

## **THE WAY TO HANDLE DISCOURAGEMENT**

**20** <sup>14</sup>Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, saying, "This is what your brother Israel says: You know about all the hardships that have come upon us. <sup>15</sup>Our forefathers went down into Egypt, and we lived there for many years. The Egyptians mistreated us as well as our fathers. <sup>16</sup>But when we cried out to Jehovah, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. Now we are here in Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. <sup>17</sup>Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard; neither will we drink water from the wells. We will travel along the king's highway; we will not veer off to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory. <sup>18</sup>But Edom answered, "You may not pass through my country. If you attempt to do so, I will come out against you with the sword." <sup>19</sup>The children of Israel replied, "We will travel along the highway; and if I and my livestock drink any of your water, I will pay for it. Only let me pass through on foot—I ask for nothing else." <sup>20</sup>But he said, "You may not pass through my land." <sup>21</sup>So it was that Edom refused to allow Israel to pass through his territory; therefore, Israel turned away from them.

<sup>22</sup>The children of Israel, indeed, the whole congregation, set out from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor. <sup>23</sup>At Mount Hor, near the border of Edom, Jehovah spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, <sup>24</sup>"Aaron shall be gathered to his people; he shall not enter into the land I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. <sup>25</sup>Take Aaron and his son Eleazar, and bring them up to Mount Hor. <sup>26</sup>Remove Aaron's priestly garments from him and put them on his son Eleazar." <sup>27</sup>Moses did as Jehovah commanded: they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of the whole congregation. <sup>28</sup>Moses removed Aaron's priestly garments and put them on his son Eleazar. Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. <sup>29</sup>When the whole congregation learned that Aaron had died, the entire house of Israel spent thirty days in mourning for him.

**21** When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev\*, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked them and took some of them captive. <sup>2</sup>Then Israel made this vow to Jehovah: If you will deliver these people into my hand, I will devote their cities to you by totally destroying them. <sup>3</sup>Jehovah listened to Israel's vow and delivered the Canaanites to them. They completely destroyed them and their cities; so that place was named Hormah.

<sup>4</sup>Then they traveled from Mount Hor along the route towards the Red Sea, in order to go around the land of Edom. The people became very discouraged in spirit because of the route [they were obligated to take]. <sup>5</sup>The people spoke against God and against Moses, saying, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt in order to die in this wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" <sup>6</sup>Then Jehovah sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup>The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against Jehovah and against you. Pray that Jehovah would take the snakes away from us." <sup>8</sup>Jehovah said to Moses, "Make a replica of a venomous snake and put it on a pole; when anyone who has been bitten looks at it, he shall live." <sup>9</sup>So Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. And it happened that, if anyone was bitten by a snake, when he looked at the bronze snake, he lived. (Num. 20:14-21:9)

\*Or, “the South”

## Introduction

Many years ago a group of settlers was going west along the Oregon Trail. At one point they reached a very discouraging episode in their journey. For several days water, and grass for their livestock, had been scarce. The heat was stifling during the day. Some of their wagons broke down, causing delay. Consequently, a spirit of fretfulness and complaining took the place of the cheer and high expectations that had marked the outset of their journey. The settlers decided to hold a meeting at the next night's resting place and talk over their situation.

When they gathered around the campfire to discuss their problems, one of them stood up and said, “Before we do anything else, we should first thank God. Thank Him that we have come this far without any loss of life, that we have had no serious trouble with the Indians, that we still have the strength to continue our journey.” The settlers followed this man's advice; one after another they stood and thanked God for His blessings. (*Mrs. Knight's Book of Illustrations*, pp.367-368)

That approach to discouraging circumstances stands in striking contrast to the way Old Testament Israel dealt with discouragement:

*Then they traveled from Mount Hor along the route towards the Red Sea, in order to go around the land of Edom. The people became very discouraged in spirit because of the route [they were obligated to take.] <sup>5</sup>The people spoke against God and against Moses, saying, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt in order to die in this wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” (Num. 21:4-5)*

When we experience severe disappointment or discouragement in our lives we, too, are tempted to lash out against God in a blasphemous way. But the LORD will not tolerate spiritual temper tantrums; therefore, we must learn how to handle discouragement in a godly manner.

