WILDERNESS WARNINGS by Andy Diestelkamp

In general, throughout time, the gospel of Jesus Christ has not been well received. The Jews of Jesus’ day imagined themselves as being more receptive to God’s Word than were their forefathers, saying “If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets” (Matt. 23:30). Yet Jesus called them “serpents” who as “sons of those who murdered the prophets” would “fill up ... the measure of [their] father’s guilt” by their own rejection of Him and those He would send to them (vv 31-34).

After crucifying Jesus, the Jewish leadership focused on squelching any effort to resurrect the idea that Jesus was the Messiah (Matt. 27:62-66; Acts 4:1-3,17,18,21; 5:17,18, 26-28, 33,40; 6:9-15, etc.). They failed simply because “it was not possible that”death could hold Him (2:24); and those who witnessed His bodily resurrection boldly proclaimed it (2:32-36; 3:15; 4:8-12,19; 5:29-32; etc.).

It is in this context that Stephen, when hauled before the Jewish council on false charges, used the opportunity to review Israel’s history. He highlighted Israel’s pattern of rejecting God’s prophets. Specifically, he emphasized Moses as a type of the “Prophet” who was to come and to whom they should listen (7:37). Moses, too, had been rejected (vv 23-28); but it was Moses, though rejected, who God used to deliver His people from bondage (vv 35,36). It was Moses to whom God spoke and “who received the living oracles to give to”Israel. Yet their forefathers “would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt” and its idolatry and the bondage that came with it (vv 38-41). Next Stephen adapted the words of Amos who—centuries after Moses—prophesied to the apostate tribes of Israel about their future Assyrian captivity. Yet, instead of saying “beyond Damascus” (Amos 5:25-27), Stephen said, “beyond Babylon” (Acts 7:42,43),making it clear that his present audience could not excuse themselves from his point. *Both* Israel and Judah were historically unfaithful to God. Their captivities went *well beyond* Assyria *and* Babylon as they were presently dominated and occupied by Rome!

Stephen’s lesson was masterful and his application blunt. “You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. ... they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers” (vv 51,52). Once again the Jews had rejected the One sent to rescue them. *Still*, Jesus willingly went to the cross to offer them and us deliverance.

The wilderness wandering of the children of Israel serves as a warning to subsequent generations for any with ears to hear and minds to learn from history rather than blindly repeat the sins of their fathers. Israel did not do a good job of this despite being repeatedly reminded to remember. Jesus calls His disciples to do better (cf. Matt. 5:20). Thus, even the earliest Christians were taught lessons from Israel’s failures to make them aware of the real threat of apostasy.

Using the events of the exodus and wilderness wandering, Paul presented a compelling comparison that should sober *all* followers of Jesus Christ. He observed “that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink” (1 Cor. 10:1-4). Note that the word *all* is used *five* times to emphasize their common experience. Using Moses as a type of Jesus, Paul inserted the word *baptized* into this historical sketch of Israel’s deliverance to make a point to *all* who had been *baptized* into Christ. Just as *all* who were “baptized” into Moses were saved from Egyptian bondage, so *all* who are baptized into Christ are saved from bondage to sin. Likewise, those so delivered *all* ate of the same food and drink which “was Christ.” Again, Paul inserts Christ into the picture to insure that Christians understand the point of this comparison: “But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness” (v 5). All Israel was saved, but most of Israel did not remain faithful and were not permitted to enter the land of promise! To Christians Paul writes, *“*These things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted” (v 6). “They were written for our admonition” (v 11). “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (v 12). Thus Paul wrote as an admonition to us to do likewise,*“*I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (9:27).

Similarly, the Hebrews’ author cited Psalm 95 which admonished ancient Israel to remember their “rebellion in the day of trial in the wilderness” (Heb. 3:8) and warned Christians, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God” (v 12). “To whom did [God] swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief” (vv 18,19). “We have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (v 14). Let we who call Jesus Lord beware lest we behave like Israel in the wilderness or like the Jews of Jesus’ day. “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (2:3). Remember Christ. Trust in Him. Obey Him. Hold fast to Him to the end!