



Numbers - Chapter Fourteen

III Numbers 13:1-19:22 - Forty Years Near Kadesh (continues)

III.a Numbers 13:1-14:45 - The Mission of the Spies and the National Rebellion (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Fourteen

The people rebel against God and believe they would be better off choosing a new leader to take them back to the security of slavery in Egypt rather than into a land of strong people. While Moses and Aaron turned to the Lord in prayer, Joshua and Caleb pleaded with the people to not rebel against God but to go forward into the land. The presence of God came down in anger against the people, warning of their annihilation by his wrath and the establishment of a new people through the faithful Moses.

Moses intercedes for the people, asking God to forgive the continued transgression against him, not on the basis that they deserve his favour, but for the sake of the Lord's name among the other nations. God then forgives the people but also decrees that none of those who were adults when they left Egypt will enter the Promised Land other than Caleb and Joshua. For this to happen, the entire people were destined to wander in the wilderness for a total of forty years, where the adults would perish.

At this the people realised they had sinned. Still not realising they were opposing God's will they decided to go into the Promised Land anyway. Ignoring Moses' warnings that they would fail without God, they went anyway and were defeated in battle, for they were transgressing against the will of God.

III.a.iii Numbers 14:1-12 - The People Rebel

The people react very strongly to this pessimistic view of their prospects. Their comments challenge both God's purposes and his power. God had promised them the land, but they dismiss it as impossible and suggest choosing a new leader to bring them back to Egypt.

¹ Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night.

Numbers 14:1

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry. The children of Israel were confronted with two reports regarding the Promised Land. Two of the twelve spies, Caleb and Joshua, say: <<*Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it*>> (Numbers 13:30b), but the other ten spies said "what God promised about the land is true; nevertheless, the natives of the land are too mighty, and we cannot overcome them, despite what God has promised."

It should not be forgotten that the twelve spies were sent one from each tribe (Numbers 13:2); in this way, they truly represented the people of Israel, and the lack of faith of the majority of the spies is a lack of faith on behalf of the whole nation. What must also be remembered are the details of how and why the spies were sent; the idea to send them did not originate with Moses or with God, but with the people (Deuteronomy 1:19-25); Moses unwisely agreed, and God merely told them how many spies to send and that they should represent the whole nation. But why were the spies sent? There was no military information needed; God had promised them victory over their enemies. Perhaps a reading of the terrain would have been helpful, but Moses told them to see if the land was good, and to see if the people and cities were weak or strong (Numbers 13:17-20), and this information indirectly led to the bad report of the ten spies!

The people wept that night. The unbelief of the ten spies truly represented the unbelieving heart of the nation. Israel wept that night upon hearing that the enemies in Canaan were formidable. This mourning had a distinct character. It was mourning because God would not make it all 'easy.' Christians often somehow expect that of God, and resent adversity in their lives, forgetting the example of Jesus, who had it 'harder' than any of them, and whom no one is above. It was mourning filled with a resentful attitude towards God, blaming him for their 'problem', denying that he is a loving Father who cares for his children. It was mourning that gave into the feeling of unbelief and fear; mourning that allowed feelings rule in one's life instead of faith in the living God. Here, their clinging to the feelings of fear and mourning is plain sin and rebellion, and their feelings did not by any means justify their rebellion. Clinging to feelings can be sin. This was

mourning over a loss. People usually mourn because something has died. Here, God was trying to cause something to die, the flesh, the sinful nature, the old man, as much as it could in an Old Covenant sense; and Israel mourned because they wanted the old man to live, not die. Thus Paul writes to the church: <<***We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin***>> (Romans 6:6), thus encouraging them have faith in God through adversity and to allow them to be released from their captivity to sin and doubt.

