

Making Our Way through the Wilderness
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Moses, Israel, and the Freedom of the Desert

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With Israel leaving behind the wonders of their deliverance from Egypt and pressing on into the wilderness, they find themselves in an awkward position: glad to leave slavery behind, but not sure they want the freedom they're being offered. Nevertheless, God and his 'friend', Moses, press forward with the education of Israel that they might learn the true meaning of freedom and that it is realized in the right ordering of our lives, around the worship of the one true God.

Thematic Review

- Last week we were with Moses, as he lead the people out of Egypt and to freedom in the desert
- and as you might recall, they were lead out of slavery through a great display of power; a display not only to make an impression on the rest of the nations of the earth, but was primarily done to make a mark in the Hebrew soul. And the stories were to be passed down from generation to generation, that the memory and identity might not be lost; they were a marked people, a people set apart for the restoration of the earth, and all peoples were to be blessed by them
- And that mark was that they were people of faith, sojourners in a foreign land, longing for their true homeland; the mark was that they were different from the other nations, from those who were still under the curse of the fall and its darkness, lost in their blindness, utterly without wisdom and the wherewithal to make sense of life, and the world around them
- Like God had done with Abraham, he brings Abraham's children out into the desert, too; first Moses, their head, and then the whole nation themselves.
- And even though God had gotten their bodies out of the slavery of Egypt and into the freedom of the desert, their behavior in the wilderness reveals that they still have a lot to learn before they're able to be brought into the Promised Land
- So do we! Like Israel, we're usually not at all sure about just how bad we want the promises of God; usually we don't want to be much different from the world; we're usually not really interested in exchanging the deeply-ingrained habits of this world's so-called wisdom, which is really chaos, for the wisdom of God and the happiness and freedom it can bring.
- Like Israel, we would much rather die in slavery but with full stomachs than in freedom and wait upon God for our every need. Like Esau, we would gladly trade our birthright for a meal.

Looking back to Israel in the desert...

Wilderness Lessons—Step by Step, Raising Them Up to Worship

God cares for their bodies through food and water—giving them further reason to trust

- If only the children of Israel had been more like their father, Jacob, and been willing to do whatever it took to weasel their way into receiving the blessing of their Father Isaac; if only they'd had the presumption to take hold of God and wrestle a blessing out of him!!!
- When Moses takes Jacob's children out into the wilderness of Shur, departing from the miracle and celebration at the Red Sea, they look nothing like their ancestor Jacob
- having been taken out of slavery with full stomachs and burdened down with gold and riches, and having witnessed the utter devastation of their enemies, a victory for which they didn't even need to lift a finger but instead to just sit back and watch the show, they immediately show themselves incapable of understanding that this same God will provide for something as simple as their bodily needs
- What's the great problem they're facing? Finding fresh water. What's their attitude? "They murmured against Moses." They didn't plead with Moses, they didn't say please; they held it against him. They were fearful, and they were antagonistic and bitter.
- What does God do? He sweetens the waters with a tree.
- But he also accompanied this miracle with a solemn warning: "If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee." (Ex 15.26)
- All of this was done, says the text, "to prove them," that is, to test them and thereby to draw out what lies in their hearts
- Just like when they were squeezed between Pharaoh and the Red Sea, God is turning up the heat on Israel to demonstrate what they're made of, and to re-shape them into what he intends for them to be
- Israel sets out again, and the same complaint arose, even more bitterly, over the lack of food: "Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Ex 16.3) In their current state they're children of Esau, not Israel... that is, Gentile, just one more nation among the nations, not truly Hebrew
- And again, God knows this, and is testing them: "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, *that I may prove them*, whether they will walk in my law, or no."
- To feed his people, God rains down bread in the morning, and quail in the evening.
- But there is a law attached to this provision, and it's very simple: don't gather more than a day's worth; on the 6th day, gather enough for the 7th so you can rest on the Sabbath; keep one measure of the manna in the ark, to remember this provision forever
- Remember, God is establishing a story for them and their children
- And at its most basic level, the story is this: not only has God brought them out of slavery, but he will provide for their every bodily need, so that they might know in their heart that God cares for them, and that they belong to him: "And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God." (Ex 16.11-12)
- not only are they unable to keep the simple laws over food, but they are unable to believe that God is in fact the Lord their God; they move camp yet again, and water again

runs out, and what do they do? Murmur again. “Wherefore the people did chide with Moses, and said, Give us water that we may drink. And Moses said unto them, Why chide ye with me? wherefore do ye tempt the Lord? And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said, Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? they be almost ready to stone me.” (Ex 17.2-4)

