

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Numbers 14: 36-45

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it is time to read the bible again. We continue to read Numbers chapter 14. Today, we are reading verses 36 through 45.

In God's speaking to Moses and Aaron, God declared His judgment upon the Israelites. Among the twelve tribes of Israel, all those who were numbered, twenty years old and above, who complained against God, would fall dead in the wilderness and would not enter the good land. Joshua and Caleb, along with the women and children of the Israelites, would wander in the wilderness for 40 years, and then God would lead them into the good land to possess it as an inheritance.

In this passage of speaking, God three times mentions that their carcasses would fall in the wilderness and be consumed. The 600,000-strong army of Israel would wander in the wilderness for 40 years, and in the end all be consumed in the wilderness. The newborn generation of Israelites would grow up in the wilderness, and would finally be brought by God into the good land. This judgment is indeed severe, yet it was also necessary.

Speaking typologically, the first generation of Israelites is our old man; the old man must be crucified together with Christ in order to remove the evil passions and lusts of the flesh. The newborn generation of Israelites is our new man, just as Ephesians 4:22-24 says, "that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness." "To be renewed in the spirit of your mind," translated according to the original text, means to let your mind be renewed by the Holy Spirit. In this way, the new man has righteousness and holiness, and is then worthy to enter the good land.

Verse 36: "Now 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 of the land,"

After God declared His judgment to Moses and Aaron, He first dealt with the source of the rebellion, that is, the ten spies whom Moses had sent to spy out the land of Canaan and who, upon returning, brought back a bad report. They clearly knew that it was a land flowing with milk and honey, and they also knew that God had led them out of Egypt precisely in order to enter the land of Canaan which God had promised to their forefather Abraham. Yet because the inhabitants of Canaan were tall in stature, they saw themselves as grasshoppers, forgot God's promise, and forgot that God would fight for them, so that they brought a bad report to the congregation of Israel, causing everyone to be terrified and chilled at heart, so that they began to complain against Moses and wanted to appoint another leader to bring them back to Egypt. These ten spies who brought the bad report were the source of the Israelites' rebellion.

Verse 37: "those very men who brought the evil report about the land, died by the plague before the LORD."

God had originally intended to send a plague to destroy the Israelites and to raise up the descendants of Moses instead to replace the Israelites; afterward, because Moses interceded on behalf of the Israelites, God pardoned the iniquity of the Israelites. But God did not forgive these ten chief culprits; they were immediately struck by the plague and died before the LORD.

Verse 38: "But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive, of the men who went to spy out the land."

Joshua and Caleb were also among the twelve spies; they did their utmost to declare to the Israelites that the land of Canaan was the good land God had

promised, and that the giants of Canaan were their food. Regrettably, the Israelites listened only to the bad news and could not take in the good news. Now God vindicated them: the ten spies immediately died of the plague, while Joshua and Caleb remained alive. The congregation of Israel saw this with their own eyes and knew that this was God's judgment, and so word spread from one to ten and from ten to a hundred, and the whole congregation understood that this was a serious matter. These ten spies were also the outstanding ones among the ten tribes; their death by plague was a serious and major event, and the congregation of Israel immediately fell silent.

Verse 39: "Then Moses told these words to all the children of Israel, and the people mourned greatly."

This was a teachable moment for the Israelites, and Moses seized this opportunity to tell the whole congregation God's judgment upon the Israelites. Looking at the corpses of the ten spies, they knew that this was God's mercy, in that He had not struck them down with the plague. But the judgment God gave them was also extremely severe: they were to return to the wilderness and live each day depending on manna and water from the rock. The living conditions in the wilderness were exceedingly harsh, and in the end they would all die in the wilderness, and only their women and children would be able to enter the good land. Therefore the whole congregation began to mourn, regretting what they had done.

Verse 40: "And they rose early in the morning and went up to the top of the mountain, saying, 'Here we are, and we will go up to the place which the LORD has promised, for we have sinned!'"

