In effect, the concept is similar. Let's suppose we are having say, a bad day or a bad month and we deny that God wants to help us due to our problems of the moment. That is not the type of sin being described in these verses. It is describing a type of life long denial in the desire to have God rule over our lives. In effect, that is also an example of committing "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit".
 - ii) The main point here is that if someone sins intentionally and they have no desire to repent of that sin, we are in effect to turn our back on that person. Yes they still have be punished for their action, but that is a separate issue from whether or not God is willing to forgive them. This also does not mean that some people can avoid going to say jail just because they confess their sins to God.
 - iii) Parents know that children are more than willing to confess their sins in order to avoid punishment. However, punishment is usually necessary as our children don't learn to avoid those sins in the future, unless punishment is actually given for the sins committed. That is the idea of these verses. Society must still punish people for things they have done wrong and give a punishment that is appropriate for that sin. At the same time, God's forgiveness is, up to Him and not us. If He is willing to forgive intentional sins that are confessed, that is a separate issue from how we as a society are to handle such issues.
 - d) All of this leads me back to the verses. The guilty person must be "cut off". That word can describe being executed and it can also describe being separated. The point is the church cannot allow any sin to go unchecked, intentional or not. The one who committed the sin must be separated from the group until they repent of that sin.
 - i) With that tough topic, out of my system, it is time to read about an example of this type of punishment being dished out on someone.
12. Verse 32: While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day.³³ Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly,³⁴ and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him.³⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, "The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp."³⁶ So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses.
- a) The short version is a man was caught gathering fire wood on the Sabbath and it was declared to be a death sentence for that act. Remember that my lesson title was "now what?" Well the answer to the question of what do we do with this person, is that this person is to be stoned to death. To warn you right now, I'm going to need a good page to explain this act. The good news is we only have a few verses left to cover after this.

- b) To begin, it does not seem like much of a crime to receive a death sentence. So does this mean if we see someone working on a Sunday, we should kill them? Of course not. My point is the issue at hand is a little more complicated than it seems on the surface.
 - i) It is probably best to talk about the literal crime first. The idea is that when God says we are to take one day per week to rest, we take it seriously. The religious Jews of that day would not do any work on the Sabbath out of fear of receiving this type of punishment.
 - ii) If you study the four Gospels carefully, one gets the impression that Jesus seemed to go out of His way to perform miracles on the Sabbath. He was criticized for this act as breaking the Sabbath like this guy did here in Numbers. Jesus response was in effect, "Should one be allowed to do good things on Sabbath?" (See Matthew 12:12 as an example of that). In fact, to this day, doctors and say, police officers who are Jewish are exempt from the Sabbath rule in order to do good works.
 - iii) For those who don't know, most religious Jews don't drive a car on the Sabbath. It is their interpretation of the rule of "No lighting a fire on the Sabbath, with the idea of a spark plug in the engine being a fire." The practical idea is that Jews need to live close together near their synagogue, which is why that practice is there.
- c) That leads me back to the man gathering firewood on the Sabbath. To state the obvious, this man probably just wanted to gather wood to keep warm or maybe to cook. So what is so bad about that act that it warrants a death sentence? Let's also say that he confessed that it was a violation of the Sabbath to perform that ritual, should he still be executed?
 - i) Believe it or not, the issue comes back to the concept of "blasphemy of the Spirit". The type of sin being described in these verses, is not about a man desperate either to keep warm or prepare warm food. It is about describing a person who doesn't care about God's laws and therefore, willfully and purposely defies them. If one studies the use of the Hebrew words describing this action, that intent is clearer.
 - ii) The point is, this is not an accident on that man's part, but a willful desire to defy the God of the bible. This text is describing a man who doesn't care at all for any of this "God stuff" and willfully wanted to violate His will. Could this person be in heaven today? I suspect the answer depends on whether or not He truthfully and willfully confessed that sin prior to his execution.
 - a) The point is the congregation is not to tolerate anyone who willfully and deliberately does not want God to be a part of their life. To state it another way, we don't execute people today who do not believe in Jesus dying for their sins, but we don't willfully allow them to be a member of our church.
- d) This leads me back to a discussion about the congregation who stoned them. To state the obvious, you can't have two million people throw stones at this one person, even if there were that many stones around. I suspect that this act was done by having representatives of each tribe perform this act.
 - i) So why stoning? Part of the answer is out in the wilderness there were no trees to hang anyone and the electric chair hasn't been invented yet. Symbolically through out the bible, stoning is associated with the rejection of God. Think when Jesus made the statement "Whoever falls on this stone will be broken (one's life will change based on one's trust in God) but whoever this stone falls on them will be crushed (killed)." That is a rough translation of Luke 20:18, plus my comments. My point is God uses stoning in the bible to show the fact that such an act will either humble you to seek God or kill you for turning from Him.
- e) Finally, let me come back to the issue of do we kill someone who willfully violates God's laws? Isn't that what the bible teaches here? We are to "kill them" in the sense of not allowing that person to be part of our church community until they repent. At the same time, it is up to God to decide whether or not that person can live with Him in heaven.