- That place is given a name, Massah and Meribah, because it was there that they put the Lord to the test. Again, they needed a demonstration. After all they’d seen, the fools were asking: “Is the Lord among us, or not?” (17.7) At even the first hint of want, the people instantly forgot all that God had done for them. Their policy seems to have been formed on investment disclaimers: “Past performance is not necessarily indicative of future results.” If they couldn’t even appreciate that which they had seen, how could they even begin to appreciate that which had merely been promised? Children of Abraham, they are not. Yet God provides anyway, and elects to bring them along for his honor, and in his wisdom.

God shapes their souls through moral law—guides them to obedience

- After experiencing some moderate success in battle and administration, both brought about by the grace of God, a dramatic new episode in their corporate memory begins to come about: the experiences they have at Mt Sinai
- God reiterates the covenant to them: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.” (Ex 19.4f)
- And then he announces his presence, saying to Moses: “Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever.”
- Still working on convincing them, still working on their faith.
- The experience is a bit of “Shock and Awe”: the people are to wash and fast; the mountain is cordoned off, upon penalty of death for both man and beast; Israel is brought to the foot of the mountain to witness a spectacle: a thick cloud upon the mountain, loud trumpets, thunder and lightning, fire and smoke.
- Moses is called up into this fearsome scene, and the people are warned again not to approach the mountain, “Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish.” (Ex 19.24)
- The experience is one of setting off; Israel is being set apart from God. Like the rest of the nations, they are not yet conformed to God’s will; they are essentially Egyptian or Canaanite, and God has not yet accomplished his purposes in them. They first need to know where they stand; they need an initial assessment of how they compare to the Lord. They are not yet “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Only Moses could go up. He was their only priest at this stage.
- Indeed, “all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die. And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you,

and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not. And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was.” (Ex 20.18-21)

- But God doesn't leave them with merely this difference and distinction; he gives them a way forward. He gives them the Ten Commandments. And not only this, but he gives them an instruction to worship and the promise of blessing:
- “And the Lord said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold. An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.” (Ex 20.22-24).
- The pattern is set: God cares for their bodies, and they are initiated into the fear of the Lord. But they are also initiated in the way forward: moral law, and the sacrifice of worship. Israel's pattern is set. The basic outlines of their life have been established.

God directs their hearts and minds through worship—leads them to devotion

- This is essentially the pattern we have through the rest of the Book of Exodus. Bodily provision, moral law, and the principles of worship.
- Throughout the experience on Sinai, wherein the law is given, 1) they are given plenty of reminders about the Promised Land (Ex 23.20-23.33), 2) the Lord's covenant with Israel is sealed in the blood of sacrifice (24.1-8), surely evoking their memory of the covenant sealed with Abraham and the one smeared on their doorposts in Egypt, and 3) the elders, along with Moses and Joshua meet with God again in a fearsome and impressive encounter (24.9-18)
- In this Sinai experience they're given very detailed instructions in Moral Law (21-23, with more to come!) and in Worship, with the detailed plans for the Tabernacle (25-31)
- But rather than focus on these, it's more profitable for now to focus on the story around these laws and directions
- What is Israel up to while Moses is getting the instructions for the form of right worship? They're worshipping something else!!!
- The pinnacle of their national life was to be worship, built upon God's care for their bodies and their moral reformation. And what do they do? Worship an image of Creation, rather than their Creator and Deliverer. “In your face, God.” A golden calf which can't even move itself, something they made with their own hands, is preferable to the living one who actually destroyed a whole nation and moved the sea to deliver them
- Here it seems that something turns in the narrative. For the first time, God is set *against* the people, and he puts Moses in the position of mediator. The people are manifestly incapable in themselves of becoming what the Lord had created them to be
- He even tells Moses they are *his* people, sort of like when I tell my wife, “Guess what *your* son just did...”:
- “7 And the Lord said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for *thy* people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 9 And the Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people:10 Now therefore let me alone, that my

wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.” (Ex 32.7-10)

