

He Drank the Bitter Cup

Based on Numbers 5 | In the Wilderness: A Fall Series in Numbers (5)

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." — Galatians 3:13

Sermon Summary

We all know the feeling of being caught red-handed — the flush of blood to the cheeks, the crushing weight of guilt and shame when a teacher, a friend, or a parent catches us in the act. But we know something else, too: the feeling of NOT being caught. The lie that went undetected. The thing we did that no one discovered. And underneath it, the quiet dread — what would happen if it ever came out? That crushing weight of hidden guilt and secret shame is where Numbers 5 meets us.

This fall the congregation is walking through the first ten chapters of Numbers — Israel camped at Sinai for nineteen days, prepared to walk with God through the wilderness. Chapter 1: God counts his people by name. Chapter 2: God arranges them with himself at the center. Chapters 3–4: God gives every Levite a purpose, down to the smallest task. Now, in chapter 5, comes the call to holiness — and it begins by confronting us with the shame of our sin and failure.

The chapter's premise is set in verse 3: "so they will not defile themselves in their camp, where I dwell among them." A holy God has come to dwell in the very center of an unholy people. How can that continue? Chapter 5 answers in three movements — uncleanness (skin disease), unfairness (wronging a neighbor), and unfaithfulness (the marriage bed). The long section on the "law of jealousy" shows how sacred God holds marriage: if he is going to live among his people, they must honor it.

This is not a woman caught red-handed — for that, Leviticus 20:10 already prescribed death for both adulterer and adulteress. This is the harder case: guilt that is hidden, impurity undetected, no witness, a husband who suspects but cannot prove. For those moments God gives a process in four steps. First, the husband takes his wife to the priest with an offering of barley flour — coarse, the offering of the poor, crude like the situation — with no oil and no incense, because there is no joy in it. Second, the priest has her stand before the Lord, mixes holy water from the tabernacle basin with dust from the tabernacle floor, and loosens her hair — the sign of one who is unclean. Third, he places her under a solemn oath and speaks the curse, and she must answer "Amen. So be it" — the first occurrence of the word "amen" in all of Scripture, spoken by a woman. Fourth, the priest writes the curses on a scroll, washes the ink into the bitter water, and she drinks it down to the dregs.

Strikingly, this ordeal is protection, not a trap. Everywhere else in the ancient world — trial by combat, molten metal on the chest, walking across hot coals, boiling water, sinking or swimming — the ordeal itself caused harm unless a god intervened to save the innocent. Here it is reversed. Messing up your hair doesn't hurt you; drinking holy water with a little dust in it doesn't hurt you. Nothing in the process harms her unless God supernaturally acts to judge. As one scholar put it, the ordeal "protects the woman from the lynch-mob mentality of an angry community or a jealous husband." The case is taken out of human hands and placed under divine judgment. For an innocent woman it is hurtful but not harmful — the priest reassures her, and verse 28 promises she will be cleared of guilt and publicly vindicated, freed from a lifelong cloud of suspicion.

But imagine the other woman — the one who really did it, who buried the guilt and bottled up the shame, whose lover has abandoned her, whose husband feels betrayed. She stands in the presence of God, hears the curse, and must say, "So be it. I deserve this." The process feels foreign to us, and the power of a curse feels foreign too. Yet what is not foreign at all is the reality of hidden guilt and the fear of being found out — and the way sin tends to find its way out. That reality is deeply, painfully human, and the sermon named it honestly and

with care: the secret addiction, the past abortion, the affair, the shame carried in the body — things in our lives that no one knows, that we fear would destroy us if they came into the light.

Then the turn: we don't have to imagine that guilty woman, because we are that woman. Jeremiah 3 and James 4 name us as the unfaithful spouse; Jeremiah 8, Isaiah 51, and Galatians 3 hand us the poisoned cup and the curse of the law we could never keep. But when Jesus comes, he meets two women who fit Numbers 5. To the woman at the well — five husbands, filled with shame, hiding at noon — he tells everything about her life, yet offers not a poison cup but living water. To the woman caught in adultery, dragged in red-handed, he says, “Neither do I condemn you — go and leave your life of sin.” How can there be such a difference? Because we are the unfaithful bride and he is the faithful bridegroom — like Hosea, told to love his wife again though she is an adulteress. And the cup of wrath? Jesus does not get rid of it. In Gethsemane he prays, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me — yet not my will but yours,” and on the cross he drains it to the dregs. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” Picture the husband taking the cup from his accused wife's hands, drinking it himself, and saying, “You go home. I will bear the punishment.” That is what God has done for us. So he gathers us in gratitude, calls us to repentance and to bringing the hidden thing into the light — for God heals what is confessed — and shows us his restoring grace, so that for those in Christ Jesus there is now no condemnation.

Discussion Questions

This is a tender, weighty text that touches on shame, sexuality, and secret sin. Aim to create a safe and gracious space, keep confidences within the group, and let no one feel pressured to share more than they wish. The goal is to move toward the gospel of grace, not to pry.