### I. The Way to Handle Discouragement: Don't Be Surprised by It

When Israel arrives at the border to the land of Edom (located southeast of Canaan), Moses sends ambassadors to the Edomite king requesting permission to pass through their land (Num. 20:14.) The Israelite ambassadors appeal to the blood relation that existed between themselves and the Edomites, identifying themselves as *“your brother Israel;”* and they appeal to Edom's mercy by recounting all the adversity they have suffered at the hands of the Egyptians (Num. 20:14-15.) The ambassadors explain that the people of Israel are merely requesting permission to pass through Edom along the king's highway, they have

no intention of settling within Edomite territory or plundering the land (Num. 20:17.)

But Edom refuses to grant permission, threatening to make war against Israel if they enter Edomite territory (Num. 20:18.) Despite Israel's pleading and even their promise to pay for the use of water, Edom adamantly refuses to allow the people to pass through their land (Num. 20:19-20.) Consequently, Israel is forced to turn away and take the long arduous journey around the land of Edom to get to the Promised Land of Canaan (Num. 20:21.)

To make matters worse, not only is Israel refused permission to pass through Edom, they are attacked by the Canaanite king of Arad (Num. 21:1.) Feeling threatened by Israel's presence, that king sends out a military expedition against them, taking some of the people captive.

Despite the fact that the LORD gives Israel a military victory over these Canaanite people, He will not let Israel advance north into the land of Canaan itself; rather, the LORD instructs Israel to journey south in order to go around the land of Edom and eventually approach Canaan from the east along the Jordan River (Num. 21:4a.) So it was that the people became *"very discouraged in spirit because of the route [they were obligated to take]"* (Num. 21:4b.) They have encountered Edom's rejection, a Canaanite attack, and now God's mysterious providence. All of these occurrences took Israel by surprise, they were all contrary to the expectation of the people.

The way to handle discouragement: Don't be surprised by it.

Don't be surprised to encounter an unloving, unsympathetic response from those with whom you would expect to have brotherly relations—the kind of response Israel received from Edom. Consider the response David got from Nabal when he sought Nabal's help and comfort after having protected Nabal's shepherds in the wilderness:

*Nabal answered David's servants, Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. <sup>11</sup>Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where? (1 Sam. 25:10-11)*

Consider the response the Lord Jesus got in the days of His earthly ministry: *"He was in the world, and the world was made through him, but the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to his own people, yet those who were his own did not receive him"* (Jn.1:10-11.)

Don't be surprised to encounter hostility, rejection, and opposition from a world that neither fears God nor is sympathetic to His purposes—the kind of response Israel received from the Canaanite king of Arad. Consider again the case of the

Lord Jesus Christ: *“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”* (Heb. 12:3.)

Don't be surprised to encounter God's mysterious providence by which He even allows His people to be opposed and temporarily thwarted by the devil. Note the words of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonian church, *“we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan hindered us”* (1 Thess. 2:18.) The hymn writer, Isaac Watts, asks, “Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God?” The answer he anticipates is “No.” Note the many times Scripture warns the Christian to expect opposition and trial in the present world:

*I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation. But have courage; I have conquered the world.* (Jn. 16:33.)  
Such is Jesus' testimony to His disciples and to us.

*... they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup>strengthening the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and[ teaching] that we must enter into the kingdom of God through many tribulations.* (Acts 14:21-22)

The thoughts and prayers of a contemporary Christian writer are very apropos:

The other night I stopped by the bank after hours and used the automatic teller machine. The whole transaction took less than a minute. As I walked the few steps back to the car, I thought, *The trouble with American society is that it's too convenient ...*

I find myself thinking that every aspect of life should be as easy as using an automatic teller machine. When it isn't, I can easily become frustrated. In addition, there is the subtle assumption that God is somehow committed to making my life convenient, pleasant, and protected ...

