

The Foolishness of Presumption

Numbers 14:39-45

By Jon Quinn

Men and women who think themselves wise will often in their own conceit presume things that bring ruin. Presumption is born of pride. Concerning our lives and our service to God, many religious leaders in their arrogance have presumed things about God which may or not be true. If they like something, they presume God likes it. For example, many have assumed that God is infatuated with the pomp of ornate religious rituals which take place in beautiful cathedrals, and so spend huge sums of money and energy in providing these things. "We desire it" they say, "so certainly God does too." When asked for evidence that God desires such, the response is something like, "We have worked so hard on it and are so dedicated, He's just got to like it."

The truly wise do not presume such things. They accept God at His word and with humility and reverence accept what He has revealed. They give Him that which He has authorized. They refrain from serving Him with those things which are of human design and instead look at what is ordained in the Scriptures of God. No amount of human dedication, talent or effort can make a thing acceptable unto God if He has not authorized it to begin with (II John 9; Colossians 2:20-23; I Corinthians 4:6; Matthew 15:8,9).

A Case in Point

"And when Moses spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people mourned greatly. In the morning, however, they rose up early and went up to the ridge of the hill country, saying, 'Here we are; we have indeed sinned, but we will go up to the place which the LORD has promised.' But Moses said, 'Why then are you transgressing the commandment of the LORD, when it will not succeed? Do not go up lest you be struck down before your enemies, for the LORD is not among you. For the Amalekites and the Caananites will be there in front of you, and you will fall by the sword, inasmuch as you have turned back from following the LORD. And the LORD will not be with you.' But they went up heedlessly to the ridge of the hill country; neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses left the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Caananites who lived in that hill country came down, and struck them and beat them down as far as Hormah." (Numbers 14:39-45).

Background Information

"So they said to one another, 'Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.'" (Numbers 14:4). In spite of the constant reminders of God's care for them, these people lacked confidence in Him. They had escaped terrible bondage in Egypt and had witnessed God's power at the Red Sea. They had survived the wilderness journey through God providing them with food from heaven and water from the rocks. The cloud and pillar of fire had led them to the borderlands of Caanan.

But they had complained and grumbled almost constantly. They had made a calf of gold and engaged in idolatry. They had spoken against Moses. And most recently, they had sent spies into Caanan and received the spies' report. They were told that Caanan was everything it had been promised to be. But ten of the twelve spies also expressed doubt as to whether Israel could inhabit the land. The Caananites were too strong, they insisted.

Because of this lack of trust in God who certainly had proven Himself worthy of better than that, God decreed that this generation would not be permitted to enter the land, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who had encouraged the people to trust in the LORD. All the others, from twenty years and upwards, would die in the wilderness. Following this, which would take forty years, the new generation would enter in and possess the promised land (Numbers 14:20-35).

The Presumption

"And when Moses spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people mourned greatly. In the morning, however, they rose up early and went up to the ridge of the hill country, saying, 'Here we are; we have indeed sinned, but we will go up to the place which the LORD has promised.'" (Numbers 14:39,40). It is interesting that the people only realized how valuable the blessings of the promised land were after they had forfeited God's promise. It is so typical that we often "do not miss the water until the well runs dry." We take so many things for granted when we ought to be thanking God each day for what we have in our nation.

Notice how these people, because of their newfound desire to possess the land of Caanan, began to reason and presume their way to disaster:

1) "**Here we are**": It was as if they were saying that since God had gotten them this far, they were free to do as they pleased. It is with every confidence that we can point to past blessings and providence in our lives. The Christian can credit God for his salvation from past sin. God's grace is wonderful, but we must not be tempted to think that we may sin with impunity "that grace may abound" (Romans 6:1,2). Though favored in the past, if we sin against God in the present we will forfeit His promise to us as well.

2) "We have indeed sinned": Confession of sin is good. But it will do no good to confess sin with the purpose in mind of immediately sinning again. Confession without submission is empty and worthless. It was a sin for these people to seek to possess Caanan after God had decreed that their generation would not possess it. No amount of confessing past wrongs allows us to commit a sin in the present without guilt. This confession was not from a contrite heart before God but rather a desperate gambit to try anything to recover what they had lost.

3) "But we will go up": In spite of the LORD'S words to the contrary, these people insisted. They were going to have it their way. When will they, and us today, ever learn that faith is submitting to the LORD'S way. Understand this: if we insist on our way, then the LORD will not be present with us, and we are doomed to failure.

4) "The LORD has promised": The Lord's promise would be kept to their children, but not to them. That had already been made very clear. Many times men cite the Scripture out of context to prove something completely contrary to the truth. Even Satan used the word of the LORD with which to tempt Jesus. It is not enough to quote Scripture; it must be applied correctly.

The Consequence

"For the Amalekites and the Caananites will be there in front of you, and you will fall by the sword, inasmuch as you have turned back from following the LORD. And the LORD will not be with you.' But they went up heedlessly to the ridge of the hill country; neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses left the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Caananites who lived in that hill country came down, and struck them and beat them down as far as Hormah." (Numbers 14:43-45) Of course the people were doomed to fail. The LORD was not with them. They marched against an enemy stronger than them, and were defeated.

Before they began their foolish assault, Moses had asked; "Why then are you transgressing the commandment of the LORD, when it will not succeed?" (Numbers 14:41). That is an equally good question to pose today when men and women presume to worship and serve God in ways other than He has authorized. The only way we can know for sure how God feels about anything is for Him to tell us. The New Testament says; "...Even so, the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God" and then continues by encouraging us to "know the things freely given to us by God" by examining the words of inspired revelation (I Corinthians 2:10-13). How can we know what God wants? By listening to His word. How can we know we are pleasing to Him? By obeying His word.

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