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The Story: The Bible as One Continuing Story of God and His People
Wandering
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INTRODUCTION

I am really enjoying this book that we are reading. I love the Bible, but as someone who really likes bullet points, *The Story* is great for capturing God's heart and the significant events in the lives of the Israelites.

I read the chapter on wandering a couple of times through and several things leaped out at me. The Israelites have begun a time in the wilderness with God and through a choice that they make, their time of wandering ends up being a lot longer than they expect. Now, we have all had "wilderness" experiences in our lives. If you were here a couple of weeks ago when I shared my testimony, I have had several of those times in my own life. Depending on our personality type, it can be a bit uncomfortable.

Do you all know Joyce Meyer? She's an evangelist and author and I was watching her television program a few years ago when I was in the wilderness and I remember hearing her say, "Until you can learn to be happy in the wilderness, you're never going to get out of it." I think what she was trying to say was that being in the wilderness can be a time for God to teach and train us; it is an opportune time for us to focus on God as He is working in us. But if we are only consumed with getting OUT of the wilderness, we are not able to see what God might be doing or trying to teach us. Being in the wilderness requires that God's people have teachable spirits.

Overall, this chapter on wandering shows God's strong desire to love and invest in His people. He is not a lazy or negligent parent. He made it clear to Abraham and Moses that the Hebrew people were His chosen people! Like any good parent, He desires to grow His children into strong, thriving, loving, and humble people. I heard Chip Ingram say in a sermon once, "God's #1 goal is not that you're a happy camper all the time. His #1 goal is to make you in the image of His Son." It is clear that God used this time in the wilderness journey to invest in His people and reveal Himself and His expectations of them.

So three things leaped out at me in this chapter. The first thing I noticed is that fidelity is very important to God. *He* wants to be the Hebrews one and only, just like He wants *them* to be His one and only. He desires to be *their* all in all just as He wants them to be *His* all in all. He made it crystal clear to Moses that He would be with them in their journey out of Egypt. He revealed His glory and His incredible power in all of the many plagues that He sent into the Egyptians. God is really trying to show these people that He is sovereign, capable, devoted, loving, and powerful. He is deserving of their devotion and fidelity. Like any responsible parent, He cares more about their character

than their comfort. So that character-building process is difficult for the Israelites, just as it can be for us, but well worth it in the end.

The second thing I noticed was that God always provided for the Hebrews. He provided a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He gave them the ability to travel around the clock. Can you imagine how dramatic that would have looked to the surrounding nations? Seeing these gigantic pillars going before thousands of people?

God provided water and food for them as well. So even though the selection may have shrunk, compared to what they ate in Egypt, they are still getting the sustenance that they need.

The third thing I noticed was the amount of complaining that went on during this time in the wilderness. So being in the wilderness is one thing, but complaining about it is something else. From God's perspective, it must seem like a slap in the face or a sign of mistrust, especially after all He had done for them to get them out of slavery.

So, let's examine each of these three things:

- Fidelity
- Provision
- Complaining

Let's start with complaining.

COMPLAINING

Now, God had prepared the Israelites for their journey while they were still in Egypt. He knew what was before them, and as we learned last week, He had very clearly laid out His expectations about their relationship to Him and their behavior toward each other through the Ten Commandments. The vertical and horizontal relationships.

Now, this chapter on wandering says that the Israelites were slow learners. With regard to complaining, they really didn't seem to waste any time in looking back at their "advantages" in Egypt. You would think that they were "foodies" or gourmets since they talked about all of the food they missed eating – all the cucumbers, melons, and leeks.

But, let's step back for a moment. I don't know about you, but when I read these stories in the Bible, I try to imagine what it would be like to be the Israelites. I try to put myself in their shoes. I think about the oppression that they must have felt in Egypt, being told that they had to seek their own straw to make the bricks for Pharaoh.

