

INTRODUCTION

Life is a journey. You came to this country to study, to work or to establish a family. You set various goals for your path. Every now and then you evaluate your accomplishments. You look for some milestones. For example, graduation, marriage, child-birth, empty-nest, child's marriage and retirement. You have a sense of fulfillment when you get through one stage after another. But sometimes you regret about lost opportunities. If you can turn back the clock then you will perhaps study a different major, go to a different school, marry a different person, live in a different city than this rural place called Memphis or come to U.S. sooner. The interesting thing is, for many decisions in life you cannot go back and choose another option. But you can always gain wisdom by looking back. You hope that you will avoid the same mistakes you made in the past. In doing so, you turn negative experience into positive learning moments. The Israelites were on their journey to Canaan. They made tons of mistakes. They had to overcome a lot of problems too. Externally, they had to deal with the weather, food, water and enemies. Internally, it was never easy to maintain unity among such a large group of people. God called the Israelites to be His people. He had a plan for them. They would reach their destination as long as they followed the Lord's guidance. Now the Israelites came to a transition in their voyage. The second half of Numbers chapter 20 records two incidents. God was about to lead the Israelites into Canaan after 40 years of wilderness wandering. But they had to go through Edom first. Also, God's people would bid farewell to Aaron. Just like what happened before, God used the two events as important lessons for the Israelites. You may be at a transition in your life. It can be about your family, career or church ministry. No matter what it is, from the experience of the Israelites, we shall see that God has lessons for us to learn in every stage of life.

EXPLANATION

1. 中途逼繞路 Detour from the Lane

God sent the Israelites to a detour. At the beginning of the chapter, we are told that God's people were at Kadesh, in the desert of Zin. That was somewhere to the southwest of the Dead Sea. The [map](#) on the screen can tell us about their approximate location. God asked the Israelites to change direction and go east. They had to pass through Edom before they headed north. Moses sent a few representatives to negotiate with the king of Edom to allow them to walk past his country peacefully. Look at [verses 14-16](#): ... 14 "This is what your brother Israel says: You know about all the hardships that have come upon us. 15 Our forefathers went down into Egypt, and we lived there many years. The Egyptians mistreated us and our fathers, 16 but when we cried out to the Lord, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt..." Israel was a brother of Edom. The Israelites were descendants of Jacob, whose twin brother was Esau. Edom was another name for Esau. Therefore, the two people groups were like cousins. The Israel representatives mentioned a few things in their report: why they came from Egypt, what they encountered there and why they were here now. Notice that they gave glory to God for their experience. God heard their cry for help, and He sent His angel to rescue them from Egypt. We can draw a quick application from that. It is common to face difficulties in life. But do you

