

Wilderness Wanderings: ***Journeying from Zoan to Zion***

Lesson 1 | Psalm 78:12, 68

Outline:

- I. In the Wilderness Years, God Desires Through Israel to Herald a Testimony to the Nations (Exodus 9:16; 15:14-16; 19:1-4; Deuteronomy 4:6-8; 2:25)
- II. In the Wilderness Years, God Desires to Instruct Israel to Prepare Them for Life in the Promised Land
 - A. God Desires to Work the Ten Commandments into the Fiber of their Beings (Deuteronomy 6:13-18)
 - B. God Desires to Instill in a New Generation a Right, Full-Orbed Concept of God (Exodus 19:4-5; Deuteronomy 6:13-15)
 - C. God Desires to Unfold for Them the Glories of His Salvation
- III. In the Wilderness Years, God Desires to Test Israel to Expose What Is in Their Hearts (Deuteronomy 8:2, 16; Exodus 15:25; 16:4; 20:20)
- IV. In the Wilderness Years, God Foreshadows His Redemptive Plan
- V. In the Wilderness Years, God Preserves a Story that He Uses to Instruct New Testament Believers
 - A. Because of the Number of Times New Testament Preachers or Writers Refer to It:
 - B. Because of the Themes Emphasized Throughout the Account
 - C. Because of its Scripturally-Identified Value for Instruction for New Testament Believers

Introduction: When God commands His people to take a journey, He intends to preserve them in it and through it. Years after the wilderness wanderings ended, the people of God would bear testimony to the faithfulness of God to them.

*¹⁶The people answered and said, Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and **preserved us through all the way** in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed (Joshua 24:16-17).*

The years of Israel's journeys in the wilderness represent a significant portion of our Bibles, and they form a body of written revelation from which later Old Testament revelation and much New Testament revelation draws. The period of Israel's wandering follows their miraculous deliverance following their first Passover from Egypt (Exodus 15:1) until their first Passover in Gilgal (Joshua 5:10-12). The exodus from Egypt can probably best be dated in the year 1445 B.C.

Why do the wilderness passages merit the attention of New Testament believers? In part, the portion of Scripture deserves our attention simply because it is in the Bible. In addition, however, the wilderness wandering years occupy a significant portion of the Old Testament. For example, notice the number of pages a typical Bible allots to cover Exodus 12:37-Deuteronomy 34. Compare that number of pages in the Old Testament to an equal number of pages in the New Testament. God gave that much written attention to just 40 years. To further highlight the amount of coverage, notice on the one hand that all of the pages of Genesis cover 2000 years, and on the other, the Jewish period of 430 years in Egypt gets comparatively any notice at all until the very end.

What then are the major Scripturally-identified spiritual values connected with studying the wilderness years?

- I. In the Wilderness Years, God Desires Through Israel to Herald a Testimony to the Nations (Exodus 9:16; 15:14-16; 19:1-4; Deuteronomy 4:6-8; 2:25)

Just as God had raised up Pharaoh and enabled him to rule in order that God might proclaim His name throughout the earth (Exodus 9:16), so He desired to separate Israel from among the nations of the earth so that they might be a distinctive testimony in the earth and represent Him before the nations with whom they came in contact.

God desires to give to His Son the nations as His inheritance (Psalm 2:8), and very early in Israel's history God wanted to use them toward this end. God had made His name known among the Egyptians (Exodus 7:5, 10:1-2; 14:4, 18;) through Israel's presence, and in much the same way God intended to make a name for Himself among other nations who observed His dealings with His people and on behalf of His people. From the first major event of Israel's exodus journey, God began accomplishing this purpose:

¹⁴ *The peoples have heard, they tremble; Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia.*

¹⁵ *Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; The leaders of Moab, trembling grips them; All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. ¹⁶ Terror and dread fall upon them; By the greatness of Your arm they are motionless as stone; Until Your people pass over, O LORD, until the people pass over whom You have purchased (Exodus 15:14-16; cf. Genesis 22:17).*

²⁵ *This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under the heavens, who, when they hear the report of you, will tremble and be in anguish because of you (Deuteronomy 2:25).*

Along the way, He reminded them of how He would use them as a testimony to the nations.

Then God said, "Behold, I am going to make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform miracles which have not been produced in all the earth nor among any of the

nations; and all the people among whom you live will see the working of the LORD, for it is a fearful thing that I am going to perform with you (Exodus 34:10).

The purpose that God had for His people in the wilderness would continue to be His purpose for them as they finally entered the land promised to them:

*⁵ See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. ⁶ So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding **in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'** ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? ⁸ Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today? (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).*

Along the way of the journey, they would have contact with several nations on whom the Lord made decisive impressions: Philistia, Edom, Moab, Amalekites, Canaan, etc. (see Numbers 33 and Deuteronomy 2-3 for fuller accounts).

