

Truth for Today

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Lessons from the Journey of the Children of Israel: The Wilderness

I was recently reading of three women who are attempting to walk to the North Pole. This challenges them to walk 413 miles in extremely forbidding conditions. Sadly, one member of the team has had to be airlifted from the ice to receive medical attention for frostbite. Such challenges are faced by many people in various ways, whether this concerns reaching the North or South Pole, or seeking to cross the Sahara Desert. The conditions are unforgiving and there is little of help to the traveller.

We are thinking today of Israel, the nation which spent forty years in the wilderness. We can read of their activities there specifically in Exodus chapters 15 to 40 and the book of Numbers. Their conditions were not as severe as in arctic areas, but they did spend all that time in a barren area of non-arable plains where vegetation thinly covered limestone. There would be some pasture but no cultivation. They had left Egypt, where they had been slaves of Pharaoh, and God had brought them out in His own powerful way. They had miraculously crossed the Red Sea and were heading for a land of plenty, full of good things, and especially a land where God had promised to care for them. Twelve of their number had even gone to spy out the land and had brought back a cluster of grapes so large that two men had to carry it, together with pomegranates and figs. They said, 'We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it', Numbers 13:27. The journey through the wilderness could have been accomplished in days rather than forty years so we have to ask why Israel had to stay in that barren land, which was quite unsuitable for long term living, and which provided little for their daily needs.

We can look at this in three ways. Not only do we find lessons for Israel but we see those same lessons for us in our day too. They can be stated as:

- The Purpose in mind.
- The Presentation of a God for the people.
- The Preparation of a people for God.

The Purpose in mind.

Even a brief review of the period covering the wilderness journey will give every reader a clear understanding that these people sinned against God and refused His blessing on them. The immediate response to the crossing of the Red Sea was a song of triumph to the LORD, the first mention of singing in the Bible, Exodus 15. However, before the chapter is ended the people murmured against the LORD for lack of water. It is clear that the lessons of the triumphant move out of the clutches of the master of slaves, Pharaoh, into the blessing of dependence on God had not been learnt.

Then, finally, Israel totally rejected entry into the land God had promised them. There is a marvellous appeal by Moses to save Israel when it appeared that God was ready finally to abandon them, Numbers 14. So God says, 'Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, have tempted Me now these ten times, and have not hearkened unto My voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked Me see it...' Numbers 14:22-23.

At the end of the period of wandering, Moses speaks to Israel and reminds them again of the reasons why it was necessary to spend this time in the wilderness. We read in Deuteronomy 8:2, 'Thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments or no'. So it was a time of humbling, of proving and a demonstration of what was in their heart.

Are Christians today any better than Israel of old? How easily we find pride in our heart. How easily we turn away from following our Master closely. We may also need a time of proving. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that Christians may experience the chastening of God Himself. How much we need this! Let us read the verses together from Hebrews 12:6-11. 'Whom the Lord *loveth* He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? ... Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much

rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days c hastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby'. So we have a clear understanding of why God may chasten us. There is no life-long chastening as with Israel but it is for our good; we are encouraged to live more wholly for Christ, and through chastening we appreciate more the peace of knowing we are in harmony with the Lord again. Chastening may be punitive, that is, we are chastened because we fail. It may sometimes be preventative - in view of the prospect of sin. It is also promotive - to encourage Christian progress in our lives. That every believer will be chastened at some time is certain, but if we mistake the Source of the chastening then we miss the gain the Lord would have us enjoy.

The presentation of a God for the people.

It is vitally important that Israel should reach the point of understanding who God is and learn solely to depend upon Him. The people had two urgent needs, water and food, and we will consider each of these.

Shortly after the people had crossed the Red Sea and had hailed the victory in song, they moved into the Wilderness of Shur and went without water for three days. This surely was a calamity! We read of this in Exodus 15:22-27. At last they reached the waters of Marah where they were gasping to drink. Sadly, this water was not drinkable, so they complained to Moses. Their trust in God, following the crossing of the Red Sea, was soon lost! When Moses came to the LORD in prayer, 'the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet', verse 25. These verses go on to say 'there He proved them'. They were put to the test. There must be no doubt that the LORD is a God for this people!

The lesson is clear for us too. Have you found the water of life in this world? What we may think is water is either a mirage or bitter. We need the truth of the tree cut down and used to gain full life-giving refreshment for our need. Peter and the other apostles spoke to the Jewish council in Jerusalem, Acts 5:30-31, 'The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins'. What a tree, Calvary's tree, on which He was crucified! What refreshment and blessing has come from this! He is the Source and Supplier of the water of life.

We find further examples of the greatness of God in providing water for His people. In Exodus 17 the people are blaming God again through Moses saying 'Thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children...', verse 3. The LORD had an answer and he told Moses to take his rod and smite the rock. By doing so, again there was water. Once more the people were to learn that the LORD is the only God for this people. We can be in no doubt of the significance of this for us too. Paul writes, 'that Rock was Christ', 1 Corinthians 10:4. We know the story well concerning the One who is 'the rock'. The Lord Jesus was smitten once. He suffered and died to provide that water of life, so necessary to every individual. Have you drunk of that water? 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink', the Lord cried out, John 7:37. The water He provides is eternal life.