13. Verse 37: The LORD said to Moses, ³⁸ "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: `Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. ³⁹ You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. ⁴⁰ Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. ⁴¹ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD your God.' "
- a) The good news of this last set of verses has no more references to killing people. This set of verses is about a practical suggestion on how to keep one's focus upon God when one is being blessed in the Promised Land. Remember for us that the Promised Land represents the concept of trusting God with every aspect of our lives. Therefore, when we do realize we are being blessed by Him and we do receive some sort of actual blessings on our life, it is easy then to not think about Him. With that thought in mind, God gives the Israelites a practical idea on how to keep their focus on Him when they are blessed.
 - b) Let me talk about the actual "tassel" itself as described in this verse. The text says these tassels are to hang from the corners of their garments. I was trying to picture a corner of my pants, and then I remembered they mostly went around in long robes. The bottom line is that they hung down at the end of their garments.
 - i) To describe this, think about most military uniforms. Usually one knows the rank of an officer by the markings on the shoulder or on the collar of that uniform. The Israelite men would wear these near the bottom of their garments. There are a few times in the Gospels where someone wanted to touch the hem of Jesus garment. (See Mark 5:27 as an example). That was probably where Jesus' tassel was. The point is this tassel was an outward sign of one's commitment to God.
 - ii) My only personal experience with this was one time many years ago at work I had an assignment for an Orthodox Jewish attorney. He wore a long tassel from his waste. I do remember when I asked Him about it, that it is based on a scripture from Numbers Chapter 15. Little did I know back then I would be teaching on that very same subject one day. We then went back to work and I didn't ask any more questions about his tassel. My point is the practice still exists today.
 - iii) The visual picture is that of a set of strings hanging off one's garment. Among the strings should be the color blue. I can't remember the color of my client's tassel as it was too long ago. I did Google the image of tassels and most of them were a mixture of colors with a lot of blue in them.
 - iv) So why does the text specify blue in the color? The color blue is associated with the sky and also royalty. When we see the blue color, one thinks of looking up toward the sky (toward God), or one thinks of being part of a "royalty" called people in order to serve Him. The point is it makes us think of God.
 - c) OK John, so Jewish people made these tassels to get them to focus on God. We Christians don't wear tassels today. How do we relate to this? Does that mean God wants me to wear a cross around my neck wherever I go or something like that? First, it is time to remember that we are saved by grace alone and it is not a requirement of Christians to wear a sign of our faith. However, with that said, it is a good habit to do something just to remember to keep our focus on Him. I stated in my introduction that one reason I read my bible daily is to help keep my focus upon Him. Bottom line is some sort of habit that just reminds us (not one to brag to other people) to keep our focus on Him is a good idea.
 - d) Last thing about these verses. Notice that Moses said that these verses say that this tassel will help us to focus on Him. Let's face it; the biggest temptation to sin always comes when we are not thinking about Him. Having some sort of visual sign on us reminds us of our commitment to Him would help all of us to keep our focus upon Him.

14. At this point, let me come back my lesson title of "Now what". My final question of this lesson is in effect, "why is this chapter laid out the way it is?" Why interrupt the story of the Israelites going from Egypt to Israel with all of these laws and regulations, not to mention having the story of killing a man for gathering wood when he should not have been doing so?
- a) The answer is about encouragement. Let's face it, the Israelites were at a very low point in their lives at this point in the story. This chapter is God saying in effect, "Despite all of the problems you are going through at the moment, it is still worth the effort to follow Me. Despite all of things going wrong at the moment, I have great plans to bless all of our lives either in this lifetime or in heaven simply based on trusting Him to guide our lives."
 - i) To continue, there is still is a great benefit to trusting in God, even when one still commits a sin, intentional or not. There still is a price to be paid for committing a sin whether one is in a wilderness or one is being blessed by Me at any moment.
 - ii) Keep one's focus on God and one will be blessed both in this lifetime and in the next one. If one gets that concept, one understands this chapter.
 - b) Unfortunately, the Israelites still rebelled against God, despite the lessons learned in this chapter. The previous chapters (13-14) focused on their rejection of God and believing the reports of the bad spies. The next chapter focuses on some specific Israelites who did not want Moses to be their leader and we will read of them in the next lesson. In this chapter we get a bunch of regulations that say in effect, "Keep focusing on God, it is worth the time and trouble to do so despite the suffering one may have at the present moment."
 - i) The question for us is in effect, are we going to choose to keep our focus upon Him and trust Him to guide our lives, or still desire to do things our own way?
 - ii) I'm not saying I expect all of us to be perfect. I'm just saying that if we are grateful for God's salvation, then we make the effort to show our gratitude to Him based on the way we live out our lives. That is the message of this lesson.
 - iii) With that said, I can now close in prayer.
15. Heavenly Father, help us to keep our focus upon You. Help us when we are going through our own wilderness times, to remember that it is worth the struggles. Help us to remember that You do have great plans for our lives and You do have a reason to allow us to go through what we are currently dealing with at the present moment. Help us to keep trusting in You and live to make a difference for You in all that we do. Help us to be a good witness to You to a world that doesn't realize the great plans You have for all of us who trust in You with our lives. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.