Then I think of their dramatic exit where they are alone in the desert with ONLY God. I try to imagine them weighing the difference between good food and a routine life in the midst of CAPTIVITY and OPPRESSION versus water, manna, quail, FREEDOM, and being alone with God. For me, that would seem like a WONDERFUL tradeoff. The

good of their freedom certainly outweighed the "bad" of fewer food choices. But I also wonder if one of the reasons that God found their complaining frustrating was because He was capable of giving them SO MUCH MORE than they asked. He knew they needed sustenance. He created their bodies to require water and food. I can imagine Him saying, "I am the Creator of the universe. I brought you out of slavery. You saw what I did to the Egyptians. Don't you want more? Is water the only thing you think I can provide?"

I remember in a sermon once, John Ortberg said, "We pray thimble-size prayers when we should be praying bucket-size prayers." I think one of the things that God would have loved to hear the Israelites to say is, "We are so grateful that you brought us out of Egypt, we love that you chose us, and we know you must have big things in store for us. We want whatever that is. Have Your way with us." Yet they have a bit of a "bare minimum" mindset.

I wanted to share a story that illustrates that sort of outlook.

Several years ago when my mother was about 60, I visited her for Christmas. Now, she had grown up in the Depression in a fairly large family and always wore hand-me-downs. She was very used to not having anything new or wearing what she liked. Anyway, she had said that she wanted some walking shoes as a Christmas gift. I had bought her a pair that was similar to the ones that I had.

Before Christmas, during the course of a conversation, she revealed that the only kind she DIDN'T want was the exact kind that I had purchased for her. Come Christmas morning, she opened the shoes and the look of disappointment was very evident. But, I said, "I know you hate them, but we can exchange them for something you like." Her response was, "That's okay, I'll keep them. I'm used to not having things I like." I felt so sorry for her that she was still trapped in that mindset of poverty.

That way of thinking is very much like the Israelites. God is capable of giving us extravagant gifts and yet we settle for "good enough."

When I read about the complaining of the Israelites, God gave them what they asked for (or complained about), but I think what bothered Him even more than the complaining was the fact that He wanted them to want more. He wanted them to ask for something more than the bare minimum so He could reveal His GLORY and benevolence in bigger ways. His provision is limitless.

So, let's talk about the provision that He did offer.

PROVISION

After a time of wandering, the Israelites have finally arrived at the door of the Promised Land. I can't imagine how exciting that must have felt – to be home! To arrive in a land hand-picked by God, that is "move-in ready." The crops are already planted, the houses

are already built, the trees are already producing fruit, and the cities are already fortified. What happens next is my favorite story in the whole Bible. It's called the Spy Story from Numbers 13. This isn't the spy story with Rahab. That happens 40 years later. This is the original Spy Story.

So they finally arrive and God directed Moses to send out 12 spies into the land. God wanted them to see exactly what He had given to them: the topography, the bounty, the buildings, and the people. Everything. These 12 spies are gone for several weeks. So after 40 days, they finally return to present their report. Not only that, but they have brought back grapes as Moses had instructed them to do. The grapes are so heavy, they have to lug them on a pole between two of the men.

So all the Israelites are gathered to hear the report and ten of the spies are scared of what they have discovered. They saw "giants" in the land and they are frightened because they feel so small in comparison. But, they are forgetting the immensity of their God. Only two of the spies – Caleb and Joshua have complete faith and trust in God. The other ten spies are looking at their circumstances, but Caleb and Joshua are looking at God.

In Numbers 13:30, Caleb said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it." Now, if we look back in Exodus 23:28, God had promised to send a pestilence on the inhabitants of the land. He had said that *He* was going to take care of driving out the inhabitants. In Exodus and Leviticus, He tells them EIGHT times that He is going to drive out the people of Canaan. He was going to do all the "hard work." The Israelites just needed to trust Him.

