

## Division in the Wilderness

David Flatt

Most are familiar with the account of the Exodus. God honored the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and rescued His people from slavery in Egypt. By sending plagues, Jehovah disproved and destroyed the idols of the Egyptians. Pharaoh finally relented and released the Israelites. God saved His people.

After Israel had been traveling to Canaan, the Egyptians pursued them. In what appeared to be a dire situation, again, God saved the Israelites. He parted the waters of the Red Sea. The Israelites escaped on dry ground. The Egyptians drowned.

Following this victory, Moses and Miriam sang a song to praise God. It is known as the "Song of the Sea" (Exod. 15). Moses, Miriam, and the Israelites must have been overjoyed. Sadly, their joy was short-lived. There would be division in the wilderness.

### Israel's Grows Dissatisfied

**1). Complaining.** Three days after being rescued by God at the Red Sea, the people began to complain to Moses. They were thirsty. God was patient with the people. He provided them with water, but Moses gave them a warning: "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer" (Exod. 15:26).

**2). Discord in the leadership.** The trip to Canaan was difficult. A long journey on foot through the desert would have its challenges. The people continued to complain. They grew angry toward Moses. The unity of the people began to fray.

Miriam and Aaron became impatient with Moses. They conspired to usurp Moses' leadership. They tried to discredit his leadership based on the ethnicity of his wife. Moses was married to a Cushite, an Egyptian. As Miriam and Aaron were arguing with Moses, God intervened. God rebuked and punished Miriam for her actions. Due to how Miriam was punished, the division within the leadership of Israel became known publically. Morale must have reached a low.

**3). A fearful report.** The unity of Israel was weak. The people had become discontent. The leadership had suffered. Yet, the Israelites continued toward Canaan. As they approached, Moses sent twelve men to spy out the land (Num. 13). Upon their return, ten of them gave a fearful report.

The bad news traveled quickly among the Israelites. Overwhelmed with fear, they rebelled against Moses and spoke against God: "And all the people of Israel grumbled 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! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land,

to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt" (Num. 14:2-4).

As He had with Miriam, God intervened. He pronounced a death sentence on an entire generation. They would die in the wilderness for their evil hearts and unbelief (Heb. 3:7-18).

**4). Korah's Rebellion.** During this time of division, an influential Levite attempted to overthrow Moses. Korah persuaded two hundred and fifty respected men from among the tribes. Eventually, God punished Korah and his supporters. Nearly 15,000 Israelites died as punishment for their rebellion.

### **Lessons Learned**

This period of Israel's history is tragic. God saved them and began to lead them to the Promised Land, but they grew discontent. In simple terms, they had bad attitudes. They were suspicious and distrustful of God and their leadership. In trying to circumvent God and His plan, many never saw the Promised Land. There is much to be learned.

**1). We must trust God.** This is a simple point, but this is the starting point for us being led to our inheritance. If we trust God, we will obey His word and trust His path. Trust will prevent doubt and complaining.

**2). We must trust God's leadership.** In the local church, God has provided the eldership to lead the group. We must trust and support their vision for the church. Nothing constructive comes from criticism, complaining, and rebellion. Such actions only produce division. Division leads to death.

**3). The solution for division.** Israel having problems in the wilderness was inevitable. Any endeavor involving humans will experience conflict. In the local church, there is bound to be complaining and criticism. There is bound to be some questioning the eldership. When this happens, we must find ways to peaceably solve our problems. Choosing to go our separate ways is not an acceptable option.

When Miriam was stricken with leprosy, Moses was not happy. He did not stand in triumph. Instead, he begged God to heal her. Moses loved Miriam. He needed her to help him. When God punished the people for rebelling with Korah, Moses begged God to spare the people. Moses loved the people. All he was trying to do was get them to the Promised Land.

Likewise, elders labor to lead the church to eternal life. They try to implement opportunities to promote spiritual growth and foster unity; yet, saints often complain and criticize. If we learn anything from Israel, we learn that division leads to death. Nothing productive comes from discord.

## Conclusion

The division in the wilderness was remembered many generations later in the New Testament. In the letter to the Hebrews, it says, "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:7-13).

What is an evil heart of unbelief? A bad attitude. God only knows how many of His children have lost their souls because of a bad attitude. We must learn the lessons of Israel and heed the warnings.