*Lord, help me not to construct a theology of convenience that will not allow You to lead me through this life or call me home to heaven along a road of pain and personal loss.* (David McCasland, *POWER*, 5/3/92, p.8)

## **II. The Way to Handle Discouragement: Don't Overlook God's Faithful Mercies in the Midst of It**

Again the people of Israel blasphemously protest against the LORD and His servant Moses: *“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt in order to die in this wilderness?”* (Num. 21:5a.) They totally lose sight of, and even deny, God's acts of salvation and His good purpose, note Jeremiah 29:11, *“I know the plans I have for you, declares Jehovah, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'”*

They go on to protest, *“There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”* (Num. 21:5b.) The LORD had been graciously and even miraculously keeping these people alive, yet they have the audacity to curse the very provision He has faithfully supplied. They also have lost sight of the fact that it was their unbelief and rebellion that has prevented them from already gaining access to the Promised Land of Canaan. The wisdom of Proverbs 19:3 well applies to the present situation: *“A man’s own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against Jehovah.”*

In response to Israel’s attitude and behavior, the LORD demonstrates that He will not tolerate spiritual temper tantrums, and He will not allow His sacred Name to be blasphemed. He sent venomous snakes among the people (Num. 21:6a.) The wilderness was infested with venomous snakes and scorpions, as we learn from Moses’ testimony, *“He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions”* (Deut. 8:15.) But Israel had been graciously spared—until now. When we deny or curse God’s dealing with us, He may expose us to more terrible perils than we knew existed. Who can count or even know the dangers and demonic forces from which we have been spared by the mercy and covenant faithfulness of God? But curse God, deny His present goodness to you, and you are liable to be exposed to the very perils from which the LORD has been graciously sparing you.

We read further that these poisonous serpents *“bit the people and many Israelites died”* (Num. 21:6b.) The terrors to which we expose ourselves when we blaspheme and forsake the protective care of Christ are very real and deadly; as the LORD warns rebellious Israel in the time of Jeremiah: *“See, I will send venomous snakes among you, vipers that cannot be charmed, and they will bite you, declares Jehovah”* (Jer. 8:17.)

The way to handle discouragement: Don’t overlook (and don’t forsake) God’s faithful mercies. May we bear in mind such Scripture passages as these:

*Many, O Jehovah my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you planned for us no one can recount to you. Were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare.* (Psl. 40:5)

*Because of Jehovah’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup>They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* (Lam. 3:22-23)

Consider, too, the following testimony:

A man in Dundee, Scotland, who had fallen and broken his back, was confined to his bed for 40 years. He never had a day without pain, but God gave him the grace and strength to keep going. His cheery disposition and great love for the LORD inspired all who visited him.

One day a friend asked, “Doesn’t the devil ever tempt you to doubt God?”

“Oh yes, he tries—especially when I have to lie here and see my old schoolmates driving by, having a good time with their families. At times it’s as if Satan whispers, ‘If the LORD is so good, why does He keep you here? Why did He allow you to break your back?’”

When the friend asked how he handled such attacks, the man replied, “I point him to Calvary and to the wounds of my Savior and say, ‘Doesn’t He love me!’ The devil can’t answer that, so he flees every time.” (*Our Daily Bread*, 12/2/93)

### III. The Way to Handle Discouragement: Repent of Any Ungodly Response to It

The people of Israel came back to Moses and confessed their sin: *“We sinned when we spoke against Jehovah and against you. Pray that Jehovah would take the snakes away from us”* (Num. 21:7.) After having come to Moses in anger and accusation, and then having turned away from Moses and from the LORD in disappointment and sinful disgust, it took a great deal of humility for them to return. But they came to see that their plight was desperate, that there was no hope apart from the LORD, and they had to return. In returning, they confess their sin: there can be no forgiveness without the confessing and forsaking of sin. When they returned to the LORD, in humility and honest confession of their sin, they found the LORD to be merciful.