Now, this is similar to what Kim mentioned last week about the stone tablets. The first time, GOD wrote the 10 commandments, but when they were broken, Moses wrote the second set. I see a parallel with the Spy Story. God had told Moses before they had even left Egypt that He was going to do all the "heavy lifting."

In Exodus 23, God had told Moses, "...I will send a pestilence in front of you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you." But because the Israelites rejected His gift of the Promised Land, they not only had to wander for another 40 years, due to their infidelity and lack of faith, THEY would have to clear the land themselves. This tells me that God longs to bless us, but when we refuse or reject His gifts, it can be harder for us in the long run. The first opportunity, He says, "I'll do it." But if He has to offer it again, He says, "You do it." That is a BIG difference.

Todd Misfeldt shared something with me that he had written in one of his seminary papers that I absolutely loved. The Talmud is the collected wisdom of the rabbis of the first five centuries. He said that in the Talmud, it is written, 'In the world to come, each of us will be called to account for all the good things God put on earth which we refused to enjoy.' (Ecclesiastes 9:1-12)

The land that God had chosen for the Israelites is a land flowing with milk and honey. This term means that the land is particularly fertile. God does not give inferior gifts, but He desires our fidelity and faith in Him.

FIDELITY

So, finally, let's talk about fidelity. God had reminded His people over and over of His covenant with Abraham. Fidelity is very important to God and He is incapable of infidelity. In this chapter on wandering, He was so frustrated with the Israelites for refusing His gift of the Promised Land, that He told the Israelites that they would wander in the desert for 40 years due to their infidelity – one year for each day that the spies were in the land, viewing what was to be their home.

With regard to God's desire for fidelity, I think sometimes that we need to look at the more challenging things that come our way. Clearly being uprooted from familiarity in Egypt was going to be strange and certainly a time of testing for the Israelites. Even though they were no longer being oppressed, they still had some unforeseen challenges ahead of them.

I was taught that it is GOOD to accept challenges or do tough things that may be asked of me because it builds character. It is good for us to attempt things that we may even feel unqualified to do because it builds us up. That has stuck with me to this day. So, whenever I am asked to do something that is unfamiliar to me, I try to accept the challenge because I believe that God will be with us, He will guide us, and we will grow in faith and character when we see what He has accomplished through us and let Him have His way with us – just like He wanted to do for the Israelites.

Look how He grew up Moses in the many years that they partnered. Moses went from a hand-wringer who didn't think he could do anything to this giant of a man who led hundreds of thousands of people for decades. Humans consistently fail when we overthink things and rely on our own strength. But, when we accept God's call to fidelity, the benefits and rewards can be AMAZING.

In this chapter, it really stood out that God blessed Caleb and Joshua for their faithfulness and trust in Him. They were the only two out of the entire first generation of Israelites who would ultimately be allowed to enter the Promised Land. God richly blessed their fidelity.

Perhaps there have been times for you when you recall being asked to serve and have made yourself available. You have seen how God used you to make a difference and you've seen the blessings of obedience. A friend of mine once said that he was concerned that if he said "no" to God, God would give away his assignment to someone else. He said that if God had picked him as the perfect person for a particular mission, just like He did with Moses, he said he would be mortified if he refused.

One final thought that I wanted to offer about God's goodness. Even though He was justifiably angry and frustrated with the Israelites, He didn't say, "Go wander around for another 40 years and then come back and we'll talk." He went *with* them. He went with them and as Deuteronomy 8:4 says, "The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell..."

He is extraordinarily gracious.

One of my favorite expressions is, "It's not the end of the world." So, when you find yourself in the wilderness or perhaps you are there now, I hope you don't feel like it's the end of the world – that things are not going to change. Everything is subject to change, except God. Remember that the wilderness can be a time of extraordinary growth and character development. Look to God and ask Him how He wants you to respond to this experience, knowing that He will answer.

Remember how He has provided even when circumstances seemed uncertain. Radically step out in faith! God longs for our fidelity and faith. He is so good. He is plotting and scheming to bless us.