- Moses rises to the occasion, just as God intended: “But Moses besought the Lord his God, and said, Lord, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand?” (Ex 32.11)
Moses then re-states the covenant, in effect repeating it back to God. It’s clear that *he* gets it, anyway! But the name “stiffnecked” has been applied, and is revealing
- Moses descends from the mount and basically freaks out; he is the agent of the Lord’s wrath. After listening to their excuses, he punishes them and then calls out: “Who is on the Lord’s side? let him come unto me.” The separation within Israel has begun.
- The clan of Levi comes forward, to their credit, and at God’s instruction Moses has them slay with the sword a representative number of the transgressors. And after that, a number of them are slain by a plague, the very sort of judgment God had said he would send them if they were to fall from his ways. Moses, though, is lovingly interceding all the while for this stiff-necked people.
- The Lord continues in his patience, but in some undisclosed way, he is not “with” them anymore in the same way that he was before. There is an increased distance.
- “Depart, and go up hence, thou and the people which thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt, unto the land which I swore unto Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, Unto thy seed will I give it: And I will send an angel before thee; and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite: Unto a land flowing with milk and honey: for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people: lest I consume thee in the way.” (Ex 33.1-3)
- To their credit, “the people mourned.” But it was far too little, far too late. Their hearts had been revealed.
- But the promises were not revoked; God still restates the covenant, and still gives them the law through a second set of tablets. What has changed for the people, I suspect, is that it is fully manifest now that in the current state of things their hearts and minds never really will leave Egypt, as we see throughout the rest of the sojourn in the desert, throughout the life of Moses. Practically the entire generation of Israelites are proven to be sons of their uncle Esau, rather than Jacob.
- Even though they’re the ones who received the Law and built the Tabernacle, even though they were the ones who’d been personally delivered from Egypt, in themselves they were unable to become the nation God was building, the faith-ful children of Abraham. The Promise would have to go to their descendants... or perhaps more properly, *Abraham’s* descendants.

What’s God Looking For? Moses and Israel, compared...

- I think it’s fascinating at this point to compare Moses and Israel... Every time Israel fails in their morals and their worship, they seem to get more and more Law.
- Moses, on the other hand, seems already to possess all that the Law and Worship were meant to instill in the people.
- After Israel’s apostasy, Moses had the practice of going outside the camp, to the “Tent of Meeting,” where the cloud of God’s presence would descend and God would meet with Moses and speak to him as his friend, “face to face” (Ex 33.7f)

- In their intimate meeting, Moses requests of God, “See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight. Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation is thy people. And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” (Ex 33.12f)
- “Shew me now they way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight.” No other Hebrew had uttered that prayer. And then, like Jacob, Moses has the audacity to request something exceptional: “I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.” And what does God say? Essentially, “Ok.” “I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.” (Ex 33.18-19) And Moses does indeed see the glory of the Lord, as much as a human being can. Ask, and ye shall receive.
- And it is on this foundation that God continues to lead his people Israel.
- Indeed, thereafter, whenever Moses came down from the Mount, his face shown, and the people couldn’t bear it.
- fascinating how Moses seems not to need all the accoutrements... but neither did Abraham

Christian Lessons in the Desert

- As Christ and the Apostles tells us, it’s about having the *faith* of Abraham; the Law and the Instructions for Worship pointed out what the Lord expected his people to become, but didn’t get them there. This doesn’t mean that the Law wasn’t good; it most definitely was! God used it to reveal to Israel their true selves.
- Here’s Paul on the Law: “It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.” (Gal 3.19)
- “before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3.23-26)
- The Law was Israel’s, AND OUR, schoolmaster. It educates us on God’s provision, it teaches us what the will of God looks like, and it commends to us the reverent worship of sacrifice to the one true God, who has pulled us out of slavery and given us wonderful promises. But it also educates us, through our failure to keep it, that apart from *wanting* to leave slavery, and apart from *wanting* the Promises, we’ll never become what he is making us to be.
- The law was Israel’s preservative, holding them until the coming of Christ and the Holy Ghost, whereby God gave his people not new earthly circumstances, but new hearts; not bodily freedom from slavery, but desire for the freedom of true worship; for the service of God, “Whose service is perfect freedom.”
- These are the lessons of the desert, and in our next few meetings we’ll see how Moses himself knew this to be true, and how in the Prophets, a faithful remnant within the desolation that is to become the nation of Israel begins to understand the true, spiritual nature of the Gospel.