"Be Careful What You Wish For"

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

In Chapter 13 of the Book of Numbers, we read that the Israelites reached Kadesh-barnea, a large oasis on the southern fringes of the Promised Land of Canaan and that 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 the two other spies encouraged the people to go in and conquer the land that God was giving to them.

In our text, Chapter 14, we read a fuller exhortation from Caleb and Joshua, the two spies who trusted God’s promise to give the land to them. But what was the response of the people? They mourned, thinking that they would all die trying to overcome the powerful inhabitants of 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. Worse, they were so angry at Caleb and Joshua that they wanted to stone them to death, and even worse, they wanted to replace Moses with a new leader of their choosing.

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
And if you get it then you just might not know
What to do wit' it, 'cause it might just
Come back on you ten-fold.

Although this song was not composed by a believer, it is a good reminder to us as Christians. Remember the Israelites after they settled in the land, and they had judges ruling over them? They looked at other nations, and demanded to Samuel, “appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations” (1 Sam 8:5). The prophet warned them that wicked kings would rule over them, and “you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.” The people got what they wished for: they had kings, but most of them led them into idolatry, apostasy and lawlessness.

Even after Jesus declared himself the Messiah-King to the Jews, the Jews kept looking for their political king. Right up to his ascension, his disciples seem to be expecting the restoration
of the kingdom of Israel by a king who would drive out the Roman armies (Acts 1:6). God told them, “You want a different Messiah after I gave you the True Messiah? I will give you many.” Thus, many false messiahs later led the Jews in a series of rebellions against the Roman Empire, culminating in the destruction of the Temple and the deaths of over a million Jews in AD 70.

“Be careful what you wish for.” 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. What was the reason for their total rebellion against God? They did not believe and trust in God’s promises, so they became irrational in their thinking. God being holy and just would not let their rebellion go unpunished, so the people suffered dire consequences for their unbelief. But God is also patient and compassionate, so that through the mediating prayer of Moses, God relented from his wrath against this rebellious people.

This afternoon, we will dwell on the theme, “**BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR**”:

1. The Root Cause of the Wish
2. “Ten-Fold” Consequences
3. Mediation after Getting the Wish

**The Root Cause of the Wish**

Upon hearing the bad report of the ten spies about the giants in the Promised Land, the people mourned in fear that they would all die trying to take the land. They turned against Moses, Caleb and Joshua in their fear and anger, wanting to replace their leader and to kill the two spies. It was a direct challenge to God and his promise to give them the land.

They 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 is so unexpected, given that the people had 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, but drowning the Egyptian army in the process; and in guiding them in their wilderness travels through the pillars of cloud and of fire. What to the Lord are a few disorganized cities compared with defeating the Egyptian superpower? Even if Canaan’s walls were massive, they were puny compared with the wind and the sea which God controls. 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 divine wrath?

Unbelief produced irrationality. Irrationality produced rebellion. But do we not also become irrational and rebellious in our unbelief? We believe God created the universe and is sovereign over all, but most Christians do not accept that he is sovereign over all of our salvation. 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 we, not the Holy Spirit, do the quickening 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 stored for a rebellious people.

“Ten-Fold” Consequences

Time and again in their wilderness journeys, the people of Israel rebelled against God. They started early when they asked Aaron to carve a golden calf for them to bow down and worship as their god. Soon after they started their march to the Promised Land, they grumbled not only against hardship and food, but also against Moses. And now after they reached the gates of Canaan, they grumbled once more against Moses and against the Promised Land itself.

This time, God has had enough with this people! Now it is his time to censure these Israelites, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” Enough is enough, God says, so I will destroy these people and start all over again with Moses, and make a people “greater and mightier than they.” God made a similar threat to consume this stiff-necked people and make a great nation of Moses after the golden calf affair (Exod 32:10). He did it once before, not hesitating to destroy the whole human race and restarting mankind with Noah.

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, “Therefore I tell you, 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 come not only from national Israel, but also from all nations as the Church, the new Israel of God and the new covenant people. This is why Jesus commands us to preach the gospel to all nations.

God could have destroyed these rebellious Israelites immediately, and Moses could not have complained. In the Garden of Eden, God could have destroyed Adam and Eve immediately as he has warned them. In these acts of judgment, God would have been perfectly just. Was God justified when he destroyed all humanity, except for eight people, in the Great Flood? Was God justified when he destroyed every man, woman, child and animal in Sodom and Gomorrah? Certainly, because his holiness demanded the punishment of sinners. If he were to destroy the whole world today, would he be justified? Definitely, because all are sinners and the penalty for sin is death. This is why all creation is bound to die, some sooner than later.