God used the nation Israel, even in these infant fledgling years to begin to fulfill the promise that He had made to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) – that from him would come a nation through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The ultimate fulfillment of that blessing came in the Messiah.

II. In the Wilderness Years, God Desires to Instruct Israel to Prepare Them for Life in the Promised Land

If the following statement is true – “The Old Testament can well be called the kindergarten of the Bible” (C. H. Stevens, *The Wilderness Wanderings*, 11) – then the years of wilderness wandering represent some of the earliest stages of that spiritual kindergarten.

God patiently bore with Israel’s slowness to learn, their immature spirits, their child-like complaints, their unchild-like faithlessness, their repeated failures, etc. In addition, He instructed them with astounding miraculous events, sustained miraculous provision, unthinkable deliverances, continuing visible manifestations of His presence, tender words, seasons of instruction, oral lessons, written lessons, object lessons of spiritual truth, a priesthood, impressive worship, a meek leader, etc.

Considering the daily miracles of the cloud and pillar, the daily provision of manna, and the nearly continual supply of water, the number of overt miracles during these forty years is nothing short of mind-boggling.

More miracles are associated with the account of the forty years in the wilderness than with all the rest of the Old Testament combined (Stevens, 13).

What specifically was God trying to teach His people?

- A. God Desires to Work the Ten Commandments into the Fiber of their Beings (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 6:13-18)

The Ten Commandments display the character of God.

³ *You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes.* ⁴ *You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God.* ⁵ *So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD (Leviticus 18:3-4).*

- B. God Desires to Instill in a New Generation a Right, Full-Orbed Concept of God (Exodus 19:4-5; Deuteronomy 6:13-15)

1. Of His terror (Exodus 16:7, 10, 12; 19:12-17)
2. Of His blessing (Exodus 19:4-6)
3. Of His glorious uniqueness

Throughout the wilderness wanderings, God repeatedly intervened with displays of His glory: at Sinai (Exodus 24:16-17), in the tabernacle (Exodus 29:43; 40:34-35), to Moses personally (Exodus 33:18ff), and repeatedly at the tent of meeting (Leviticus 9:6, 23; Numbers 14:10, 21-22; 16:19; 20:6). Moses would later testify that when the people saw God's glory in connection with the second giving of the Law that they had seen His glory *and His greatness* (Deuteronomy 5:24).

4. Of His undiscouraged perseverance

J. Oswald Sanders, in his excellent work, *Spiritual Maturity*, entitles a chapter "The Undiscouraged Perseverance of God." In it, he reflects on the faithfulness of God to His covenant with His people.

The perseverance of the saints is possible only because of the perseverance of God Though Israel balked and thwarted Him at every turn, He persisted in His gracious disciplines until His purposes were realized, and in the Hebrew nation all the peoples of the earth were blessed. When one approach failed, He adopted another. If one generation refused to respond, He patiently began with the next. Time and again succeeding generations turned to idolatry until at last the chastening of their final captivity in Babylon forever taught them its folly and futility (pp. 31-32).

The years in the wilderness give us a glimpse into an important stage in the perseverance of God with His people. He had singled them out 600 years before, and He persisted in His care and tutelage of them.

C. God Desires to Unfold for Them the Glories of His Salvation

They were to move from standing still and seeing the salvation of the Lord from bondage and enemies (Exodus 14:13-14) to traveling and seeing the salvation of the Lord on display in His continuing leading and provision for them.

God was attempting to prepare His people for their part in His grand plan of redemption (through them to bless all the nations of the earth – Genesis 12:3), and it required them to both remember that they once needed His salvation, and it required them to continually live inside of that salvation.

God taught them how to do that by often reminding them that it was He, Jehovah, who had brought them *out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage* (i.e., Exodus 16:6, 20:2; 29:46; Leviticus 11:45; 19:36; 22:33; 23:43; 25:38, 42, 55; 26:13, 45; Numbers 15:41). On that basis, God asserted His rightful ownership or Lordship over Israel and insisted that He was their new Master (Exodus 15:25b-26).

In addition, it is interesting that God not only tried to teach Israel during the wilderness years, but later He repeatedly used lessons from the wilderness years as instructional tools for the later generations in Israel:

- For the generation that grew up in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 1-3)
- For the generation settling the Promised Land (Joshua 24:9-10)
- For generations living under kings (Psalm 78, 105, 106)
- For the generation living in captivity (Ezekiel 20:10-26)
- For the generations that returned to the land and were there in Jesus' day (John 6:22-59)

III. In the Wilderness Years, God Desires to Test Israel to Expose What Is in Their Hearts (Deuteronomy 8:2, 16; Exodus 15:25; 16:4; 20:20)

God exposes to Israel what was in their hearts. Idolatry, ingratitude, bitterness and more resided there. The longer the wilderness years extended, surely Israel could increasingly comprehend that nothing pleasing in them had mandated God's choice of them as His favored nation! The testings enabled them to see how much of Egypt had gotten into them (in terms of affections, tastes, and spirituality).