A similar incident occurred later and is recorded in Numbers 20:1-13. Will the people never learn to trust God? They complain again at the lack of water. The LORD already has His plan for the occasion and He tells Moses, 'speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water', verse 8. Moses, in his anger, took the rod and smote the rock twice! Although Moses disobeyed God, the LORD was so gracious to the people in giving them what they needed. Oh, that they would appreciate the LORD as the God for His people!

But let us just read verse 12. 'The LORD spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed Me not, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them'. The LORD would fulfil His promise of bringing the people to the land but Moses would no longer be the one to lead them in. Why was the judgement on him so severe? No doubt it is because of the significance of his action in twice smiting the rock. The instruction was given to 'speak' to the rock, not to smite it. You see, we have already referred to the time when the Rock was smitten. The Lord Jesus only needed to die once for sin and Moses signally failed, in his anger, to appreciate that God had a purpose in telling him to speak. For us, today, there is an additional significance. Paul writes to the Ephesians, 5:25-26, 'Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word'. This refers to you, my Christian friend. Do we find that the Word of God has a cleansing effect upon us as we read it day by day? The Lord has purposed that this will be so in the life of each one.

The Israelites never stopped complaining! If anything seemed to go wrong, they complained and so they lacked food, Exodus 16:1-18. Here we find the LORD once more supplying their need in a remarkable way. They were given, 'in the evening flesh to eat, and in the morning bread to the full', verse 8. In the evening the quails came up. The quail, a small bird often carried by the wind, adequately met Israel in its need. When the nation arose in the morning there was 'manna'. The word means 'what is it'? It tasted like 'wafers made with honey', 16:31. How clearly the LORD is the God of the unexpected, the God of the seemingly impossible! This food supply continued through the whole time

of the wilderness journey (see Joshua 5:12). What food do we have for our Christian pathway? It is the Lord Jesus who tells you and me, 'I am the Bread of Life', John 6:35. Yes, the manna speaks of the Lord Jesus particularly when we find ourselves in the wilderness experience of this world. We need the basic thrill of appreciating the keeping power of our Saviour then.

Let us summarise this section as we think of the wilderness experience of Israel who must learn that the LORD is their God. In Deuteronomy 29:2, 5 and 6 Moses tells the people, 'Ye have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes...I have led you forty years in the wilderness: your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot. Ye have not eaten bread, neither have ye drunk wine or strong drink: that ye might know that I am the LORD your God'. Let us never forget the sustaining power of God.

The preparation of a people for God.

If the people were to be a God honouring nation in the land He would give them, it is in the wilderness, free from outside influences, where they would learn the ways of God. Although it is one thing for Israel to be convinced that the LORD must be their God, it is equally true that God will require the nation to trust and honour Him daily.

When we look at Exodus 19 we hear God speaking to the people through Moses. He reminds them, 'Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself', verse 4. It was on this basis that God desired that they follow Him and they replied, 'All that the LORD hath spoken we will do', verse 8. Sadly, within days they were worshipping a golden calf as their god! However, God gave to Moses what was to be called 'the Law'. This is made up of 'Ten Commandments' which set down how the people were to act before God and men. There was also a moral law which governed the ways of the people on matters of cleanliness and activities between one and another. The matter of first concern was that the LORD must have first place. As a jealous God, He should have the only place in the minds and hearts of the people. Provision of these commandments was so important that they were written by the 'finger of God', Exodus 31:18. If Israel kept the Ten Commandments, they would live and be justified. They could not do it. The whole purpose for Israel was that they were to follow God in just the way He had appointed, and as they promised, but they failed.

For Christians today the letter to the Galatians speaks extensively on this matter. We are no better than the Israelite of old. We also cannot maintain the letter of the law but now we have One who has borne the punishment for our sins. When with faith we believe, we die to our own efforts and we are raised with the Lord Jesus to a new life. We learn from Galatians 2:16, 'Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified'. So the whole principle is different. The apostle goes on: 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith', 3:13-14. In His death on the cross, the Lord Jesus became that curse for us and we are marvellously saved through faith.

We must refer to the tabernacle before we conclude. Very detailed instructions were given to Israel for the building and the daily order and worship of the tabernacle in the wilderness. When the tabernacle was built, the cloud, marking the presence of God, rested on it. God dwelt among His people! The people must offer worship to Him in just the way He required. In this way they became a people for God. What lessons they learned in the wilderness! We do not need, today, all the ceremony and ritual of Israel of old. Yet God still seeks worshippers. Speaking to the woman at the well, the Lord Jesus said, 'The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in Spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in truth', John 4:23-24. Are you a true worshipper today? One form of worship is described in the New Testament several times. It is given by the Lord Himself in Luke 22:19-20 and Paul encourages the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. He says here: 'As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till He come'. This remembrance surely brings us to the highest form of worship, that of deep thanksgiving to the Lord Himself and to God the Father.

Such are the lessons we learn today as we think of the wilderness journey. May we each one be drawn nearer to the Lord Jesus; may we trust Him more and give honour to His name day by day.

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