

“Be Careful What You Wish For”

Numbers 14:1-45 (Text) • Hebrews 9:11-15

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Last Sunday, we read in Chapter 13 of the Book of Numbers that the Israelites reached Kadesh-barnea, a large oasis on the southern fringes of the Promised Land of Canaan. From there, Moses sent twelve spies on a scouting mission into the land. The spies accomplished their mission, even bringing back a huge cluster of grapes, pomegranates and figs as proof of the beauty and richness of the land of Canaan.

However, the scouts were not unanimous in their report. The majority report of ten of the scouts painted a gloomy picture of well-fortified cities inhabited by powerful, giant warriors. In contrast, the minority report of two other spies—Caleb and Joshua—encouraged the people to go in and conquer the land because God promised to give it to them.

Today in our text in Chapter 14, we read a fuller exhortation from these two spies. But what was the response of the people? They mourned, thinking that they would all die trying to conquer the land. They wished that they would just go back to the wilderness and to Egypt and die there. They feared for their wives and children that they will be slaves in Canaan.

An old proverb says, “Be careful what you wish for”? A rock band put the saying into a song: “So be careful what you wish for / 'Cause you just might get it.” Although this song was not composed by a believer, it is a good reminder to us as Christians. This proverb is also relevant to our narrative today. The Israelites responded to the spies’ majority report with a few “wishes” that seem to our eyes to be obviously irrational. They did not believe and trust in God’s promises, so they rebelled against God. He is holy and just, so the people suffered dire consequences for their unbelief and rebellion. But God is also patient and gracious, so through the Moses’ mediation, God relented from his wrath against them.

Today, we will dwell on the theme, “**BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR,**” under three headings: first, **The Root Cause of Their Wish;** second, **The Consequences of Their Wish;** and third, **Mediation After Getting Their Wish.**

The Root Cause of Their Wish

Because they did not believe God’s promises, the people wished for several things. First, they would rather die in Egypt or in the wilderness. Second, they did not want their women and children to become a prey in Canaan. Third, they wanted to replace Moses with a new leader who would lead them back into Egypt.

When Joshua and Caleb heard the people grumble against God, they grieved by tearing their clothes (Gen 37:29). They tried to convince the people not to rebel against the Lord, but to be courageous and obey, for God will not protect the Canaanites. For this exhortation, the people became even more rebellious, so they tried to stone Joshua and Caleb to death, a penalty reserved for apostates, which they had become as a people.

This was so unexpected, given that the people had already witnessed God's power from the time they were in Egypt—his mighty work in the plagues; in parting the Red Sea so the people can cross on dry land; and in guiding them in their wilderness travels through the pillars of cloud and of fire. This is why God said to Moses, *"How long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?"* (v 11)

As we saw last week, this unbelief produced irrational contradictions when they looked at the land and its people. They said that the land was fertile and bountiful and its people big and strong, but "the land devours its people." They wished they had died in Egypt or in the wilderness: which is better, to die in Egypt or in the wilderness, or to die at the hands of the Canaanites, or to die sooner or later? They wanted to go back to Egypt because they feared that their wives and children would be a prey in Canaan. Did they not remember that they were slaves toiling under the cruel Egyptians for 400 years? They wanted to choose a new leader and go back to Egypt. Did they not remember that Moses pleaded repeatedly to God to save them from God's wrath?

Unbelief produces irrationality. Irrationality produces rebellion. We believe God can change the hearts of kings, but we easily give up on stubborn family and friends who reject Christ. We believe the Holy Spirit can give new hearts to unbelievers, but we devise all kinds of entertainment in our worship because we think that our methods, not the Holy Spirit, do the saving of unbelieving souls. We claim that God works everything for our good, but we easily forget that promise when we run into serious marital, financial or medical difficulties.

The people rebelled because of their unbelief. And God who is holy has judgment reserved for his rebellious people.

Consequences of Their Wish

Over and over again in their wilderness journeys, the people of Israel rebelled against God. But over and over again, God showed them his patience and mercy. But this time, God had enough with this people! Now it is time to punish these Israelites. Enough is enough, God says, so he will destroy these people and start all over again with Moses and make a people *"greater and mightier than they"* (v 12; see also Exo 32:10).

God also threatened to "disinherit" them, which means they will cease to be God's covenant people and they will not inherit the Promised Land. We know that he did not act on his threat until Jesus first came to establish his kingdom and prophesied against the Jews, *"the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits"* (Matt 21:43). His kingdom people will now come not only from the Jews, but also from all nations as the Church, the new Israel of God, the new covenant people.

God could have destroyed these rebellious Israelites immediately, and Moses would have had no right to complain. In the Garden of Eden, God could have destroyed Adam and Eve immediately as he has warned them. He was justified when he destroyed all humanity by the great flood, when he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, or if he were to destroy the whole world today. In these acts of judgment, God had been perfectly just because all human beings are sinners

deserving death. But God is not only holy and just. He is also *“slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”* (v 18). Therefore, it took him 1,500 years to “disinherit” Israel by sending the Roman army to destroy the Jerusalem and its temple in A.D. 70.