*Go, proclaim this message ... Return, faithless Israel, declares Jehovah, I will frown upon you no longer, for I am merciful, declares Jehovah. I will not be angry forever. <sup>13</sup>Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against Jehovah your God, ... and have not obeyed me, declares Jehovah. <sup>14</sup>Return, faithless people, declares Jehovah, for I am your husband ... <sup>22</sup>Return, faithless people; I will cure you of your backsliding. Yes, we will come to you, for you are Jehovah our God .... <sup>23</sup>... surely in the Jehovah our God is the salvation of Israel.* (Jer. 3:12-14,22-23)

When the people return to the LORD, He is faithful to receive them back and to provide for their deliverance. Moses is instructed to make a bronze replica of the deadly, venomous snakes (Num. 21:8a.) That bronze snake was attached to a pole and prominently displayed for all to see (Num. 21:8b.) In order to be saved, the bitten, perishing Israelites had to look at the bronze snake, trusting that the LORD would save them (Num. 21:8c.) The bronze snake attached to the pole was an Old Testament representation of the Lord Jesus Christ: *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in the same way must the Son of man be lifted up; <sup>15</sup>so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”* (Jn. 3:14-15.) Because of their blasphemy and rejection of the LORD, they were delivered over to the deadly venomous snakes. The way of salvation the LORD provided was for them to look to the harmless snake He appointed for their deliverance. Note 2

Corinthians 5:21, speaking of Christ, the Apostle Paul declares, *“Him who knew no sin God made to be sin on our behalf; so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”*

The way to handle discouragement: Repent of any and every ungodly response to it.

The Apostle Paul exhorts the Philippians, *“Do all things without grumbling and arguing, <sup>15</sup>so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without blemish, in the midst of a perverse and depraved generation, among whom you shine like stars in the universe”* (Phil. 2:14-15.) When he speaks of *“grumbling and arguing,”* Paul is not speaking here about that struggle that takes place in the Christian’s heart as we wrestle to accept the will of God. Even our Lord Jesus in His human nature experienced such struggles: *“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done ... <sup>44</sup>And being in anguish, Jesus prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground”* (Lk. 22:42,44.)

What Paul is referring to that deep-seated resistance and rebellion against God that refuses to accept His will and becomes hardened and embittered when its own will is disappointed. When he uses the phrase, *“grumbling and arguing,”* Paul has in mind Old Testament Israel and the character they displayed in the wilderness:

*... you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the commandment of Jehovah your God. <sup>27</sup>You grumbled in your tents and said, Jehovah hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us.* (Deut. 1:26-27)

*They (Israel) have dealt corruptly with Jehovah, they are not his children, it is their blemish; they are a perverse and crooked generation.* (Deut. 32:5)

It is one thing to cry out, “O LORD, help me to trust and obey!” It is quite another to quietly seethe, “O LORD, I will not trust and obey!”

We are to do all things without grumbling and arguing so that we may become *“children of God without blemish.”* What Paul means is that we are to increasingly become transformed into the character of Christ our Savior who trustingly accepted His Father’s will, confident that in the ultimate sense he would not be disappointed, note Isaiah 53:7,11-12,

*He was oppressed and afflicted, but he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is being led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before her shearers, so he did not open his mouth. ... <sup>11</sup>He will see the fruit of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied. ... <sup>12</sup>Therefore, I will give him a portion with the great, and he will divide the spoil with the strong ...* (Isa.53:7,11-12)

As opposed to being like Old Testament Israel who, because of their perpetual grumbling and arguing, are identified in these terms in Deuteronomy 32:5, “they are not his children, it is their blemish”—i.e.; their rebellious spirit is the blemish, the condemning mark against them.

## **Conclusion**

Christian, in this present world you may expect to encounter discouragements—sometimes of a very severe nature. If you respond to such times of discouragement and disappointment by lashing out against God in a blasphemous way, do not expect the LORD to tolerate such spiritual temper tantrums.

May we learn to avoid the sinful conduct exhibited by Old Testament Israel; may we learn to imitate the righteous conduct of Christ our Savior.

As Christians, may we, too, utter the prayer made by that perceptive brother to whom we earlier referred: *“Lord, help me not to construct a theology of convenience that will not allow You to lead me through this life or call me home to heaven along a road of pain and personal loss.”*