

## **Paradise Lost**

### **Numbers 11-20**

By the time we get to Chapter 10 in the Book of Numbers we see Israel amassed in great numbers, they militarily strong, they are ordered according to God's design, and they are ready to leave for Mt Sinai.

They're ready to commence their journey to the Promised Land. And so the departure of Israel from Mt Sinai is full of high hopes, the people are confident, there is an unswerving commitment by Israel to trust and obey.

Have you ever longed for the past? These are common words, “Things were better in my day”. “It's not like we used to do things in the good ol' days”! The days of long ago were always so much better. And so being caught in the present is a terrible thing. These are the hard, troublesome days and we fear the future because it only look like getting worse.

Only one chapter later, in fact from chapters 11 through to 14, the wheels fall off the cart and any hopes we held for Israel's future are severely dashed.

Chapters 11 to 14 describe the slow decline of Israel into patterns of rebellion and unfaithfulness. Trust and obey slowly gives way to mistrust and disobedience and the situation looks grim.

Today we are going to look at Israel's rebellion in the wilderness. It's not a pretty picture. The issues are confronting but through the horror of it all we see a God committed to his promises despite the rebellion of his people.

Now there are four examples of rebellion in chapters 11 to 14, we have only time to look at two examples: the first in chapter 11, and the second in chapter 13.

**The first example of rebellion is found in chapter 11.** We might entitle it, “Rejecting God's provision—longing for the past” (slide).

Have a look with me at verses 4-6 in chapter 11,

The rabble with them (i.e. with the Israelites) began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'

The rabble are probably other people in Egypt who joined the Israelites in their march. But the trouble with joining someone else's culture is that you have to put up with their food. And the rabble began to crave food other than the food God is providing. And they stir up the Israelites and soon everyone yearns for the food back in Egypt—the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.

The Israelites memory of their diet back in Egypt is both haunting and seductive.

So the Lord drives a great flock of quail into the camp and the people go out in verse 32 with eagerness and pick up more meat than they can possibly eat.

And this sounds so good, but what the Israelites think to be God's kindness turns out to be the instrument of his judgement.

A great numbers of people are struck down as they eat the quail. Look at 11:33, “But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the LORD burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague. Therefore the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had craved other food”.

The Israelites who so desperately craved for meat now themselves become food for the open mouths of graves, and their final resting place is called “Kibroth Hattaavah”, which means “graves of craving”.

*What was their sin? Why did the people who craved meat deserve such punishment from God?*

The Lord identifies their sin in verse 20, “You have rejected the Lord who is among you, and have wailed before him saying “Why did we ever leave Egypt”?”

Israel's sin was to reject the Lord who is travelling with them.

The one thing that distinguished Israel from all the peoples on the face of the earth was the presence of God amongst them. the power of God's presence. And here in desert the rejection of manna amounts to a rejection of God himself.

Numbers 11:5, “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic”. Look at how good it was in the past! Funny thing for a slave to say isn't it?, “I remember the tasty food my master used to throw at me”.

The people are so consumed by their stomach the fact that all their nice food was provided in cruel and harsh bondage has completely escaped their memory.

*We need to learn something about sin here.*

It is fundamental to sin that it gets everything out of perspective. Leeks and onions and garlic become more desirable than freedom. A comfortable slavery becomes more preferable than a demanding freedom. Jesus said that, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”.

Freedom comes by obedience to God. It's the truth that sets us free.

If think that your Christian freedom will give you a life without any challenges then you are mistaken.

The fleeting and transient pleasures of this world will always be before us. But there is only so much satisfaction one can get from an onion, a cucumber, a furniture catalogue, a credit card, from a lifestyle magazine. You cannot serve two masters. There is little satisfaction in slavery and no matter how many leeks and onions there are, no matter how enjoyable slavery is, it is still slavery.

At the heart of Israel's sin is a longing for the life from which God had rescued them. “We were better off in Egypt”, they say in verse 18, and they long for the past which was slavery. The Israelites romanticised the past, they believed God wasn't acting in their best interest, and they longed for the good old days which were the days of slavery!

We can be tempted to romanticise our past life of slavery.

It's easy to romanticise our past and grumble about the present in a way that demonstrates an unbelief in the promises of God. Remember that the rabble wailed, "If only we had meat to eat"! The tragedy—and make no mistake it is a tragedy—is that some Christians wail for the past. And of course when you wail every one hears you. It brought Moses to despair and it brings the present day church leadership to despair.

Bob Thomas was ordained as a Presbyterian Minister in 1971. He served as Moderator General of the PCA. Bob was involved in the events of Union which many of you remember well. He wrote a book called "The Crisis of '77" and he takes the reader through the turmoil of Union.

In the conclusion to his book, Bob urges the Presbyterian Church not to look back, but to trust God's promises and look to God for provision in the present time. Bob says, "Wherever we find traditional Presbyterians we really ought to go out after them with the Scriptures, and demonstrate that Bible-believing and main-stream are synonyms".

Rejecting God's provision—longing for the past.

**The next example of rebellion comes in chapter 13** and we might entitle it, "Rejecting God's Plan—fearing for the future" (slide).

At the end of chapter 12 we see the Israelites camped in the Desert of Paran, just to the south of the Promised Land. They are right on the border of their new home. Egypt is far behind them. Moses appoints 12 leaders to go into the land to see what it is like and to return and tell the news. So the spies go out in chapter 13 and spend forty days moving around the Promised Land—and they come back with grapes and figs and pomegranates as evidence that the place is truly a "land of milk and honey".

This fruit was proof of God's goodness and his grace and his future provision.

When the twelve spies return they make a divided report. Ten say that the land indeed flows with milk and honey, but they are convinced that the size and the number of the people and the fortifications of their cities make it impossible for Israel to occupy the land.