So here, Israel stood barely a year out of Egypt, on the threshold of the Promised Land. Over the first ten chapters of Numbers they had been fully prepared to walk as Promised Land people, they had been ordered and organised; cleansed and purified; set apart and blessed; taught how to give and how to function as priests; had been made to remember judgement spared and deliverance brought; and had been given God's presence as a guide and the tools needed to lead the people. Now God invited them to take the land, and they rebelled through their mourning. Unbelief made them think of God's good for them, i.e. the gift of the Promised Land, as something evil.

² And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ^{3a} Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword?

Numbers 14:2-3a

And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron. Their murmuring was directed first towards Moses and Aaron, but since these were the Lord's leaders, they were murmuring against the Lord. The vision of Moses and Aaron to lead these people into the Promised Land is the Lord's vision. Their complaint is against the Lord, even if they want to hide it by directing it against Moses and Aaron. Probably some falsely 'spiritual' folks among the murmurers said, "Oh no, we trust the Lord. We love the Lord. We would never rebel against the Lord. It is Moses and Aaron we do not like." But Joshua and Caleb knew: <<***Only do not rebel against the Lord***>> (v.9), and the Lord himself knew: <<***How long will this people despise me?***>> (v.11).

Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! The challenge of faith before the people seemed so great, and so grievous, that they would rather have died than go on with what the Lord has for them. Tragically for this generation, God would give them what their rebellious, unbelieving hearts wanted.

Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Here, they directly accused the Almighty with sin and evil towards them. They were angry with God, accusing him of plotting the murder of them and their wives and

children. This was a deep state of rebellion. God, who can do no evil, with whom there is no shadow of turning, was called evil and a murderer by his own people.

Some counsel it is a healthy thing to be angry with God, and to let it all out, so that they can be reconciled with God, as sort of a matter of counselling therapy. While it is true that one may be angry with God, and should take every such feeling to God, it is wrong to ever assume or imply that such feelings are justified. If a person is angry at God, they are sinning because God has never done anything that deserves them to be angry with him. They should honestly bring such sin before God, but never for a moment feeling it to be justified.

^{3b} Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?’ ⁴ So they said to one another, ‘Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.’

Numbers 14:3b-4

Our wives and our little ones will become booty. The unbelieving among Israel justified their unbelief on the basis of concern for their wives and children. Tragically, because of their unbelief they would die in the wilderness and their children, a new generation of faith, would inherit the Promised Land.

Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? This was not better. In the first ten chapters of Numbers, God led Israel through a process intended to change them from a slave-minded people to being a ‘promised-land’ people. Here, they completely revert back to their slave mentality, preferring slavery under cruel, murdering masters than the walk of faith God has for them. Make no mistake, what Israel rejected here was a walk of faith. If God was going to lead them into a deeper trust than they had before, they wanted no part of it. If he made it all easy, that was fine with them, but they did not want a walk of faith.

Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt. This was pure rebellion. They said that they did not want God’s plan, they did not want God’s leaders, and they did not want God’s land. They believed that they knew better than God. Notice how man-centred their rebellion was: they said to one another - the decision was made among themselves, believing their majority vote had more wisdom than God. Let us choose a captain - they did not like God’s selection, so they wanted a leader who would truly represent them, in all their rebellion against God.

⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the Israelites. ⁶ And Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to all the congregation of the Israelites, ‘The land that we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land.

⁸ If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹ Only, do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, for they are no more than bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.’

Numbers 14:5-9

Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces. Moses and Aaron were older and wiser and therefore knew how bad the situation was. They simply prostrated themselves in prayer, and said not a word to the people, knowing it would do no good, but they knew that they must cry out to God for a miracle if Israel was to be spared.

Joshua and Caleb rightly term the popular reaction as rebellion against the Lord and urge them to have faith in God’s power to bring them into the land. For this they are threatened with stoning (v.10), a form of execution prescribed for apostates: <<*Say further to the people of Israel: Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death*>> (Leviticus 20:2), <<*The whole congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death, just as the Lord had commanded Moses*>> (Numbers 15:36), and: <<*Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*>> (Deuteronomy 13:10).

