

**Exegetical Notes, Numbers 14:1-45**  
**“They Rebelled Against the Lord”**

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**NUMBERS 14:1-45**

**Verses 1-4**

*That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.<sup>2</sup> All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness!<sup>3</sup> 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?”<sup>4</sup> And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”*

- After hearing the report of the spies sent into the Promised Land (see Numbers 13), the Israelites spent the night mourning their situation. They believed, on the basis of the report that they had received, that they would not be able to take possession of the land God had promised them. They bemoaned their situation concluding that they were going to die in the desert, and that it would be better for them to turn around and go back to Egypt.

**Verses 5-9**

*Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there.<sup>6</sup> Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes<sup>7</sup> and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good.<sup>8</sup> If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us.<sup>9</sup> Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”*

- By their action, Moses and Aaron begged the people not to make the mistake of turning back to Egypt and risking the disapproval of God.

- Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, joined Moses and Aaron in imploring the people not to do as they were saying they would. These two spies alone urged the people to move forward and trust God.

### Verses 10-12

*But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. <sup>11</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? <sup>12</sup> I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.”*

- Despite Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua, the people were unmoved. They considered stoning these men to death because they urged them to follow God.
- Then YHWH appeared at the Tent of Meeting. (*The pillar of fire moved before the tent.*) God spoke to Moses. God told Moses that he was angered with the people's contempt for him displayed in the refusal to trust him despite the miracles he had done in delivering them from Egypt, both in the land of Egypt and on their journey through the wilderness. For the second time God threatened to destroy the entire nation of Israel and to begin again by making Moses' descendants alone his people.

### Verses 14-19

*Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. <sup>14</sup> And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, LORD, are with these people and that you, LORD, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. <sup>15</sup> If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, <sup>16</sup> ‘The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.’ <sup>17</sup> “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: <sup>18</sup> ‘The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.’ <sup>19</sup> 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.”*

- Moses interceded before God for the people. He argued that if God did destroy the entire nation of Israel, as they deserved, the other nations who were aware of Israel's progress and knew it to be God's blessing of them, would conclude that God was unable to give Israel what he had promised and so destroyed them. Moses did not argue that the people did not deserve to be destroyed. He appealed to the nature of God's heart...that God is slow to anger, abounding in love, and ready to forgive. He admitted that God will not allow sin to go unpunished but begged God not to destroy the nation even though they deserved it. In this, Moses shows himself to be a great man of God and a true leader of the nation.

### Verses 20-25

*The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked. <sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, <sup>22</sup> not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times— <sup>23</sup> not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. <sup>24</sup> But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it. <sup>25</sup> Since the Amalekites and the Canaanites are living in the valleys, turn back tomorrow and set out toward the desert along the route to the Red Sea.”*

- YHWH told Moses that he had already forgiven the Israelites. The purpose of his pronouncement was not to destroy the nation but to make it clear for all time that he knew what Israel deserved, to show the world his heart, to show Moses his favor, and to bestow favor on Caleb and later Joshua for remaining faithful to him when all of the others turned away. God never intended to destroy Israel for her sin. His intention was to use the situation to teach.
- YHWH did acknowledge that those who led the rebellion would not be allowed to enter the land. God also told the Israelites to turn back into the desert. The nation as a whole would be delayed from entering the land. Though the nation was not destroyed, there were consequences of their bad behavior which were unavoidable.

### Verses 26-35

*The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: <sup>27</sup> “How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these*

*grumbling Israelites.* <sup>28</sup> *So tell them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say: <sup>29</sup> In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. <sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. <sup>32</sup> But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness. <sup>33</sup> Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness. <sup>34</sup> For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.’ <sup>35</sup> I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together against me. They will meet their end in this wilderness; here they will die.”*

- God explained the consequences more fully. Because the Israelites had treated him with contempt ten times (see Exodus 14:11-12, Exodus 15:23-24, Exodus 16:2, Exodus 16:20, Exodus 16:27, Exodus 17:10, Exodus 32:7, Numbers 11:1, Numbers 11:4, and Numbers 13-14; one rejection for each of the miracles done in Egypt), it was time for God to act. Mercy alone did not instruct the nation. Now God would act in judgment. The purpose was to teach Israel that they could not expect only mercy. Continued rebellion brings consequences.
- None of the adult generation then alive would be allowed to enter the land. They would all wander in the desert for the rest of their lives and die there.

### **Verses 36-38**

*So the men Moses had sent to explore the land, who returned and made the whole community grumble against him by spreading a bad report about it— <sup>37</sup> these men who were responsible for spreading the bad report about the land were struck down and died of a plague before the LORD.*

*<sup>38</sup> Of the men who went to explore the land, only Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived.*

- The spies were held to a more strict judgment. As leaders they had encourage the people to rebel against God, and had led the people in rebellion. They were stricken by a plague and died.
- Only the two faithful spies, Caleb and Joshua, were spared.

## Verses 39-45

*When Moses reported this to all the Israelites, they mourned bitterly.*

*<sup>40</sup> Early the next morning they set out for the highest point in the hill country, saying, “Now we are ready to go up to the land the LORD promised. Surely we have sinned!” <sup>41</sup> But Moses said, “Why are you disobeying the LORD’s command? This will not succeed! <sup>42</sup> Do not go up, because the LORD is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies, <sup>43</sup> for the Amalekites and the Canaanites will face you there. Because you have turned away from the LORD, he will not be with you and you will fall by the sword.” <sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the highest point in the hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the LORD’s covenant moved from the camp. <sup>45</sup> Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah.*

- When the people heard the report of God's judgment upon them for their unfaithfulness they repented of what they had done. Hoping to escape the consequences of their own behavior, they confessed that they had sinned and vowed to go and take the Promised Land. But they had still not learned to obey YHWH. God had told them to turn back into the wilderness. But the people were now determined to take the land. In doing so, they were still disobeying the command of God.
- Again, Moses tried to warn them that disobedience to the command of God was wrong and would lead to failure. But they still did not listen.
- The people went up into the land and attacked those who lived there. Neither Moses nor the ark of God went with them. They were soundly defeated.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *They Rebelled Against the Lord*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)