

This Evil Place

Life can beat us down, especially when it seems that the hardships will never end. But they *will* end—and that ought to change our perspective on everything.

“And why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink” (Num. 20:5).

“There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. . . . Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience” (Heb. 4:9, 11).



To appreciate the significance of this story, we need to do a quick review of the geography and the history surrounding it.

This episode took place at Kadesh (v. 1), also called Kadesh-Barnea, on the southern border of Canaan. It was from here that spies were sent out to reconnoiter the Promised Land. It was here that the Israelites rebelled when they heard the bad report of the spies and decided to return to Egypt. And it was from Kadesh that the Israelites launched an attack on the land and suffered a humiliating defeat. All this is recorded in Numbers 14.

Now, in chapter 20, the people are back at Kadesh. We aren't given a time span, but Moses later said that Israel “remained in Kadesh many days” (Deut. 1:46), which leads some scholars to believe that a good portion of the wilderness “wandering” was likely spent hanging out around the vicinity of Kadesh. There were springs

at Kadesh, but apparently, they had gone dry; thus, the complaint about lack of water.

So when the Israelites grumbled about “this evil place,” they were not grouching about poor accommodations at another stopover on a long road trip. Rather, they were tired of waking up every morning to the same dreary landscape they had lived with for the past several years. The Israelites saw themselves stuck in an endless loop of thirst, heat, boring food, and desolate scenery, with no end in sight. It was a depressing life, and they gave God and Moses an earful about it.

But their life of hardship was *not* endless. In fact, God earlier had given them a concrete timeline: forty years, minus time already served. This long wilderness odyssey was punishment for their earlier rebellion, but there was an endpoint. The younger generation especially, who were not condemned to die in the wilderness, had every reason to be hopeful. They just needed to hang on a little longer, and the prize was theirs. But even they could not see the bright future that lay before them.

God gave the people their water. But Moses, in exasperation over their bad attitude, handled himself poorly and forfeited his own right to enter the Land (v. 10-12). The whining of these malcontents dragged down a good man; grumbling often inflicts collateral damage.

This story ought to strike a chord with us. When we find ourselves in an evil place in life, it's easy to feel hopeless about the future. Every new challenge becomes one more piece of baggage piled on top of the burden we're already carrying. So we start complaining. God has promised to be with us and bless us, but where are the blessings? Why are we trapped in such a wretched existence? Why isn't God doing something to help us?

Oh, but He is! The author of Hebrews reminds us that “there remains therefore a rest for the people of God.” It's out there, and its beauty exceeds our wildest dreams. Jesus has given assurance of its existence by His own suffering and resurrection. But we must “be diligent to enter that rest,” rather than murmur and complain.

The Israelites were so close to their goal but let their frustration with “this evil place” blind them to its presence. We are even closer to our goal and have greater reason to be optimistic in pursuing it.

— David King