

Self-imposed Wilderness

Deuteronomy 1

In the early books of the Bible the wilderness was a necessary place of transition. The children of Israel needed time in the wilderness to disengage from life in Egypt and to prepare for life in the Promised Land. They needed time in the wilderness to learn that God was with them and for them. They needed time in the wilderness to cultivate faith in God and love for God. The wilderness wasn't easy, but it was necessary. At the same time, they didn't need to be in the wilderness for forty years. As we'll see in Deuteronomy 1, the last 38 years were a type of self-imposed wilderness. They really only needed two years in the wilderness.

Many of us here today find ourselves in some type of wilderness transition: we're not where we were, but we're not where we want to be (or need to be). Your wilderness could be any number of things:

- * Your health - you got a diagnosis that means things will never be the same
- * Your career - a college student trying to discern what God wants you to do after you're finished with school; or perhaps you're already into your career and you're sensing that God has something different for you
- * Your marital status - you're single and you wish you were married; you're married and you wish you were single; as a result you're disoriented and confused.
- * Your gifting and calling as a believer - you have a sense that God is calling you to serve Him in new ways; there's cost and risk involved
- * Your obedience - you're finally at the place where you're ready to let God deal with some area of disobedience or an addiction.

As with the children of Israel, the wilderness is necessary. Some things can only be learned in the wilderness. We want to pay attention to God so that we don't miss a thing He's trying to teach us. At the same time, we don't want to stay in the wilderness longer than necessary. Specifically, we don't need to stay in the wilderness because of our unbelief.

The book of Deuteronomy has been called "a book on the boundary." The people stood on the boundary between the wilderness and the Promised Land. They stood on the boundary of the past and the future. They stood on the boundary of past disobedience and future obedience. They needed to become a people who accurately represented God to the nations. Entering the promised Land was part of their mission of blessing all the families of the earth (Genesis 12) and being a light to the nations.

In Deuteronomy 1 Moses reminds the people of their disobedience and unbelief in the wilderness. He wasn't interested in condemning them or beating them over the head with their "past." But he did want them to understand very clearly that they spent an extra 38 years in the wilderness unnecessarily. Last week we saw in 1 Corinthians 10 that the children of Israel serve as an example and a warning to those of us living in the age of fulfillment (in the new covenant). Today we want to be warned by their self-imposed wilderness.

The first five verses set the context of the book of Deuteronomy. There we learn at least three important things. First, the multitude is standing to the east of the Promised Land, across the Jordan River, on the plains of Moab. This means that geographically, they were in sight of the Land that God had promised to give them. Second, we learn that it had been almost forty years since they had left Egypt.

Third, we read in verse 5 that Moses set out explain (or “expound” NASB) this law. The book of Deuteronomy isn’t really a “second law” as much as it is an explanation of the law already given at Mt. Sinai. Moses wanted to make very clear what God expected of the people. We will see an emphasis in Deuteronomy in obeying **all** that the Lord commanded; thirty times Moses tells them to obey “all the commandments” (see 6:2, 8:1, 12:28, etc.).

Beginning in verse 6 Moses recounts what God had taught them during the past forty years. He focuses on the fact that two years after being rescued from slavery in Egypt God commanded them to “go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to them and their descendants after them.” Beginning in verse 19 Moses recounts how the people refused to obey this command to possess the land, explaining the resulting consequences.

19 “Then we set out from Horeb and went through all that great and terrifying wilderness that you saw, on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, as the Lord our God commanded us. And we came to Kadesh-barnea.

After traveling over a hundred miles through a waterless, desolate wilderness, they came to Kadesh-barnea. This would become their base camp from which they would launch an attack on the Promised Land.

20 And I said to you, ‘You have come to the hill country of the Amorites, which the Lord our God is giving us. 21 See, the Lord your God has set the land before you. Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has told you. Do not fear or be dismayed.’

The command, “do not fear or be dismayed” was an appropriate command because taking possession of the Land meant going to war - which was and is a fear-inducing endeavor! God’s command to conquer cities and kill all its inhabitants sometimes offends our sensibilities and sometimes is a stumbling block to people considering the claims of Christ and of the Bible. We’ll wait until we get to chapter 7 to discuss the issue. Today’s passage acknowledges that taking possession of the Land was no trivial matter; it would involve great courage and great faith in God. God would give them the Land (v. 20) **as** they fought its inhabitants and “took possession” (v. 21).