1 The pastor opened with the experience of being “caught red-handed” — and then the different weight of NOT being caught, of carrying hidden guilt. Why do you think secret, undetected sin can weigh on us even more heavily than sin that has been exposed?

2 The premise of Numbers 5 is a holy God choosing to dwell in the center of an unholy people (v. 3). How does that reframe why God cares so much about purity — not as cold rule-keeping, but as what it takes for him to live among us?

3 We learned that this ordeal was protection, not a trap — unlike every other ancient trial by ordeal, nothing in it harmed an innocent woman unless God intervened, and it shielded her from a jealous husband and a lynch-mob community. How does seeing the passage this way change your first reaction to it?

4 The first “amen” in all of Scripture is spoken by this woman: “So be it.” For the guilty woman it meant “I deserve this.” Where in your own life have you had to say “so be it” — to own something as true, whether in confession or in trusting God's verdict?

5 The sermon named real, hidden struggles honestly — addiction, a past abortion, adultery, shame carried in the body — things we fear would destroy us if they came to light. Why is it so hard to bring hidden things into the open, even in the church, and what makes a community safe enough to do it?

6

Jesus meets two women who fit Numbers 5: the woman at the well, whom he offers living water instead of a poison cup, and the woman caught in adultery, whom he refuses to condemn. What do these two encounters tell you about how Jesus responds to both hidden and exposed sin?

7

Picture the husband taking the cursed cup from his wife's hands and drinking it himself: "You go home. I will bear the punishment." Galatians 3:13 says Christ became a curse for us. How does knowing that Jesus drank YOUR bitter cup change the way you carry your own guilt and shame this week?

Living It Out

Take the truth of this passage out of the study and into the week. Consider these prompts across four areas of ordinary life.

In Your Heart — Bringing the Hidden into the Light

- Ask honestly: is there something hidden you have been trying to fix by yourself, hiding from God like Adam and Eve rather than bringing it to him? Name it before the Lord this week.
- Sit with Romans 8:1 — "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" — and let it answer the accusing voice that says your secret would destroy you.

In Your Home — Faithfulness and Trust

- Numbers 5 reveals how sacred God holds marriage and the marriage bed. If you are married, thank God for your spouse and take one concrete step to guard and honor that trust.
- Reflect on the restored marriage in the testimony — grace, not the stain, had the last word. Where is God inviting you to extend or receive that kind of grace at home?

In the Church — A Gracious, Safe Community

- The sermon warned against churches that "rule by fear." Ask how you can help make your church a place where people can confess without being crushed — God heals what is confessed.
- Is there someone carrying secret shame who needs you to be safe, confidential, and full of grace this week? Be that person for someone.

In the World — The Faithful Bridegroom's Love

- Like Jesus at the well, look for someone the world would shame and offer them dignity and "living water" instead of judgment.
- Remember that roughly the whole town is full of people hiding something. Let that make you gentler, not harsher, with the people you meet this week.

Service Challenge

Faith takes on flesh when we act. This week, put the gospel of the bitter cup into practice through a concrete act of grace toward someone weighed down by guilt or shame.

Step	This Week's Challenge
1	Pray. Ask God to bring to mind one person who is carrying hidden guilt or shame — or to search your own heart for something you have been hiding from him.
2	Reach out. Have one honest, grace-filled conversation. If it is your own hidden thing, bring it into the light with a trusted friend, pastor, or your spouse. If it is someone else's, simply be a safe, confidential presence.
3	Offer living water, not a poison cup. Choose to respond to a struggling person the way Jesus did — without condemnation, pointing them toward grace and a fresh start rather than shame.
4	Bear a burden. Do one tangible thing to lighten the load of someone weighed down — a meal, a note, a ride, a listening hour — as a small echo of the One who drank the cup for us.
5	Give thanks. Write down one hidden thing Christ has already carried for you, and thank him that there is now no condemnation. Let gratitude, not fear, drive your obedience.

Optional Extended Challenge

Read John 4 (the woman at the well) and John 8:1–11 (the woman caught in adultery) side by side this week. Notice how Jesus meets both hidden sin and exposed sin with grace and truth. Then ask: which woman is more like me right now — and what would it mean to receive from Jesus what he offered her?

Closing Prayer Guide

Close your time together in prayer, using these movements as a guide:

- Gratitude — Thank Jesus, the faithful bridegroom, for taking the bitter cup and the curse we deserved so that we could go free.
- Confession — Bring hidden things into the light before God, trusting that he heals what is confessed and does not condemn those who are in Christ.
- Grace — Ask God for the courage to have hard, honest conversations, and for a heart that extends to others the same grace we have received.
- Restoration — Pray for marriages, for the wounded and ashamed, and for your church to be a safe, gracious place where God brings healing and wholeness.

“Imagine that woman standing before the tent — and her husband, after hearing the curse, takes the cup, drinks it for her, and says, ‘You go home. I will bear the punishment.’ That is what God has done for us.”

If this study surfaced private pain or a struggle you're carrying, you are not alone — please reach out to a pastor, an elder, or a trusted Christian friend. God heals what is confessed, and there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.