The history of later Israel is an Israel that not only forgot the graciousness of God's choice and deliverance of them, but it also reflects a nation that forgot the sins of its youth. The sins of the wilderness years are repeated again and again in intensifying ways, and God ends

up having to deal with Israel as severely as He had formerly dealt with the nations around her.

Israel needed to learn that the God of Israel was a testing God:

*The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD'S throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids **test** the sons of men (Psalm 11:4).*

*I, the LORD, search the heart, I **test** the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds (Jeremiah 17:10).*

*Yet, O LORD of hosts, You who **test** the righteous, Who see the mind and the heart; Let me see Your vengeance on them; For to You I have set forth my cause (Jeremiah 20:12).*

IV. In the Wilderness Years, God Foreshadows His Redemptive Plan

We will not belabor this point now, but even a cursory look at the wilderness years highlights how frequently God planted seeds of truth in symbols, rituals, or structures.

Through institutions, feasts, sacrifices, and observance of days, the priestly ministries served to keep the basic divine truth before the nation (Stevens, 23).

Yet these seeds were shadows that actually were pregnant with much greater meaning than Israel initially knew. The Sabbath, the rock from which water came, the manna from heaven, the water, the Tabernacle, sacrifices, feasts, priests, and more all depict Christological and soteriological (doctrine of salvation) truth that had great significance for the ministry of Christ – both when He lived on the earth and in His ongoing ministry in the lives of believing followers.

V. In the Wilderness Years, God Preserves a Story that He Uses to Instruct New Testament Believers

The continuing relevance of the wilderness years is made evident in the following ways:

A. Because of the Number of Times New Testament Preachers or Writers Refer to It:

Stephen (Acts 7:36-43); Paul (1 Corinthians 10:1-11); Peter (2 Peter 2:14-16); Jude (v. 11); John (Revelation 2:14-15); Jesus (John 3:14; 6:31); the writer of Hebrews (3-4, 8-10, 11:29).

B. Because of the Themes Emphasized Throughout the Account

The themes of those years recall not only aspects of God's character and dealings with His people, but they are revelatory of continuing needs in the lives of His people. Often it is the very contrast of these themes that drives the lessons home to us.

1. God's merciful, sovereign choice of Israel
2. God's unfailing faithfulness to Israel (in discipline, provision, and instruction)
3. Israel's continual need of God

C. Because of its Scripturally-Identified Value for Instruction for New Testament Believers

⁴ *For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope* (Romans 15:4).

¹¹ *Now these things [specific lessons from wilderness years] happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come* (1 Corinthians 10:11).

- The wilderness years almost function like an Old Testament *Pilgrim's Progress*.
- They contain implicit warnings for us that are explicitly reiterated by Paul (1 Corinthians 10:1-11) and the writer of Hebrews (3:9-12ff).
 - Israel's failure cited in Hebrews is their apostatizing from the living God (3:12) and their failure to hold the beginning of their confidence steadfast to the end (3:14). They had the gospel preached to them, but it did not profit them, not being mixed with faith (Hebrews 4:2).
 - Israel's continuing need was to labor with their former state firmly in mind and their destination ever before them (Hebrews 4).

Conclusion: God had chosen Israel to be part of His mission in the earth by which He would bless all the nations of the earth. God drew ever closer to Israel when they were slaves in Egypt and invited them into a closer, voluntary enjoyment of the obligations and blessings of that relationship.

The wilderness wanderings illustrate the reality that not all who claim to belong to Christ voluntarily submit themselves to participate in His kingdom on His terms. Not everyone in Israel is a spiritual Israelite (*For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel* – Romans 9:6). Thankfully, some are. There can be leaders like Moses and Joshua, obedient followers like Caleb and Phinehas (Numbers 25:6-8) and the people who gathered the manna trustingly, or who stood with Moses rather than worship the golden calf (Exodus 32:26ff). On the other hand, there can be those who gather the manna distrustingly, or drink water from the rock while simultaneously worshipping idols.

¹² Then they believed His words; They sang His praise. ¹³They quickly forgot His works; They did not wait for His counsel, ¹⁴ but craved intensely in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. ¹⁵ So He gave them their request, but sent a wasting disease among them (Psalm 106:12-15).

These years also magnify the patience of the Lord in dealing with His children. In these chapters, we see Him patiently rear a single generation. There is no flaw in the content of His teaching or in His method, but the responses of students can be flawed. The variety of “learning languages” God uses to instruct, remind, and reiterate truth is a remarkable testimony to His shepherding care of His own and His desire to see goodness and mercy follow them all the days of their lives until they arrive to live in the house of the Lord forever.