There is also a minority report. Caleb says in 13:30, “we should go up and take possession of the land for we can certainly do it”. Conflicting reports. The majority are desperate to be believed and they resort to lies and exaggeration to get their point across. Having initially said that the land flows with milk and honey, they change their report in 13:32, “The land we explored devours those living in it”.

The rest of the Israelites are so caught up by the anxiousness of the ten spies that they are overwhelmed by unbelief. They say in 14:3, “Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt”?

God's response is swift and decisive in 14:30–31, “Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. That generation is to die over forty long years in the wilderness, but their children will inherit the land”.

But the Israelites still do not learn. After being told by God that they will now not enter the land because of unbelief, they now insist upon entering it. Moses warns that to do so will now be an act of disobedience and it will end in failure. But the people persist and are swiftly defeated.

*What was Israel's sin? Why does God refuse them entry into the Promised Land?*

The Lord identifies their sin in verse 11 of chapter 14, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them”? The problem is again that they have rejected God. Israel reject God's purposes and plans for them.

The contrast between Caleb and Joshua and the other spies is a contrast between belief and unbelief—between trusting God's word and his purposes or turning away from God's commitment to his promises.

It's easy to sympathise with the Israelites. After all, the future was unknown, they did not know what lay ahead. They were small, the people in Canaan were sophisticated and strong. Israel's anxiety about the future is not without foundation.

But for the majority of Israelites, anxiety gives way to unbelief. They refuse to trust God despite all the evidence of his trustworthiness. It's easy to trust God when you don't have too, but the real test

comes when the real test comes. And confronted with an anxiety-inducing future the people turn away from God and prefer to take the future into their own hands.

On the other hand, Caleb and Joshua had as much reason as anyone else to be anxious, but their anxiety was matched by faith, by trust, by belief. A belief in the fact that the Lord was with them. Caleb was confident that they could possess the land. Their anxiety about the future gave way to a faith grounded on God's faithfulness in the past: like the amazing escape from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, manna, water from the rock. Joshua and Caleb trusted God for good reasons.

There are two responses to an unknown future: trust God and his promises or unbelief and abandon the promises of God.

Did you notice earlier that God's judgement was to give the people the meat they were asking for? The people asked for meat and God gave them meat. Now they ask to remain outside the land and so they will. And they will spend the rest of their lives in the wilderness.

*God gave Israel what they asked for—and this serves as a warning to us.*

If we move into the future by abandoning the promises of God then God may give us what we ask for. If we should ever decide not to be a gospel-centred church then the worst thing that could happen is that we're not a gospel-centred church. If an anxiety filled future leads us to abandon the promises of God, then it should not surprise if we are consumed by the dryness of the spiritual wilderness around us.

I have seen this happen in other churches.

And note carefully. It was those people entrusted to leadership that let the others down. The ten spies had an obligation to accurately report what they saw in light of a God who can be trusted. Those selected to report on God's goodness instead induced anxiousness and fear and led the people away from the Lord.

Those who lead God's people bear even more responsibility to lead by godly example, and so in verse 37 of chapter 14 the ten spies are “struck down and die of a plague before the Lord”.

Do you see that in response to Israel's rebellion there is also grace. When Israel refuse to enter the Promised Land Moses intercedes for them in 14:19, "In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now. The LORD replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked". The Lord relents and forgives his people. But there can be no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. And so the rebellious generation is left to die in the wilderness and their children will inherit the land.

Israel fail the test. In the wilderness they fail to trust the God who keeps his promises.

Next point (slide). **Jesus in the wilderness.**

Luke says that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. You can read about it in Luke 4. Jesus spent a day for every year that Israel spent in the wilderness—forty days being tempted by Satan. Jesus was denied food, yet he was content with the Lord's provision for him. Jesus was provoked into testing God's care, and he trusted instead. And so Jesus declared his unshakeable determination to pursue God's purposes and God's plan for him.

The tension between Caleb and the rest of the spies over whether Israel should enter the land was nothing compared to the temptation Jesus faced to abandon his Father.

In the desert Jesus chose not to reject God's way. Instead he chose to be rejected for our sake. Jesus chose to wear the judgement of God for our sin when he himself was without sin. Jesus was the kind of Son who trusted his heavenly Father even when it meant hanging from a Roman cross.

In the desert, Jesus committed himself to the purposes and plans of God. In the desert, Jesus decided that he would not come down from the cross though the mockers would say, "save yourself". On the cross, Jesus took the punishment for our unbelief so that we wouldn't be a generation that dies in the wilderness.

Jesus died so many of us can enter our heavenly home.

Jesus' commitment to the plans and purposes of God opened up the way to eternal life. The writer to the Hebrews warns us not to be like Israel, not to harden our hearts during times of testing. So we read in Hebrews 3:12, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God”. We are not home yet, we are still travelling through the wilderness, trust God by living a life committed to his promises.

### **Some concluding remarks.**

An upright life will not save you if your heart is turned away from God. Being on rosters, high morals, church committees, being committed to improving the community—none of these things will save you. “Where is your heart”? This is the question you need to ask yourself? *Are you committed to the promises of God?* (slide)

Secondly, if you're a Christian caught in sin, you can be forgiven. God will forgive you. Jesus' died so that you can be forgiven. Whatever you do, don't harden your heart against him. Turn to the living God, renew your life and he will never, never let you down.

Are you anxious about the future? Are you finding it hard to be faithful to God? Talk about it with a trusted Christian friend. Pray that God will work to change you. If you're turning your heart away from God you need to turn it back. You can be forgiven. Don't harden your heart. The truth is that fullness of life is found in God.

It is better to be in the desert with God than a slave in Egypt.

The truth is that God is for you, that God is with us in his Son and that he is with us through the presence of his Spirit. Trust him. Amen.