

When It Was Too Late to Go Up

TEXT

Deuteronomy 1:34 — “And the LORD heard the voice of your words, and was wroth, and swore, saying,”

Deuteronomy 1:35 — “Surely there shall not one of these men of this evil generation see that good land, which I swore to give unto your fathers,”

Deuteronomy 1:36 — “Save Caleb the son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him will I give the land that he hath trodden upon, and to his children, because he hath wholly followed the LORD.”

Deuteronomy 1:37 — “Also the LORD was angry with me for your sakes, saying, Thou also shalt not go in thither.”

Deuteronomy 1:38 — “But Joshua the son of Nun, which standeth before thee, he shall go in thither: encourage him: for he shall cause Israel to inherit it.”

Deuteronomy 1:39 — “Moreover your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it.”

Deuteronomy 1:40 — “But as for you, turn you, and take your journey into the wilderness by the way of the Red sea.”

Deuteronomy 1:41 — “Then ye answered and said unto me, We have sinned against the LORD, we will go up and fight, according to all that the LORD our God commanded us. And when ye had girded on every man his weapons of war, ye were ready to go up into the hill.”

Deuteronomy 1:42 — “And the LORD said unto me, Say unto them, Go not up, neither fight; for I am not among you; lest ye be smitten before your enemies.”

Deuteronomy 1:43 — “So I spake unto you; and ye would not hear, but rebelled against the commandment of the LORD, and went presumptuously up into the hill.”

Deuteronomy 1:44 — “And the Amorites, which dwelt in that mountain, came out against you, and chased you, as bees do, and destroyed you in Seir, even unto Hormah.”

Deuteronomy 1:45 — “And ye returned and wept before the LORD; but the LORD would not hearken to your voice, nor give ear unto you.”

Deuteronomy 1:46 — “So ye abode in Kadesh many days, according unto the days that ye abode there.”

INTRODUCTION

Deuteronomy 1:34–46 takes us to the end of Israel’s failure at Kadesh-barnea. They had reached the edge of Canaan, heard that it was a good land, and refused to go in because they did not believe the LORD.

Deuteronomy is Book 5 of 66, and Deuteronomy 1—the first of its 34 chapters—is chapter 154 of 1,189 in the Bible. Moses is speaking near the end of the wilderness years to the generation that is about to enter the land their fathers refused.

Earlier in this chapter God had said, “go up and possess it.” Israel would not go. By verse 34 the LORD has heard their words of unbelief and pronounces judgment. Moses sets their failure before the next generation as a warning: hear God where your fathers would not.

The judgment begins with a new command to the generation that refused the land: “turn you, and take your journey into the wilderness.”

I. TURN YOU, AND TAKE YOUR JOURNEY INTO THE WILDERNESS — VERSES 34-40

Deuteronomy 1:34-35 — “And the LORD heard the voice of your words, and was wroth, and sware, saying, Surely there shall not one of these men of this evil generation see that good land, which I sware to give unto your fathers,”

The LORD heard the words Israel had spoken in their tents. Verse 34 moves from “heard” to “was wroth” to “sware.” Their unbelieving complaints brought a settled judgment. Verse 35 places “this evil generation” beside “that good land.” The failure belonged to the generation that refused to believe God.

Hebrews 3:19 — “So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.”

Hebrews confirms Moses’ diagnosis. Their fear of the enemy grew out of unbelief toward God’s word. The real issue was whether the LORD could be trusted.

Deuteronomy 1:36 — “Save Caleb the son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him will I give the land that he hath trodden upon, and to his children, because he hath wholly followed the LORD.”

Caleb is the exception because he “wholly followed the LORD.” At Kadesh, Caleb measured the future by what God had said. The phrase describes his faithful response here, not sinless perfection.

Deuteronomy 1:37-38 — “Also the LORD was angry with me for your sakes, saying, Thou also shalt not go in thither. But Joshua the son of Nun, which standeth before thee, he shall go in thither: encourage him: for he shall cause Israel to inherit it.”

Moses also reminds them that he would not enter. Scripture later ties his exclusion to his own failure at Meribah, not the spies’ rebellion. Joshua would go in and lead Israel. God’s purpose for Israel continued.

Deuteronomy 1:39 — “Moreover your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it.”

The parents had used their children as a reason to fear entering Canaan. God says those children will possess the land. “No knowledge between good and evil” marks a distinction in this judgment, but gives no universal numerical age of accountability. The children they feared would become prey would enter; the rebellious adults would not.

Deuteronomy 1:40 — “But as for you, turn you, and take your journey into the wilderness by the way of the Red sea.”