In a series of pronouncements, God imposed his judgment against the people commensurate with their offenses. First, they will wander in the wilderness for forty years. Why forty years? For each day that the twelve spies were in the land, the people were to spend a year in the desert (v 34). You want to go back to Egypt? Then you shall go back in the direction of the Red Sea where you started your march. You want to die in the wilderness? Then you shall die in the wilderness. Do you fear that your women and children will be slaves in Canaan? Then your children *“shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness”* (v 33).

Second, the ten unbelieving and rebellious spies *“died by plague before the Lord”* (v 37). These men were prime examples of unbelief to the people of God, and the penalty for unbelief and apostasy is death (Deu 13:10). God judged them as leaders who caused the people to grumble against Moses and rebel against him. This is both a sober and terrible reminder that church officebearers have a much greater responsibility in upholding true doctrine and worship and in walking godly lives than the rest of God’s people. God will pronounce woes and curses on pastors and teachers who lead their flock into false doctrine, worship and sinful lives (Jer 23:1; 1 Cor 4:4).

Third, God forgave the people, but not completely, since they still suffered the consequences of their unbelief. This illustrates the fact that although God forgives sin, he does not always remove its consequences. In this case, although they remained as God’s covenant people, they still suffered for their sin. The first generation of the adults who came out of Egypt were not allowed to enter the land but died in the wilderness (vv 22-23).

But even after suffering all of these dire consequences for their rebellion, the Israelites did not seem to learn from them. In verses 39-45, they mourned over God’s judgment on them, but only because they were punished. This was not true repentance over their sin, because repentance involves turning away from sin and turning to God in obedience. Presuming that God will not punish them again for disobedience, they ignored Moses’ warning and took matters into their own hands and attempted to enter and conquer Canaan. The ensuing battle was a disaster for them because the Amalekites and the Canaanites defeated them and drove them out of the land to a place called Hormah, which means that the Israelites suffered “utter destruction.”

This last scene is another object lesson for us today: when there is no true repentance, sin piles upon sin. Covering up sin results in the commission of more sin, as we saw David’s adultery was followed with murder to cover up his first sin. And all of us—even if we delight in the law of God in our inner being—are rebellious sinners by nature, not doing the good that we want, but keep on doing the evil we do not want (Rom 7:22, 19). Is there hope for unbelieving and rebellious people like us?

Be careful what you wish for! Because it is like praying, and if you pray against God’s will, you will eventually reap dire consequences.

A Mediator Lessens the Consequences of Their Wish

Moses, as we learned previously, was a meek and humble leader and mediator. Repeatedly, after Israel sinned and rebelled against him and against God, he prayed for them. In spite of the people grumbling against him and threatening to replace him with a new leader, he pleaded to God to forgive them.

So, just as before, when Moses heard God's impending judgment on the rebellious people, he pleaded with God, *"Please pardon the iniquity of this people"* (v 19). His plea is based on two attributes of God: his great and steadfast love, and his glory and honor. Because of the intercession by Moses, God did not act on his threat to destroy of Israel. What then was God's response? It was twofold. On the one hand, he forgave them. On the other hand, he still judged the people, the ten spies, and the further rebellion that followed. God cannot wink on sin, *"he will by no means clear the guilty"* (v 18). Without Moses, what would have happened to this rebellious people? God could have immediately destroyed them! But because of Moses' mediation, God gave them a "second chance." Not all of them would die in the wilderness because their children younger than twenty years old would survive the wilderness and enter the Promised Land.

In his judgment, God pointed out the contrast between the unbelieving and rebellious hearts of the people and the faithful and obedient spirits of Caleb and Joshua (v 24). The people had an unbelieving spirit, producing rebellion. In contrast, Joshua's and Caleb's faith and trust in God's Word produced genuine courage. And the faith of the next generation that Joshua and Caleb led for forty years of wandering in the wilderness were strengthened. This is the generation that was given a second opportunity by God to finally enter and settle in the land (Jos 1:5-9).

Dear friends, like the Israelites, we are by nature an unbelieving and rebellious people. We grumble about our homes, our jobs, our children, our homework, our chores, our friends. We often look at the situation of other people and then say, "I wish I lived in a big house. I wish I had a nice job like my friend's job. I wish my children were like my friend's children. I wish I didn't have so many chores at home. I wish I had other friends because I don't like my friends now. I wish, I wish, I wish.

"Be careful what you wish for." God judges covetousness and grumbling. He might give you all the sinful desires of your heart. Then your heart might turn away from God and toward the desires of the world. In your rebellion, God might give you over to your worldly desires, hardening your hearts (Rom 1:28).

So when you find ourselves in the sin of unbelief, rebellion and covetousness, you have a Mediator who is better than Moses (Heb 9:15): Jesus Christ the Savior. He pleads for you before his Father's throne of grace, *"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."* To receive your promised inheritance, you do not have to accomplish what is impossible: fulfilling all of God's laws. It is impossible for you to do that, because what is impossible for you was already accomplished by Christ: he has fulfilled all the law for you by perfectly obeying God's law.

What are you to do to be pardoned by God for your rebellion? You are to turn away from your unbelief and rebellion and believe and trust in the only mediator between you and God: Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the really good news. But even better than this, the Holy Spirit is also the One who gives the faith and repentance that God requires of you. So pray that God will grant you faith and repentance, so he will forgive you of your grumbling and rebellion. Then you will be able to enter your Promised Land, the heavenly city that awaits all of you who are faithful citizens of God's kingdom. *Amen.*