Tore their clothes. This is a typical sign of grief and anguish: <<*When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes*>> (Genesis 37:29), and: <<*When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry*>> (Esther 4:1).

If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us. This statement from Joshua and Caleb stands in stark contrast to the cowardly statement from the other spies in 13:31. God’s subsequent blessing on Joshua and Caleb in v.30, v.38 and 26:65 shows his approval of their faith.

Only, do not rebel against the Lord; and do not fear the people of the land, the Lord is with us. Their fear and unbelief was wilful rebellion. Therefore Joshua and Caleb appealed to the will of the people, asking them to decide to give up their rebellion and return to the Lord. The people of Israel did not have to give in to their feelings of fear, of anger to the Lord, of unbelief. By God’s grace they could choose to submit to him and trust him.

Do not fear them. Fear is a God-given mechanism to enable people to react to danger; it is part of his original design in creation. However, there are times when

fear is not required for it can inhibit a person from fellowship with God: <<*After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great’*>> (Genesis 15:1). Jesus teaches this to those who choose to follow him: <<*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid*>> (John 14:27); something that John expands on later: <<*Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love*>> (1 John 4:17-18). Another apostle writes: <<*Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame*>> (1 Peter 3:13-16).

^{10a} But the whole congregation threatened to stone them.

Numbers 14:10a

But the whole congregation threatened to stone them. This was the response of the people. Rebellious, carnal man cannot endure the men of faith, who came with the challenge of faith. They would kill Joshua and Caleb for calling them to forsake their unbelief and to trust God. Nothing can be more vexing, more aggravating to the child of God in rebellion than another child of God who is full of faith and submission to God, and who has godly counsel.

^{10b} Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites.

Numbers 14:10b

Then the glory of the Lord appeared. This was the response of the Lord. It is not yet revealed what the glory of the Lord would do, but it is not hard to figure out. Their actions and feelings were not consistent with the glory of the Lord. Was it consistent with the glory of the Lord to:

- Be unbelieving?
- Mourn because the walk of faith was hard?
- Long for death?
- Accuse God of plotting murder?
- Go back to the slavery of Egypt?

- Reject God's leaders and go with 'the people's choice'?
- Kill those who call one to a deeper life of trust in God?

¹¹ And the Lord said to Moses, 'How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? ¹² I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.'

Numbers 14:11-12

The Lord said to Moses. God does not even speak with the nation; he knows they are past hearing him. He will speak with Moses, and Moses alone. Many a child of God in rebellion wonders why they do not hear the voice of God anymore; why should they? They are rejecting what God has already said, do they think they can be open to what more he might say?

How long will this people despise me? God had been only good to Israel, and had demonstrated his loving strength towards them countless times. Israel's rejection of God makes no sense.

I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they. The gravity of the sin is marked by God's proposal to destroy the nation and start again with Moses. A similar threat was made in Exodus 32:10.

III.a.iv Numbers 14:13-25 - Moses Intercedes for the People

Moses prays here, as he did after the making of the golden calf (Exodus Chapter 32), acting, as often in the Pentateuch, as a covenant mediator, as seen also in Numbers 12:3-4. He points out that, were God to fulfil his threat to annihilate Israel, the nations would say that the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land (Exodus 32:12). He reminds God that he promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land (Exodus 32:13), and finally he quotes God's own description of his character to prove that he ought to forgive (Exodus 34:6-7).

God's response is somewhat surprising. On the one hand, he declares: I have pardoned, according to your Word, i.e. he has drawn back from destroying Israel immediately. However, that does not mean they can go ahead with their planned entry into Canaan. In fact, the disobedient Israelites will get what they asked for. They wanted to return to Egypt (v.3); they are told to go into the wilderness by way of the Red Sea (v.25). They said they did not want to enter the land because they would die there (vv.2-3); they are told they will never enter it, but die in the wilderness (vv.27-38). They feared that their little ones would become a prey (v.3); but it is the children who, in forty years' time, will enter the land (v.31).