This command defines the turning point. Earlier God said, “go up and possess it.” Now He says, “turn you.” The larger promise of Canaan still stood, but this generation’s opportunity had been judicially withdrawn. Obedience for them now meant turning toward the wilderness. God-given opportunities should never be treated as though we control them independently of God. Do not wait for consequences to teach you what His word has already told you.

II. YE WOULD NOT HEAR, BUT REBELLED AND WENT PRESUMPTUOUSLY UP — VERSES 41-43

Deuteronomy 1:41 — “Then ye answered and said unto me, We have sinned against the LORD, we will go up and fight, according to all that the LORD our God commanded us. And when ye had girded on every man his weapons of war, ye were ready to go up into the hill.”

Their words sound better now: “We have sinned against the LORD.” The confession was true. Then they say, “we will go up and fight,” and claim they will act “according to all that the LORD our God commanded us.”

They are appealing to an earlier command while ignoring the command God just gave. Yesterday He said go up. Now He has said turn back. Their readiness has changed, but submission has not. They were afraid when God told them to advance; now every man girds on his weapons when God tells them to turn away. The text judges their action without revealing every person’s inward sincerity. Their chosen remedy was still disobedience. You cannot correct yesterday’s rebellion by choosing today’s rebellion.

Deuteronomy 1:42 — “And the LORD said unto me, Say unto them, Go not up, neither fight; for I am not among you; lest ye be smitten before your enemies.”

The command is plain: “Go not up, neither fight.” God also gives the reason: “I am not among you.” Earlier Moses had told them that the LORD would go before them and fight for them. Now the same enemy stands in the hills, but God has forbidden the battle. Courage does not make a course right. Faith believes God when He promises victory, and faith believes God when He warns of defeat.

Deuteronomy 1:43 — “So I spake unto you; and ye would not hear, but rebelled against the commandment of the LORD, and went presumptuously up into the hill.”

“Ye would not hear” identifies the continuing problem. Before judgment they would not go when God said go. After judgment they would not stop when God said stop. Moses calls the action rebellion and says they “went presumptuously up.” Presumption here is willful action without God’s authorization and directly against His command.

Numbers 14:44 — “But they presumed to go up unto the hill top: nevertheless the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and Moses, departed not out of the camp.”

The army moved, but the ark stayed. Moses stayed. They wanted the victory connected with the old command while resisting the word God had just spoken. Weapons, courage, activity, and religious words cannot make disobedience obedient. God’s word, not our sincerity, determines whether an action is obedience.

III. THE LORD WOULD NOT HEARKEN TO YOUR VOICE — VERSES 44-46

Deuteronomy 1:44 — “And the Amorites, which dwelt in that mountain, came out against you, and chased you, as bees do, and destroyed you in Seir, even unto Hormah.”

God had warned that they would be smitten before their enemies, and the warning came to pass. The Amorites chased them “as bees do.” Numbers names Amalekites and Canaanites in the attack; Deuteronomy speaks of the Amorite hill country. The accounts complement each other. Their new confidence could not overcome a battle God had forbidden.

Deuteronomy 1:45 — “And ye returned and wept before the LORD; but the LORD would not hearken to your voice, nor give ear unto you.”

The hearing pattern now comes full circle. In verse 34 the LORD heard their words. In verse 43 they would not hear Him. In verse 45 the LORD would not hearken to their voice. Their tears did not reverse His sentence concerning that generation’s entrance into Canaan. The verse does not say God would never forgive anyone among them or never hear any prayer from them again. It says this judgment stood. Regret may be real without reversing every consequence.

Deuteronomy 1:46 — “So ye abode in Kadesh many days, according unto the days that ye abode there.”

The chapter leaves them at Kadesh “many days.” The verse does not give enough information to fix an exact duration, but it makes the delay plain. Deuteronomy 2 then records Israel turning toward the wilderness as the LORD had commanded. After failure, the right course is still to submit to what God says now. The old generation lost the privilege of entering, yet God remained faithful to His promise and brought the next generation forward.

CONCLUSION

Israel was afraid when God told them to go and bold when God told them to stop. Opposite behavior came from the same refusal to let God’s word govern the course.

Faith takes God at His word. Believe Him when His word gives a promise. Believe Him when His word gives a warning. Let Scripture decide the course instead of choosing your own course and asking God to approve it.

When disobedience brings consequences, do not spend your strength trying to force yesterday’s opportunity back into existence. Hear what God says now and obey from where you are now. The tears at Kadesh could not reopen the door God had closed for that generation, but God’s promise to Israel still stood.

The same hill God once commanded them to climb became the hill He commanded them to leave alone. When God said go, they refused. When God said stop, they went. It was too late to go up.