After a night of settling down, early the next morning some of the Israelites came up to the top of the mountain to see Moses, and said to Moses: Here we are, we have sinned, we are willing to go up to the place which the LORD has promised. On

the surface it appears that they knew they were wrong, and therefore came to confess their sin to Moses; it appears that they had repented and were now willing to go to the land of Canaan. However, hidden here is a very deep spiritual lesson, one that we all need to pay attention to, that we must all note: delayed obedience is not obedience, but is another act of rebellion.

The land of Canaan is the good land God promised to the forefathers of Israel; this is God's eternal will, and it will not change. But when to enter the good land, and who enters the good land — this rests upon God's leading. God's leading will change along with time, circumstances, and people and affairs. We must at all times maintain open fellowship with God and know God's immediate leading. We cannot walk ahead of God, nor can we lag behind and fail to follow God; rather, we must learn the lesson of walking together with God.

Now, because of the Israelites' rebellion, God had already declared judgment; this was God's present leading. These people were plainly unwilling to submit to God's judgment, and under the pretense of confessing sin and repenting, they wanted to escape the punishment brought by their sin. This is delayed obedience — this is not obedience at all, but is once again a rebellion against the verdict God had declared through Moses.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Israelites had Moses to convey God's words to them, and therefore it can very clearly be seen that the true motive of these Israelites was to escape God's punishment by means of confessing sin and repenting. However, on our own road of following God, there is not necessarily a saint like Moses beside us to help us understand God's present leading, and so we often fall into confusion. Haven't we obeyed? Why has God's promise still not been fulfilled? It may very well be that we delayed too long in the matter of obedience: the circumstances changed, people and affairs changed, and in response to these changes God already has a new leading. Although God's eternal will does not change, God's leading should be immediate; God does not want us to follow God's leading of last year. We need to have a channel of open, immediate fellowship with God; only in this way can we keep up with God's present leading.

This is so for an individual following the Lord, and it is even more so for a corporate body following the Lord. Especially when the coworkers in a church cannot be of one heart and one mind, it becomes even harder to understand God's present leading for the church. A church must have a group of leaders after God's heart, who have open fellowship with God and who can come together to seek God's present leading; only in this way can the church suitably bear testimony for God.

Verse 41: "And Moses said: 'Now why do you transgress the command of the LORD? For this will not succeed.'"

Moses was a mature and seasoned leader; at a single glance he saw through the thoughts behind these people, and directly pointed out their problem: Why do you transgress the command of the LORD? If you truly want to confess sin, then you should confess the sin of presently disobeying God's command. As for the previous disobedience, God has already pardoned it; there is no need to confess it again. Now you want to go to the land of Canaan, which clearly transgresses God's present command, and therefore this matter will not succeed. If you want to confess sin, you must first see clearly what sin it is that you have committed; do not, under the guise of confessing sin, carry out an act of rebellion.

Verses 42-43: "Do not go up, lest you be defeated by your enemies, for the LORD is not among you. For the Amalekites and the Canaanites are there before you, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned away from the LORD, the LORD will not be with you."

Moses knew what was in their hearts, and so he did not speak to them in riddles, but directly told them: Do not go up to take the land, because God is not among you. If you insist on going up, you will be killed by the enemy. The Amalekites and the Canaanites are blocking your road to the land of Canaan; without God's presence, you will all fall by their sword. God's command is that you turn back and

go into the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea. Now that you do not follow the LORD, He will surely not be with you.

Moses always had open fellowship with God; he knew God's present leading — that God wanted the Israelites to return to the wilderness and wander. Although this road was not easy, Moses still followed. Today it is the same for the church: God does not necessarily give the church a direct and quick road. If God leads the church to walk a roundabout road, the reason is that this roundabout road is the most suitable for the needs of the saints. Perhaps some saints must be adjusted; perhaps the life of some saints is still not mature; perhaps God has a better arrangement in terms of timing. In short, we cannot use today's methods of managing a company and setting performance targets to lead the church. The church must have Christ as the Head, must have the Holy Spirit as its content, and must walk in the will of God.