In verses 22 through 25 we see that the people pleaded with Moses to send spies into the land before they obeyed God’s command.

22 Then all of you came near me and said, 'Let us send men before us, that they may explore the land for us and bring us word again of the way by which we must go up and the cities into which we shall come.'

By sending a scout team to "explore the land," they would know the best line of attack and the type of opposition that awaited them in each city.

23 The thing seemed good to me, and I took twelve men from you, one man from each tribe. 24 And they turned and went up into the hill country, and came to the Valley of Eshcol and spied it out. 25 And they took in their hands some of the fruit of the land and brought it down to us, and brought us word again and said, 'It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us.'

In contrast with "that great and terrifying wilderness" (verse 19) through which they had just traveled, the Land was lush and fruitful. So far so good, but we will soon learn that this was only half of the report. Notice the reaction of the children of Israel.

26 "Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. 27 And you murmured in your tents and said, 'Because the Lord hated us he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us. 28 Where are we going up? Our brothers have made our hearts melt, saying, "The people are greater and taller than we. The cities are great and fortified up to heaven. And besides, we have seen the sons of the Anakim there."' "

Their hearts melted when they heard that the Anakim lived in the land. The Anakim are generally thought to be a giant race of people, possibly those that produced Goliath generations later. Plus, their cities were "great and fortified up to heaven." It's understandably why they were afraid. But God had commanded them, "Go up and take possession" of the land. He expected them to believe that He would be faithful to give them the land as He had promised.

Instead of believing God, they accused Him of hating them and wanting to see them destroyed. Imagine how God felt when He heard them speaking about Him this way.

27 And you murmured in your tents and said, 'Because the Lord hated us he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us.'

They completely misinterpreted God's actions and God's motives. They looked at their circumstances and concluded, "Since the future is frightening and will require more courage than we think we have, God doesn't love us. God hates us and wants to destroy us." They were quick to think the worst about God.

The exact opposite was true: He brought them out of Egypt because He loved them and wanted them to experience life - abundance of life in the Promised Land. Repeatedly God revealed that He had set His love on them and would keep His promise to give them the Land and make them a blessing to all the families on the earth.

They spent an additional 38 years in the wilderness because they believed a foundational lie about God. Because they believed that He hated them and wanted to destroy them they couldn't fulfill their mission; they wouldn't represent God to the nations if they didn't love or trust Him. The NT makes clear (1 John) that if you don't accept the love of God you can't love others well: we love because God first loved us.

Let's notice one more detail in verse 27 before we move on. Moses pointed out that they murmured/grumbled ***"in their tents"*** - where they said what they really believed, where their children were listening, where their faithlessness could go unchallenged. They also grumbled publicly, but the core sin was grumbling in their tents. This, of course, is the opposite of what they should have done. In chapter 6 Moses will explain that the home is the place where they should speak truth and should rehearse their faith with their children - when they get up and when they go to bed, when they sit at the table and when they walk around.

You and I should be warned by their example. It matters what we say in the privacy of our own homes - about God, about each other, about everything. We tend to think that what we say in private is of no consequence; we think that as long as we don't slander people to their face we can say whatever we want. But a theme throughout Deuteronomy is that we should love God all the time and with every part of our being. If you are in the habit of murmuring/grumbling in your tent, I would encourage you to have a family conversation and purpose to speak differently. God cares what we say in public and in private. I've been convicted lately about what I say about others - even if only in my mind. God wants (and deserves) all of me. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord" (Psalm 19:14).

After confronting the lie that the people believed about God, Moses tried to convince the people to trust God and believe that He is good.

29 Then I said to you, 'Do not be in dread or afraid of them. 30 The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, 31 and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place.'

God wanted them to know that He would go before them and would fight for them - just like He did in Egypt. God will do for them in the future what He had done for them in the past. He hadn't brought them into the wilderness to destroy them; that was a lie. The truth was that the Lord their God had "carried" them through the wilderness "as a man carries his son." God had been a good Father.

After hearing this the people were given the chance to believe. If they had admitted that they had believed a lie about God, He would have forgiven them and they could then "go up and possess the land." With God it was definitely not "one strike and you're out." Sadly and tragically, we read this in verses 32-33:

32 Yet in spite of this word you did not believe the Lord your God, 33 who went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night and in the cloud by day, to show you by what way you should go.

