

Wandering in the Wilderness

A Sermon by Stephen D. Cole

"Thou shalt remember all the way which Jehovah thy God hath led thee these forty years in the desert, that He might humble thee and test thee to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or not." (Deuteronomy 8:2)

Forty years is a long time. And wandering for forty years may seem like a harsh sentence, and the Israelites served this sentence in the desert, the wilderness. The forty years and the wilderness both represent, spiritually, the time and the state of spiritual temptation. In the account of the temptations of Jesus, of which we read in our lesson from Luke, the setting was also the wilderness and although the forty comes in terms of days rather years, the connection between the two stories is obvious. The account in Luke even recalls the story in Deuteronomy, quoting the words "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every saying of God." (Luke 4:4)

The temptations of Jesus proceed in the fashion one might expect in a story of spiritual testing. The devil proposes a course of action, and Jesus resists, in each case actually answering with a passage from Scripture. But if the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai portrays a time of temptation, it is hard to see how it fits the same pattern. What were they tempted to do, or to fail to do? It seems more a period of feeling deserted, aimless, and without direction.

Similarly, another period of forty days, the flood of Noah, although it again represents a time of spiritual trial, does not appear to fit the pattern of temptation, at least as people often picture it. Noah faced challenging circumstances, but it does not seem to have been a case of wanting to do wrong and then resisting. What challenges may we face that correspond to those of Noah, and how can they be called "temptation"?

Since we all are likely to go through periods of spiritual temptation, it behooves us to be clear about what it actually is. And we can, perhaps, gain some clarity by looking closely at the narrative of the forty years in the wilderness, which is one of the more prominent stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. Not only is it the setting for most of the five books of Moses, it is even in the Hebrew name for one of those books. For the book of Numbers is called "B'midbar" in the original language, which means "In the Wilderness." Furthermore, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the later histories all hark back to the lessons learned from this time in these desert places. So let us consider what lessons there may be for us - what might be for us to experience a wilderness state of temptation. But to do this, let us back up and sketch out how the Israelites had gotten to this point.

For several hundred years they had been in Egypt, first as honored guests, but then, more recently as slaves. The Lord had liberated them then from bondage with signs and wonders, a series of eleven plagues, and the great culminating miracle by which they were led through the Red Sea, while Pharaoh's army was destroyed. The Lord then led them to Mt. Sinai, where, amidst thunder and lightening, smoke and flame, the Ten Commandments were delivered through Moses.

Soon after this, the Israelites were encamped in the wilderness near the southern boundaries of Canaan. They had left Egypt a vast multitude with no particular order to it. But by now, at the Lord's command they had been counted, and they had been set in order, both for their encampment around the tabernacle and for their journeyings through the wilderness.

They had thus been prepared by the Lord to take up their inheritance in the Promised Land. The Lord now told them that they should send twelve spies into the land, and make ready to conquer the land. The spies searched out the land for forty days. They returned bringing samples of the lush produce of the land. They brought pomegranates and figs. Carried on a staff between two of them, they brought an immense cluster of grapes. Truly, they reported, it is a land flowing with milk and honey. But their report did not end there. Despite the wonders of this new land, ten of the spies felt that they should not try to take the land. The people are powerful, they warned, the cities are strongly fortified, and compared with the giants who inhabit the land "we were in our own eyes as grasshoppers," they protested.

Two spies, Joshua and Caleb, tried to stem the tide of fear and cowardice that ran through the people, to encourage them that with the Lord's help they could cast out the mighty inhabitants of Canaan. But this was to no avail. The heart of the people failed them - they would not go up against the land.

As pictured in the story, the wrath of God then turned upon this disobedient people. A plague arose that smote the ten spies. The rest of the people, God warned, from twenty years old and upward would perish during forty years wandering in the wilderness. Only Joshua and Caleb would be spared.

We may puzzle over how the children of Israel failed to accept the encouragement of the Lord to conquer the land of Canaan. The Exodus and the events at Mount Sinai were no dim memories to the Israelites. They had only recently heard the Lord's commandments from the mountain. Why did their trust in the Lord's guidance and protection falter, why did they pay no heed to the words of Joshua and Caleb, who had recommended going ahead and taking the land. Hadn't they seen the Lord lead them out of Egypt with a mighty hand? Hadn't they witnessed miracles in the wilderness and the drama on Mount Sinai? How could they doubt the power of the Lord to accomplish all things that He had promised?