Verse 44: "But they presumed to go up to the mountaintop. Nevertheless, neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses departed from the camp."

These Israelites who came to see Moses had long ago made up their minds; they were unwilling to accept the road God had ordained for them of wandering in the wilderness, and wanted to enter the land of Canaan by relying on their own strength. They did not listen to Moses' advice, and presumptuously set out toward the land of Canaan. The ark of the covenant of the LORD did not depart from the camp, and Moses did not depart from the camp either; they acted entirely on their own initiative, and so they also had to bear the consequences of their action themselves.

Verse 45: "Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who dwelt in that mountain came down and attacked them, and drove them back as far as Hormah."

Just as Moses had warned beforehand, the Amalekites came out and attacked them, and the Canaanites who dwelt in the mountain also came down and attacked them. These Israelites had already gone as far as Hormah. Hormah is a city 40 kilometers southwest of the Dead Sea, 90 kilometers from Kadesh. These Israelites had their road back to Kadesh cut off by the Amalekites and the Canaanites, and were completely wiped out at Hormah. The Hebrew word which the Chinese Union Version translates as "drove them back" originally means "crushed," shattered; therefore it should be that the entire army was annihilated. The city of Hormah is a special city; the meaning of the word Hormah is "dedicated to total destruction," that is, complete destruction. These disobedient Israelites were completely destroyed.

If we look forward 38 years, in Numbers 21:1-3, Moses brought the new generation of Israelites and prepared once again to enter the land of Canaan, and once again suffered an attack by the Canaanites; at this same city of Hormah, God delivered the Canaanites into the hands of the Israelites, and they utterly destroyed all the Canaanites at Hormah. The same city, the same enemy; what was different was the presence of God, and the Israelites won the battle. Entering the good land does not depend on strong troops and sturdy horses, but on the presence of God.

Chapter 14, which we have read this week, is an important turning point for the Israelites in the wilderness; the location is Kadesh in the Wilderness of Paran. Because of the Israelites' rebellion, God commanded them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, waiting until the entire first generation of Israelites had fallen dead in the wilderness. And these 40 years are counted from the time the Israelites came out of Egypt, so the actual time of wandering should be 38 years and several months. And this period of wandering is recorded in the five chapters from Numbers chapter 15 to chapter 19. What is very special is that in these five chapters of Scripture, not one mentions the location where the Israelites were. And when we come to chapter 20, verse 1, it is the first month of the 40th year, and they came to Kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin. The name is again Kadesh, so it should be the same location, but the Bible very clearly says it is "in the Wilderness of Zin." It turns out that Kadesh is at the border between the Wilderness of Paran

and the Wilderness of Zin. Because chapter 14 ends at Kadesh, and chapter 20 begins again at Kadesh, some Bible expositors think that the Israelites were encamped at Kadesh for 38 years.

Actually this is not accurate, because in Numbers chapter 33, Moses himself lists every station they passed through in the wilderness, setting out from Rameses and finally arriving at the plains of Moab, altogether 42 stations from beginning to end. In Numbers 33:17 it says that they came to Hazeroth, which is the place where Miriam became leprous; in Numbers 33:36, they came to Kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin, which is also the place found in Numbers chapter 20, verse 1. According to the record of Numbers chapter 33, between Hazeroth and Kadesh there are another 18 stations, and they wandered for 38 years; therefore they were not in one fixed place, but were slowly wandering, until the first generation of Israelites had all died in the wilderness, and only then did God begin again to lead them to set out.

In today's passage, we see very clearly that following God's leading must be immediate; delayed obedience is not obedience, but is once again a rebellion.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for giving us a very good reminder through today's passage. We must have an open channel of fellowship with God, and know God's leading for us today. Although God's will for us is eternal, God also gives us immediate leading every day. This leading will change along with the circumstances, along with whether or not we obey, and along with the people and affairs around us. We must continually maintain intimate fellowship with God in order to know God's present leading for us; and this is even more so with regard to His leading for the church. We ask God to help us, and to let us learn to walk together with God. We pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ.