

Forty years in the wilderness

31/5/20 dkm

Read: Numbers 14, 1Corinthians 10:1-14

Text: Numbers 14:11-45

Psalms: 145:1-9, 106:1-3&19-26, 78:1-3 &35-42, 72

Have you even been in a desert? We have vast areas of desert in Australia but I have not been beyond Bourke- the desert is the back of Bourke! I have been in the Thar Desert that borders India and Pakistan. I had a camel ride that was not at all pleasant, and spent a freezing cold night in this desert. In our version of the Bible we have the word 'wilderness' which these days has pleasant connotations. Other translations have 'desert' which still speaks of a dry and dusty place with little vegetation. Water and food are scarce in the desert, while very hot days and cold nights make life harsh. We still hear of people getting lost and perishing in the desert. When God sent the children of Israel into the desert for forty years he was not sending them on a picnic; He was sending them for punishment.

After delivering the children of Jacob or Israel from Egypt, the Lord took them by way of Mt Sinai where he established a covenant with them. Moses led them on to Kadesh Barnea from where they were told to invade and take possession of the land of Canaan. However, ten of the twelve men sent to spy out the land brought back a bad report and incited the people to rebellion. In a terrible example of mob rule, they were about to stone Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who brought a good report. They were about to follow the example of Cain, an example followed by King Saul, and by the Jews who turned against our Lord Jesus Christ.

Their plan to stone these two servants of the Lord, men of a different spirit who followed God fully (14:24), was interrupted when the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of meeting; this later became the temple of the Lord. Even these rebels took notice when they saw the glory of the Lord. In the tabernacle the Lord met with Moses face to face (12:8). Let us now listen to what the Lord had to say to Moses

regarding this rebellion at Kadesh Barnea, and how Moses responded.

1. Intercession by Moses

Moses knew the Lord would be angry, and he was not wrong. The Lord was ready to wipe these rebels from the face of the earth. 'How long will these people treat me with contempt' and ignore 'all the miraculous signs which I have performed among them' (14:11 NIV). The Lord told Moses he would strike them with pestilence and destroy them, and start again with Moses to build a nation for himself (14:12). Moses heard much the same word from the Lord after the golden calf rebellion led by Aaron (Exod 32:10). And Moses pleaded with Lord in much the same as he did back then.

Moses' plea or intercession was based on two factors. Firstly, on the Lord's reputation (14:13-16). He argued that if the Lord destroyed all his people in the desert, and the Egyptians heard about it, they would conclude that he was not able to finish what he said he would do and bring the people into their own land. The reputation gained by the Lord in bringing his people out of Egypt would be lost in the eyes of the nations.

Secondly, Moses brought before the Lord his own words, spoken when declaring the covenant with his people. The Lord declared that he was, 'longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression' (14:18, Exod 34:6-7). Moses reminded the Lord of his own words as he pleaded on behalf of the rebels. Moses knew that the Lord does not change and that his words do not change. So with confidence he pleaded for mercy and forgiveness: 'Pardon the iniquity of these people, I pray, according to the greatness of your mercy' (14:19).

Do you pray with confidence like this? You can! Knowing you have Jesus as your mediator you can, 'come boldly before the throne of grace' knowing you will 'find mercy and grace to help in time of need

(Heb 4:12). Do you remind the Lord of words he has spoken when you pray? You will have cause to remember words like those found in 1John 1:9: 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. You might also remember words found in Matthew 11:28 or Romans 8:39, to mention a couple of other promises the Lord has given to us.

2. Forgiveness from the Lord

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I have pardoned according to your word' (14:20). How amazing! The Lord listened to the prayer of his faithful servant Moses, to whom he spoke face to face (12:7-8), and granted his request. This is what happens when we pray according to the will of God (1John 5:14). James gave the example of Elijah but he could also have referred to this prayer of Moses (James 5:17).

Moses touched the Lord's heart, speaking anthropomorphically, when he spoke about the Lord's reputation, or, in effect, his glory. In answering Moses' prayer, the Lord pardoned the people's sin and then declared, 'Truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord' (14:21). Our Shorter Catechism tells us, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever' because this is what wants, and indeed demands. God will not give his glory to another (Isa 48:11). Whatever God does it is for his glory. When he forgives your sin it is for his glory. If this sounds proud remember God is not a man; he is the creator and Lord of the universe, most worthy of praise and glory from all his creation. The prophets were assured of the ultimate aim of God; 'For the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isa 11:9, Hab 2:14).

The people of Israel, especially the spies, had tested the Lord and were fully deserving of his wrath, but in his grace he forgave them—even though justice still demanded their punishment. Under the old covenant God forgave sin but a sacrifice was still required. These men has seen all that the Lord had done in bringing them out of

Egypt, but still they failed to trust him (14:22). Scholars try to identify the ten occasions on which these people rebelled. While they rebelled a number of times after coming out of Egypt, it seems to me the number ten matches the number of spies who lead this rebellion. Even though God forgave these people they would not get to see the Promised Land. Only Caleb would get to see and live in the land he spied out. Joshua led the people after the death of Moses. The Lord then instructed Moses to lead the people back into the desert, heading south towards the Red Sea.