We may puzzle over the weakness of the children of Israel, but it may become more understandable when we consider our own weaknesses and vacillations. Even if we know well the stories of the Lord's power in the Word, and despite previous occasions on which we may have witnessed the Lord guiding our lives in ways we could never have imagined beforehand, nevertheless, we too can fail to trust the Lord to bear us up if we follow His bidding in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

What is the moral of this story? What does it mean to us? Is it just another in a long string of examples of how hard it is to trust in the Lord's power and how dire are the consequences of disobeying His will? To gain perspective on this, let us consider this question: How free were the children of Israel to obey the Lord and go up against the land?

At first this may seem like a strange question. Without doubt the Lord had showed them His mighty hand. Beyond question were the laws He had given for their guidance. The Lord had, as we have seen, ordered them and arranged them so that they could be an effective fighting force. Was not all the weight then on the side of straightway going up against the land? To see that there is a legitimate question here, let us parallels of the story of the Israelites with the spiritual journeys of our own lives

We all spend our childhood in Egypt, so to speak. We abide in the land of knowledge and drink into our minds much of the knowledge that is there. But we are as yet only slaves. We do not think for ourselves. We serve other people's ideas of what is right and how we should live. This is, of course, a necessary stage, but one that should be left behind.

When the Lord leads us out of the house of bondage, we have the opportunity to hear His voice for ourselves. We study the Word, we perceive the Lord's commandments in the way that the Israelites heard the voice of God from Sinai. As we reflect on and reason about what we learn from the Word, if we open ourselves to the Lord's guidance, He will begin to order our minds in the form heaven. Our spirits will become as the encampment of Israel, organized to serve the Lord and to fight off spiritual foes. Even as we begin our adult lives, then, we may have already, in a certain sense, all that we need to enter the promised land of heaven. We have sufficient knowledge to begin to lead the life that leads to heavens. Why then do people still need to undergo a life-long process of spiritual change to get there? Why didn't the Israelites, who had been prepared by the Lord, take the land of Canaan when they were still fresh out of Egypt?

The Israelites did at length conquer the land of Canaan. What was different then? What they had at that point, that they had not had before, was forty years of wandering in the wilderness. In the literal story, it sounds as though the years of wandering were simply a punishment from a vindictive God. But we know, of course, that God does not behave in this fashion. Everything He does or permits to be done is to help us, to further our spiritual growth.

We can shake our heads with regret that the Israelites did not obey the Lord and go up against the land of Canaan right after they first spied it out. We can regret that we ourselves have not followed the Lord right away, as soon as we have seen where He would lead us. But the fact is that we cannot be regenerated without temptation. All conjunction of good and truth takes place through temptation.

The Israelites had all the truth that they needed to go ahead and take the land. They had seen the Lord's power. They knew what he could do. But this is all a matter simply of the intellect. What we know and what we feel can be two different things. We all know that the Lord's way is the only way, but we are not truly convinced of it with every fiber of our being. This takes the joining together of what we know with what we feel, the conjunction of truth and good. And this can only happen through a series of tests and trials.

Even if temptation is often attended with the sense that we, from our own power have failed, this does not mean that we should not try. It is crucial to cultivate the youthful idealism represented by Joshua and Caleb, which will not only urge us onward at the beginning, but also will survive to lead the successes that will follow when, after "forty years," all the weaknesses and doubts have died off.

Forty years it took the Israelites to become prepared to face the challenges of Canaan. And it is a literal forty years, or even more, that it will take most of us to learn life's lessons to the point that we are really ready to follow the Lord.

But what are these lessons? The question of the real nature of temptations has not really been addressed head on. What do battles and floods and times of desolate wandering have in common? Temptations are characterized in the doctrines as “an assault upon some love.” It is easy to see how this is pictured in a war: the good side is wholesome love, the ideal, and the bad side is an enticement or inclination in opposition to that love. But what about a flood? In this case, our loves and hopes are inundated with cares and concerns, we feel overwhelmed and hopeless. Wandering in the wilderness? Now, although we have our dreams, our goals, our ideals, we nevertheless feel lost as how to pursue or achieve them. In the various scenarios the causes of our anxiety or spiritual grief are different. But what they have in common is the one only solution: trust in the Lord's power.