Since they didn't believe the truth about God, they could not fulfill their mission as a light to the nations, as a holy people, as a blessing to all the families on the earth. They wouldn't "go up and possess the land," and even if they did they weren't a people who would or could be a showcase of God's glory.

34 "And the Lord heard your words and was angered, and he swore, 35 'Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers, 36 except Caleb the son of Jephunneh. He shall see it, and to him and to his children I will give the land on which he has trodden, because he has wholly followed the Lord!'

Because of their unbelief they were labeled "this evil generation." Moses was speaking to the next generation (the children of the evil generation) in the book of Deuteronomy.

If you read the rest of the chapter you will see that God promised that their children (the generation being addressed in Deuteronomy) would possess the land instead of dying in the wilderness. God would prove His faithfulness.

This morning we need to take to heart the warning of Deuteronomy 1 so that we don't spend time unnecessarily in wilderness (months and years and decades). In light of the negative example we've seen in this passage, let me challenge you to do two things.

First, ***identify any lies you believe about God***. This is a big topic, and you might need help with this. Generally speaking, we are blind to the lies we believe about God and so we need the help of friends and counselors that we trust. The children of Israel believed the lie that God hated them and wanted to see them destroyed. Consequently, they forfeited their usefulness to God and consequently spent 38 more years in the wilderness than necessary. They couldn't represent Him in the Land if they didn't believe He was for them and that He would fight their battles.

I think it's pretty common for us to believe this same lie (and its subtle variations) in our day. Consider whether or not you believe any of these common lies:

- * "If God loved me He wouldn't have allowed this to happen." Like the children of Israel, we sometimes confuse God and our circumstances.
- * "I'm beyond the reach of God's grace and forgiveness. What I've done is too sinful. I've sinned too often." We think that the parable of the prodigal son is for others but not us.
- * "God doesn't care about my 'small sins'; they're no big deal." We conveniently ignore certain commands, forgetting that the Great Commission involves "teaching them to obey everything I've commanded."
- * "I'm all alone. I have to solve my problems and fight my battles by myself." We don't believe Jesus' teaching about being "with us" and being "for us."

Once we identify any lies that we have believed about God, we are standing right where the children of Israel were standing after verse 31 when Moses confronted them about their lie. We can repent and believe the truth about God.

Second, ***believe the gospel*** (the good news about Jesus). The children of Israel needed to believe the good news they had been told about the God: He loved them with a fierce love. He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt so that He could give them a land flowing with milk and honey. He would fight their battles. Moses told them these truths very directly calling them to believe.

I would bring us this very same challenge: believe the good news about Jesus. Some of you may be on the boundary of believing in Jesus for the very first time. Perhaps a friend or family member brought you to church. Maybe you've been searching for meaning and purpose and life. I have good news for you this morning: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." Don't believe the lie that you're too far gone or beyond the reach of God. If you read the gospels, you will see that Jesus made a beeline for people who were dripping with shame and guilt. Jesus touched them and healed them and forgave them. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

If you are already a believer in Jesus, you need to keep believing the gospel, the good news that God loves you (He proved that by sending His Son to die for you) and that He will fight your battles. Paul Tripp made the observation that ". . . no one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one else talks to you more" (Dangerous Calling, p. 99). We need to pay attention to the conversation we have with ourselves all day (and sometimes all night) long. Are we telling ourselves the truth or lies - especially about God?

If asked we would say, "I believe Jesus died for my sin and rose again on the third day. He gives me eternal life and everything I need to please God." But in practice we have "gospel amnesia" - forgetting that God really is for us and with us in the specific circumstances of our lives. We might even tell ourselves, "God doesn't love me; He is out to destroy me."

The solution is to preach the gospel to ourselves. Say to yourself what you would tell a friend who needs life: "The death and resurrection of Jesus prove that God is compassionate beyond measure and that He is for you. Since He didn't spare His only Son, He will surely with Him freely give you everything you need to please Him. God has given you His very Spirit to refine you and guide you and empower you. You are not alone. Jesus promised, 'I will be with you always.'"

This affects our ability to fulfill our mission as much as anything. If we don't preach the gospel to ourselves, we probably won't preach it to others. If we do preach the gospel to ourselves we'll be able to tell others about Jesus in a very natural and compelling way.