clearly witness God's protection and help? It can be as small as God sending a stranger to replace your tire when you are stranded by the road, or God connects you to a handy brother to fix your leaky faucet. Do not forget to give Him thanks. Also, find opportunities to share your experience with people who do not know Christ. The Israel brothers said the Edom king knew all their stories. How did the king know? It was possible that some traveling merchants spread the news. After all, it had to be an earth-shaking event for two million slaves to escape the greatest nation at that time. People would be forwarding WeChat posts to everyone, saying: "Look, some Jews defeated Pharaoh's army and marched out of Egypt!" The Israelites assured the Edom king that they were only in transit. Continue to read **verse 17**: "Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory." Bible scholars said "the king's highway" could be a well-known corridor for travelers at that time. It goes right through Edom from the south to the north. You can refer to the **map** on the screen. The messengers presented their request twice. But the Edom king refused both petitions. It was understandable that Edom saw the Israelites as a potential threat. If they could defeat Egypt, no one could stand before them. The Israelites had no choice but to go on a detour. They traveled further to the east outside of Edom before they turned north. It was not the first time God sent His people to a detour. They just finished running around in circles in the wilderness the previous 40 years. They also had a detour the night they left Egypt. Look at **Exodus 13:17-18** – 17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." 18 So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea... God was mindful about His people. He did not lead them to the shortest route. He took them to the safest path. God had his special purposes in each of the three detours. He protected the Israelites; He disciplined His people and He cared about even a foreign nation like Edom. The Israelites might think that they wasted a lot of times by walking the extra distance. God had lessons for His people to learn. They witnessed God's faithfulness on every occasion. Those are valuable teaching materials for future generations. None of us like detour. But detour is part of life. I dated more than one lady before I met my current wife. (I will not tell you how many girls I was with before that.) In one relationship, my girlfriend and I were very sure that we would be together. We are both Christians and so we at least fulfilled the basic requirement. At that time, our fellowship counselor did not think that we were ready to get married. Of course, we later broke off. As I looked back, I was thankful to God that she did not marry me. Otherwise, she would suffer quite a bit from my immaturity and self-centeredness. Well, I am not saying now my family members do not have to tolerate me. You can ask them! God also took me to a detour before I became a pastor. I went through almost 10 years in study and work, before God called me into seminary. I envy some young people who know early on what they will study in college and what career path they aspire after. I had zero idea what I should do after I got my degree in U.S. However, I have no doubt that God has been leading me in the journey. If I did not come to U.S., I would not have met my current wife. If I did not study Agriculture, I would not have gone to St. Louis for work. If I was not laid off from work, I would not have entered the seminary. If it was not because of some turmoil in my previous church, I would not have the opportunity to serve here. If I can choose, I would like to skip some detours. But God has been shaping me and equipping me for the next step. You may feel that you have gone through various detours. Many of you lived in a few cities, or even countries before you moved to Memphis. Perhaps in the near future you will relocate again. Your detour may be a

financial crisis or a health problem. It can also be a bad decision made by a family member that affects everyone. You agonize over the extra time or money spent. You get impatient about the setback. But do not forget that God is with you all along. God never allows the detours in your life to be wasted in vain. Those moments are opportunities for you to slow down and evaluate your relationship with God. Ask God what valuable lessons He wants you to learn. Pray for strength and get back on the road.

2. 領袖遭挫敗 Defeat for a Leader

The first story in our passage is about a detour from the lane. Then there is a second story about a defeat for a leader. God told Moses and Aaron in **verse 24** that Aaron would die: “Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.” The Israelites grumbled at Meribah because there was no water. God told Moses to speak to a rock to make water come out. Instead, Moses struck the rock twice with his staff. God disciplined both brothers by telling them that they would not enter Canaan. Now God was about to call Aaron home. But God would not abandon His people. God prepared a successor for Aaron. Continue to read **verses 25-26: 25** “Get Aaron and his son Eleazar and take them up Mount Hor. 26 Remove Aaron’s garments and put them on his son Eleazar, for Aaron will be gathered to his people; he will die there.” The three persons followed God’s command. Moses passed the high priest robe to Eleazar. It is like a Kung-Fu master gives his sword to an appointed apprentice to take over the martial-art clan, or a retiring CEO turns over his keys to the next executive director. The Israelites noticed that only two persons descended from the mountain, and Eleazar was wearing Aaron’s garment. They understood that Aaron had passed away. People mourned for the lost leader for 30 days. What did Aaron’s departure mean to the Israelites? First, they understood that God’s discipline was for real. There would be consequence for disobedience. Miriam challenged God’s authority and she died. Now it was Aaron’s turn. Therefore, secondly, the Israelites knew that Moses would also die before they stepped into Canaan. However, thirdly, God is faithful to raise up a new leader to replace Aaron. God hinted that the promise of Canaan stayed on course. We feel that Aaron’s life was a defeat. He worked hard all his life but he did not get the grand prize of Canaan. However, we should not lose sight of God’s blessings to Aaron. He and his future sons were chosen to be priests. Aaron had the privilege to go into the Most Holy Place to worship God. As a priest, he ministered to his people for the past 40 years. Also, God gave Aaron and Moses the power to perform miracles. The two servants led their people out of Egypt. They also witnessed God’s power first-hand in the wilderness. Aaron had a fruitful life. He should cherish every important moment of his ministries. Numbers chapter 33 told us that Aaron died at an age of 123. But he seemed to be in good health. But in God’s plan, Aaron had completed his tasks. The book of Hebrews recorded the wonderful work of some heroes of faith. Many of them suffered defeats. **Hebrews 11:13** is my life-verse in the Bible. It reads: All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. Who are those “people?” Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and many others. You know some of their stories. You kids and grandchildren study their lives in Sunday school. They had their successes and defeats. The common thing for all of them was they all lived by faith. Each of them played an important role in God’s salvation plan. When it was time for God to call one person home, he passed the baton to the next person. Their life experience subsequently led to