God is holy and just, but he is also “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty” (v 18). It took him 1,500 years to “disinherit” Israel by sending the Roman army to destroy the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70. This marked the end of Israel and the beginning of the Church as God’s covenant people.

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). On what basis did Moses plead with God? Is it on his own righteousness and position as mediator? Is it because the people are able to walk righteously before God? No, his plea is based on two things: firstly, on “the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now”; and secondly, on the glory and honor of God’s name, because the nations will surely think that God was not powerful enough to bring Israel to the Promised Land.

These two things should also form the bases of our prayers. In our model prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus taught us to say, “Hallowed be thy name... Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” We give glory to God, whether in good or bad times, in plenty or in want, because he is not only sovereign over all creation, but he also works all things together for the good of his people. As well, we ask for his forgiveness based on his holiness and righteousness, not because of our own good works.

Because of the intercession by Moses, God did not act on his threat to destroy of Israel. Instead, he granted only partial forgiveness and imposed partial judgment on the people for their rebellion. First, he declared that not one of those who were in the census a year before who were twenty years or older, except for Joshua and Caleb, would enter the land. They will all die in the wilderness outside of the Promised Land (v 22-23).

In a series of pronouncements, God imposed punishment against the people commensurate with their offenses. 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 as
punishment for their rebellion in order that they may know that God was not pleased with them (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). But afterwards, God will reward their children by allowing them to enter and settle in the land that the first generation rejected (v 31).

*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.

Second, the ten unbelieving and rebellious spies “died by plague before the Lord” (v 37). We do not know what kind of plague God sent to these men, but it is probably one of those ten plagues he sent to punish Egypt, or the same plague by which he punished Israel for worshiping the golden calf (Exod 32:35). These men were prime examples of unbelief to the covenant people of God, and the penalty for unbelief and apostasy is death (Deut 13:10). God judged them as leaders who caused the people to grumble against Moses and rebel against the Lord.

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 his covenant people. God will pronounce woes and curses on pastors and teachers who lead their flock into false doctrine, worship and sinful lives, as he does in Jeremiah 23:1, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” And the apostle Paul feels this weight as Christ’s undershepherd when he says, “It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Cor 4:4).

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 people were not allowed to enter the land, but died in the wilderness, while the ten spies were sentenced to die immediately.

We see this in our lives today. When children disobey their parents, they are usually grounded even if they are forgiven. Students are detained for bad attitude and behavior, even if the teachers pardon them. Those who commit crimes serve their time in prison or are even put to death even if they believe and trust Christ later. Addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling and sex have long-term, sometimes even lifetime, consequences.

But even after suffering all of these dire consequences for their rebellion, the Israelites did not seem to learn from them. They mourned over God’s judgment on them, but they were sorrowful 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 indicates 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 in David’s
adultery with Bathsheba, which resulted in another crime, namely the premeditated murder of
Bathsheba’s husband.

The cause of rebellion is unbelief. Unbelief and rebellion result in serious judgment from
God. 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?

The Required Mediator

The history of Israel was always a cycle of rebellion, judgment and restoration, then a repeat
of the same cycle.

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. He pleaded to God based on the honor of God’s name and on his holiness.

What was God’s response? It was twofold. On the one hand, he declares, “I have pardoned,
according to your word.” On the other hand, there were still judgment exacted on the people,
on the ten spies, and on the further rebellion that followed. God cannot wink on sin.

Without Moses, what would have happened to this rebellious people? It is possible that
God would have destroyed them immediately! 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, “But my servant
Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he
went, and his descendants shall possess it” (v 24). The people had an unbelieving spirit, producing
rebellion. In contrast, 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 (Josh 1:5-9).
Without the intercession by Moses, none of the Israelites would have had a second chance. All of them would have perished in the wilderness for their rebellion.

**Conclusion**

Dear friends, like the Israelites, we are by nature an unbelieving and rebellious people. We grumble about everything: 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 as much homework as my friend. 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 turn to the desires of the world. In your rebellion, God might give you over to your worldly desires, and harden 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. Christ is your Mediator. He sits at the right hand of God and pleads for you, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” Christ is your Mediator of a better covenant, the covenant of grace, “Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Heb 9:15). 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, as the young ruler who spoke to Jesus found out. What is impossible for you was already accomplished by Christ: he has fulfilled all the law for you by perfectly obeying God’s law. This is why Paul exclaimed as he realized his only hope, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24-25)

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 good report of our “spy” in the Promised Land.

But even better than this, the faith and repentance that God requires of you, he also gives. So pray that God will grant you faith and repentance. And 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.*