¹³ But Moses said to the Lord, ‘Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them, ¹⁴ and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O Lord, are in the midst of this people; for you, O Lord, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, ¹⁶ “It is because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.”

Numbers 14:13-16

But Moses said to the Lord. Moses did not entertain God’s offer for a moment. Instead, he pleaded for the nation and loved them despite their rebellion, and he was zealous for the glory of God.

Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among them. Moses’ zeal for God’s glory was evident. He knew that if God wiped out the present nation and started again with Moses as the patriarch, it would be a black mark on God’s reputation before the nations, especially Egypt. Perhaps then the nations could claim that the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land. It could be said that the sin and rebellion of man was greater than the power and goodness of God.

He swore to give them. Moses brought God’s promise before him. He begged God not to give the nations any opportunity to think God has not been true to his Word.

¹⁷ And now, therefore, let the power of the Lord be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying,

¹⁸ “The Lord is slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love,
forgiving iniquity and transgression,
but by no means clearing the guilty,
visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
to the third and the fourth generation.”

¹⁹ Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now.'

Numbers 14:17-19

Let the power of the Lord be great. Moses glories in the power of God, but asks that God would use his power by showing mercy and longsuffering to a rebellious Israel.

In the way that you promised when you spoke. The list of vv.18-19 is almost a quote from the words of self-revelation God spoke to Moses in the dramatic encounter Moses had with God in Exodus 34:6-8.

Slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, by no means clearing the guilty, steadfast love. Each of these is mentioned first in Exodus 34:6-8. Moses basically said: "Lord, you have revealed yourself to me by your Word. Your Word declares who you are. Now Lord, please act towards Israel according to who you have declared yourself to be in your Word.

Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love. Moses knew God's power, and appealed to it; Moses knew God's promise and appealed to it, and Moses knew God's glory and appealed to it. This was a spectacular example of intercession. What made this intercession spectacular was not primarily Moses' method, i.e. appealing to God's glory, power, and promise, but Moses' heart. Here, Moses is totally 'others-centred', not concerned for his own glory, but only for Israel. He displays that he shares the heart of God towards his people and that is what made Moses' intercession spectacular. This, of course, was God's intention all along: to develop and draw out of Moses just this kind of heart, transforming Moses into the image of his Son long before the time of Jesus: *<<For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family>>* (Romans 8:29). Paul, too, demonstrated this heart for his people: *<<I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh>>* (Romans 9:1-3).

²⁰ Then the Lord said, 'I do forgive, just as you have asked;
²¹ nevertheless – as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord – ²² none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, ²³ shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me

shall see it. ²⁴ But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. ²⁵ Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites live in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.'

Numbers 14:20-25

I do forgive. The heart of Moses and his method of intercession were successful. These are sweet words for any sinner to hear, as are: <<***Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit***>> (Psalm 32:1-2 NIV), and: <<***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus***>> (Romans 8:1).

Just as you have asked. This means that Moses' prayer mattered. Some may wonder if prayer is some elaborate game, where God threatens to do something he will never do anyway, and the petitioner prays, pretending to believe God will do what he has threatened, and when God hears the prayer, he forgets his idle threat and does what he was going to do anyway. Prayer definitely does not work that way. People do not understand the relationship between the eternal, sovereign plan of God and their prayers; but they should know it is no game. God never wanted Moses to think of it as a game, and wanted Moses to at least think that his prayers had directly affected the outcome: I do forgive, just as you have asked! Christians should pray as if life and death, heaven and hell, would be decided by their prayers! They should also remember the promise: <<***I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it***>> (John 14:13-14), even though the outcome many not seem to match this promise. God answers prayers according to his will, but he does answer them in the believer's best interest.

All the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord. God's purposes will not be defeated by human failure; he will certainly fulfil them. The doxology at the end of Psalm 72, which concludes Book 2 of the Psalms makes a similar claim: <<***Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen***>> (Psalm 72:18-19). To be filled with God's glory is to be a holy site of worship, where God makes his presence known, and this prayer is that the whole earth be such a sanctuary.

God's glory is a technical term for God's manifest presence with his covenant people. It was seen in the cloud in the wilderness (Exodus 16:7-10); it moved in to 'fill' the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35) and then the temple (1 Kings 8:11), where the worshippers could 'see' it (Exodus 29:43, Psalms 26:8 and 63:2).

Several passages look forward to the day when the Lord's glory would fill the earth, i.e. the whole world will become a sanctuary (Psalm 72:19, Isaiah 11:9 and Habakkuk 2:14). Other texts in Isaiah also look forward to the revealing of the Lord's glory to the world (Isaiah 11:10, 35:2, 40:5, 58:8, 59:19, 60:1-2 and 66:18). John 1:14 asserts that this glory was present in Jesus: *<<And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth>>*.

None of the people who have seen my glory shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors. Therefore, those who put God to the test and rebelled against his promise would not see the Promised Land. However, the faithful like Caleb would inherit the land. Note the high praise heaped upon Caleb. Caleb's stand of faith seemed futile when Israel rejected him; but it was richly rewarded by God: *<<And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him>>* (Hebrews 11:6), and: *<<Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward>>* (2 John 8).

Turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness. God had brought them to the threshold of the Promised Land, but they rebelled against him, and did not enter, so God will send them back into the wilderness. Israel has demonstrated they are still slave-minded; they do not think like Promised Land people. It will take more wilderness training until they are a people ready to live in the Promised Land!

III.a.v Numbers 14:26-45 - An Attempted Invasion is Repulsed

Although all the adult Israelites were warned that they would die in the wilderness, the ten faithless spies, who had incited the national apostasy, 'died by plague' (v.37); ironically, this uses one of the same Hebrew words used with reference to the Egyptian plagues, Hebrew *maggpah*, (Exodus 9:14). A similar fate befell many of those involved in the idolatry of the golden calf in Exodus 32:35.

The story of the spies illustrates an important principle: when God forgives sin, he does not always eliminate the consequences of sin. In the case of Israel, God's forgiveness meant that it remained the people of God in a corporate sense. The covenant made at Sinai, that the Lord would be their God and that Israel would be his people, was maintained. Yet the people still suffered for their sin; they did not enter Canaan, but died in the wilderness.

Despite the death of the spies, and despite Moses telling the people that they must die in the wilderness and not enter the land, they attempt a conquest. Their defeat, ironically at the hands of the Amalekites and Canaanites, fulfils Moses' warning.

²⁶ And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: ²⁷ How long shall this wicked congregation complain against me? I have heard the

complaints of the Israelites, which they complain against me. ²⁸ Say to them, 'As I live', says the Lord, 'I will do to you the very things I heard you say: ²⁹ your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upwards, who have complained against me, ³⁰ not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. ³¹ But your little ones, who you said would become booty, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised. ³² But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. ³³ And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. ³⁴ According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.' ³⁵ I the Lord have spoken; surely I will do thus to all this wicked congregation gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.

Numbers 14:26-35

All those from twenty years old and upwards are sentenced to die in the wilderness, because it was those over twenty who had been enrolled to fight (Numbers 1:3) but had refused to do so in order to take possession of the land.

Except Caleb and Joshua. These men of faith were the glorious exceptions. They would enter into the land of promise because they have the hearts and minds of new men. Not even Moses and Aaron were made exceptions to this decision. They would also not enter the Promised Land, each for their own reasons. However, it should be remembered that Moses was not guiltless in this whole tragedy, having agreed to the request of the people to send out spies instead of just boldly taking the land by faith. In such times, leaders are called to lead and not simply to bow to the will of the people: <<*When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces'*>> (Luke 7:24-25). John the Baptist never bowed to popular opinion but fulfilled his calling by leading people in preparation for the Gospel.

But your little ones. When excusing their unbelief, Israel had claimed concern for their children (v.3), accusing God of wanting to murder them. Now, ironically, their children would inherit the land, while they perished in the wilderness.

The land that you have despised. It may be imagined that many in Israel objected saying, “We did not despise the land. We wanted it. We were just afraid.” But they did despise it, because as much as anything, it was a land of faith for people of faith, and the unbelieving and rebellious do despise the land.

Forty days, forty years. The spies, representing the nation, failed in the test of forty days. Now the nation would be tested for forty years, and they would come forth purified, ready to inherit the Promised Land, but only after the man of unbelief and rebellion has perished in the wilderness. The old man, the man still slave-minded to sin, can never enter into God’s promises; the old man must die, and God will do whatever it takes to make that happen, as Paul acknowledges: <<*We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin*>> (Romans 6:6).

This turning point in Israel’s history is an essential lesson for every believer, and is trumpeted to them in Psalm 95:7b-11: <<*O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.’ Therefore in my anger I swore, ‘They shall not enter my rest’>>, and: <<*Then they despised the pleasant land, having no faith in his promise. They grumbled in their tents, and did not obey the voice of the Lord. Therefore he raised his hand and swore to them that he would make them fall in the wilderness, and would disperse their descendants among the nations, scattering them over the lands*>> (Psalm 106:24-27). It is also recorded that: <<*they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them*>> (Nehemiah 9:16-17). Hebrews 3:7-4:16 makes it clear: God has a place of rest and promise for every believer to enter in to, and it can only be entered by faith. The man of unbelief, self-reliance, and self-focus can never enter into God’s rest and abundance.*

³⁶ And the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation complain against him by bringing a bad report about the land — ³⁷ the men who brought an unfavourable report about the land died by a plague before the Lord. ³⁸ But Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh alone remained alive, of those men who went to spy out the land.

Numbers 14:36-38

The men who brought an unfavourable report about the land died by a plague before the Lord. These men are prime examples of unbelief within the covenant people, and must be removed. In Isaiah 1:24-28 God shows himself to be the righteous judge who must remove unfaithful leaders; afterwards, what remains is a chastened people willing to serve God. Thus God judged the leaders, who died by a plague before the Lord, because of the disastrous effect of their bad report, i.e. made all the congregation complain against Moses, a dramatic reminder of the principle that God requires a higher level of accountability for those in leadership: <<*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*>> (James 3:1).

³⁹ When Moses told these words to all the Israelites, the people mourned greatly. ⁴⁰ They rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, ‘Here we are. We will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned.’ ⁴¹ But Moses said, ‘Why do you continue to transgress the command of the Lord? That will not succeed. ⁴² Do not go up, for the Lord is not with you; do not let yourselves be struck down before your enemies. ⁴³ For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will confront you there, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the Lord, the Lord will not be with you.’ ⁴⁴ But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, even though the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and Moses, had not left the camp. ⁴⁵ Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them, pursuing them as far as Hormah.

Numbers 14:39-45

The people mourned greatly. They were indeed sorry; many people are sorry for the consequence of their sin. But they were not so sorry as to turn their hearts to a genuine trust of the Lord.

Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them. In disobeying Moses’ command, the Israelites ‘presume’ to take matters into their own hands. Rather than accomplishing God’s purposes, they encounter his judgement.

Hormah, the Hebrew word meaning destruction, is a village on the southern border of Canaan and is referred to in Joshua 15:30 as a town allocated to the tribe of Judah. Refer to the map below.



The Failed Entry into Canaan

After the Lord had condemned the people for refusing to enter Canaan, a group of Israelites changed their minds and tried to go up, even though neither Moses nor the Ark of the Covenant went with them. When they reached the hill country, they were beaten back by the Amalekites and Canaanites, who chased them all the way to Hormah.