Jesus. He is the biggest promise God prepared for the mankind. Just like those Old Testament characters, God also call us to travel on a journey of faith. God has a plan for each of you, although we may not achieve anything as significant as those followers of God. We are foreigners on earth just like them. God chooses us and uses us to fulfill His purposes. Our world glorifies heroes. Only people at the top will be remembered. There is no celebration for the second best or runner-up. Without a doubt, it is thrilling to be a winner. However, the process is as important, if not more so, than the final product. There are many retired athletes who did not get a championship trophy. Do they think that their career is a defeat? Hardly! I am sure they will always cherish many beautiful memories as they worked hard daily to improve their skills. Yes, they lost in the most critical game of their lives. But players from other teams are very envious for the opportunity to at least compete for a championship. God never calls us to be winners. He recruits us as servants. To God, the process is more important than the product. What God asks from us is faithfulness. It translates to working diligently every day on the tasks God entrusts us. Jesus told us that if we are faithful in small things, then we will be faithful in bigger things. Let me give you some suggestions. Before you get out of bed in the morning, ask God to lead you to some smaller tasks. Perhaps God wants you to show kindness to someone. It can be as simple as saying hi to a stranger or thanking a store clerk for his/her service. God may ask you to treat people with love and patience. Your kid or your grandchild may be acting moody. A colleague at work may say something not so friendly. Pray to God on the spot to help you react with His grace. A friend living in another city or a family member in Asia may call you or message you sharing his/her hardship. Tell the person how God has helped you in the past, then pray for the him/her. You see, every day is full of opportunities to experience God's presence and to serve Him. The process is more important than the product. Do not consider yourself a defeat if you are not the top person in your profession or you have not accomplished anything grand. God puts you here because He still has unfinished business for you.

CONCLUSION

God has lessons for us to learn in every stage of life. Do not feel disappointed about the past failures. God always has new grace tomorrow. Let me conclude with a true story. Robin and Erica are a young couple. Erica was expecting her first baby, Kennady. After an ultrasound scan, the doctor came back with bad news. There was water in the baby's brain. Two months after Kennady's birth, the doctor had an even more shocking discovery. Kennady had a rare condition where the two halves of her brain failed to separate. She was given six months to 2 years to live. Robin is a church pastor. He prayed for God to do one of two things. He either healed her daughter or took her home. Before Kennady left the hospital, Robin noticed a comment the doctor wrote on the medical record: "The parents understand that there is no chance of their daughter having a meaningful life." The father recalled: "It set us on a journey to discover where does this meaning come from and who determines it? What would she have to do for life to have meaning?" That was 17 years ago. To this day, Kennady is still alive. Robin shared that God used this girl to keep him humble. He does not graduate from any seminary. He told people that Kennady was his seminary. Kennady taught him that a person's meaning comes not from what they can do or accomplish. God gave this couple a third option in their prayer. God gave them enough grace every day to raise a child who cannot talk, walk or feed herself. God also helped them see things from His perspective. Today, you may be dealing with a different issue. It may look like a detour or a defeat. But every day is a new opportunity to walk with God.