The forty years in the wilderness is often spoken of as years of wandering. But, of course, these years were not wasted and they were not truly wandering. Note the words of the text. It does not say “Remember how you wandered these forty years,” it says, “Remember how God led you.” The Lord did not forget the Israelites for forty years. He provided manna daily for their sustenance. He led them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. He brought them victory over the enemies that they faced during this time. They entered the wilderness an untested army. They left it a well organized battle array. In our years of seeming wandering, we too are led by the Lord at every turn.

Each experience, whether it seems positive or negative can become an opportunity to practice trusting in the Lord and not in ourselves. We must realize that the feeling of failure is a normal and often necessary part of the process. Does this let us off the hook? Even if the Lord does not hold us responsible in the long run, we will still, here in the world of time and space, have to suffer consequences, pain, and hardship, sometimes for failures beyond our strength to avoid. We must learn to use such occasions to make firm our resolve to try harder in the future, and to receive with gratitude the grace that the Lord grants us in keeping us from the things that we would shun. We can also try to learn to exercise patience with ourselves and with others.

If we let the wilderness years be years of ever increasing trust in the Lord and conviction about His power to save us, we too will find that when our time has come full term, we are ready to follow the Lord into the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey.

Amen.

Lessons for 20 August 2023

Deuteronomy 8:1 All the commandments which I command thee today you shall take heed to do, so that you may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which Jehovah promised to your fathers.

2 And thou shalt remember all of the way in which Jehovah thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, in order to afflict thee, and to tempt thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or not.

3 And He afflicted thee, and caused thee to hunger, and caused thee to eat the manna, which thou knewest not, and thy fathers knew not; so that He might make thee to know that man doth not live by bread alone, but on all that goes out of the mouth of Jehovah doth man live.

4 Thy raiment did not wear out upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years.

5 Thou shalt also know in thy heart, that as a man chastens his son, so Jehovah thy God chastens thee.

6 And thou shalt keep the commandments of Jehovah thy God, to walk in His ways, and to fear Him.

7 For Jehovah thy God brings thee to a good land, a land of brooks of waters, of founts and abysses that come forth in vales and in mountains;

8 a land of wheat, and barley, and vine, and fig, and pomegranate; a land of the olive of oil, and of honey;

9 a land where with no scarcity thou shalt eat bread in her; thou shalt not have want of any thing in her; a land whose stones are iron, and from her mountains thou mayest hew out copper.

10 When thou hast eaten and art satisfied, then thou shalt bless Jehovah thy God for the good land which He has given thee.

Luke 4:1 And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,

2 being forty days tempted by the Devil; and He did eat nothing in those days; and when they were ended, He afterwards hungered.

3 And the Devil said to Him, If Thou be the Son of God, say to this stone that it become bread.

4 And Jesus answered him saying, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every saying of God.

5 And the Devil, leading Him up into a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.

6 And the Devil said to Him, All this authority I will to give Thee, and the glory of them, for it is delivered up to me, and to whomever I will, I give it.

7 If therefore Thou wilt worship before me, all shall be Thine.

8 And Jesus answering said to him, Get thee behind Me, Satan, for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.

9 And he led Him to^o Jerusalem, and stood Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, If Thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down from hence:

10 for it is written, He shall command His angels concerning Thee, to guard Thee;

11 and in their hands they shall take Thee up, lest Thou dash Thy foot against a stone.

12 And Jesus answering said to him, It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.

13 And when the Devil had ended all the temptation, he stood back from Him until a time.

14 And Jesus returned in the power of the spirit into Galilee; and the fame concerning Him went out into the whole countryside.

Apocalypse Explained 730:31. *And the woman fled into the wilderness....* “Wilderness” signifies the state of those who are in temptations, because in them truths and goods are shut in by the falsities and evils that come forth and are presented to the mind.

This can be seen from the wandering of the sons of Israel in the wilderness forty years; for this represented every state of temptations into which those come who are being regenerated, and of whom the church is to consist.

Every one is born natural, and lives naturally until becoming rational; and when this has happened, one can be led by the Lord and become spiritual; and this is effected by the implanting of the knowledges of truth from the Word, and at the same time by the opening of the spiritual mind which receives the things of heaven, and by calling forth these knowledges and elevating them out of the natural and conjoining them with the spiritual affection of truth.

This opening and conjunction is possible only through temptations, because in temptations one fights interiorly against the falsities and evils that are in the natural. In a word, one is introduced into the church and becomes a church through temptations. This was represented by the wandering and leading about of the sons of Israel in the wilderness.