3. Forty years in the desert

After responding to Moses' plea not to destroy the rebels, the Lord spoke further to Moses and Aaron, giving them a message for these people (14:26). Now expressing frustration rather than anger, the Lord said, 'How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who complain against me?' (14:27). He then told Moses and Aaron what to say to the people. The news was not good, but thanks to the intercession of Moses they were still alive. By way of punishment, God declared that all rebels 20yrs old and above would die in the desert (14:29). The book of Numbers begins with a record of the census taken at Mt Sinai. It seems the Lord considered those under 20yrs of age not responsible for the rebellion. In our law those under 18yrs of age are judged in a different court. Again Caleb and Joshua were excepted because they were of 'a different spirit' and wholeheartedly followed the Lord (14:24, 30).

Note that the punishment not only fits the crime but the Lord was actually giving these foolish rebels what they wanted. They wanted to stay in the desert rather than go up and possess the land the Lord promised them. Indeed, they preferred to die in the desert rather than go up (14:2). People who grumble and complain and get angry with God often say foolish things like, 'I wish I was dead'. Others foolishly say, 'If my friend is in hell I want to go there'. As believers we cringe at such words, knowing that God may well grant their

desire- even as we pray that God touch their foolish dead hearts and make them alive in Christ.

The 'evil congregation' would perish in the desert according to their own expressed desire. Moreover, their children, whom they were accusing the Lord of giving into the hands of the giants in Hebron, these children would be the ones to inherit the land of milk and honey (14:31, Deut 1:39). Far from giving these little ones into the hands of the enemy, the Lord would bring them into the Promised Land while the carcasses of their parents would litter the desert. Those over twenty would die during forty years of wandering in the desert.

For every day they spent spying out Canaan, and then bringing back a bad report, they would spend a year wandering in the wilderness. As noted in our introduction, this would not be a pleasant experience. They would see none of the grapes, figs and pomegranates they saw in Canaan as they trudged the dusty tracks of the Arabian Desert, heading nowhere but to their own death. It would be a new generation that the Lord would bring into Canaan, led by an old Joshua and joined by an old Caleb. The ten faithless spies would not even get to start this journey in the desert; they died of a plague sent by the Lord (14:37).

4. Futile attempt to invade

When Moses told the children of Israel their fate, as determined by the Lord, they 'mourned greatly' (14:39) - but not greatly enough as it turned out! It was case of crocodile tears, as we say, a case of self-pity rather than repentance. We say this because of what happened next. The next day they were up early to tell Moses they were now ready to go up into Canaan. 'We have sinned' they said, but that was now behind them and they were ready to move forward. They disobeyed the Lord's command to go up, and now they were disobeying his command to go back into the desert for forty years.

In their hearts these people had not changed. They were still making the decisions, still in control of their future. A sin or two was not going to hold them back from doing what they wanted to do. Does any of this sound familiar to you? Are you truly sorry for your sin? Have you repented of your sin before the Lord? If so, you will not be going on in your old ways, doing what you like and ignoring the commands of Christ. Repentance means turning around from the way you were going; these people were still going on in the same way.

Moses told these rebels not to go up because if they did they would be defeated. Why? Because, 'The Lord is not among you' (14:42). Sure, he told them to go up yesterday, and he would have been with them and given them victory, but they refused to obey. They sinned and the Lord no longer promised to be with them. Moses knew the importance of having the Lord with him in whatever he did (Exod 33:15) but not these people. What about you? Are you still doing things knowing that the Lord is not with you?

The children of Israel 'presumed to go up to the mountain top' (14:44). They went without the Ark of the Covenant which symbolised the presence of the Lord, and without Moses, their God-appointed prophet, priest and leader. They presumed the Lord would go with them now that they had a change of mind regarding his will. God's will was still for his people to go up into Canaan but it would not be this evil generation. These people thought they knew God's will but if they did not know their sin and did not repent before the Lord they could only presume to know God's will. What they were actually following was their own will. Many Christians make this mistake. They presume to speak about God's will for their lives when they have not truly repented of their sins, or submitted themselves to the Lordship of Christ and the sovereignty of God.

The children of Israel presumed to go up into Canaan. They set off but they did not get far. The Amalekites and Canaanites came out of

the hills and attacked them, chasing them as far as Hormah, a word that means 'destruction' (14:45, Deut 1:44). Moses told them that this would happen and that many would fall by the sword. He does not tell us how many died in this futile attempt to enter Canaan but we know that those who survived spent the next forty years wandering the desert under the rod of divine punishment, and hopefully reflecting long and hard upon their sin.