

Wilderness Wanderings

Introduction:

When many people read the stories found in the book of Exodus they wonder what it could possibly have to do with anything that they might be facing. When I read it I see that it is full of lessons that we need to apply to our lives. In fact, as Romans 15:4 says, *“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.”*

The Setting

It's necessary here to give a brief history of the nation of Israel. Most of us, because of the movies that have been made about it, are familiar with the fact that Israel spent time as slaves in Egypt. But many are unaware of what lead to that point; and I think it's necessary to understand.

In the book of Genesis the 12th chapter we are introduced to a man by the name of Abram. Abram was a good man whom God chose as His instrument to build a nation that would be a witness to the world. He promised Abram that from him would come a people that were too numerous to count, and God changed Abram's name to Abraham and made a covenant with him - a promise that He would make it all happen.

Abraham and his wife Sarah miraculously had a son in their old age named Isaac. Isaac had a son named Jacob and his name was changed to Israel. Israel had twelve sons, one of whom was Joseph. Joseph was unpopular with his brothers, so much so that they actually sold him to some slave traders who took him to Egypt while they told their father that Joseph had died.

But in Egypt, God blessed Joseph. He brought him through difficult times as a slave and as a prisoner and eventually Joseph became a governor in Egypt. The entire area including the land of Canaan, where Joseph's father and brothers lived, suffered through a drought, and the only food available was in Egypt. So Joseph's brothers came in search of food - and found Joseph. The family was reconciled and Joseph moved his father and

brothers and their wives and children to Egypt where they were given land and prospered. That was about 1850 B.C.

Over the centuries God blessed this new nation of Israel in Egypt and they multiplied. They began to be so numerous that it made one of the Pharaoh's nervous, and the Jewish nation was forced into slavery. This nation about whom God had made promises was suffering in slavery in a land far from the land of promise. Now - fast-forward to about 1440 B.C. This is the scene which most people are familiar with.

God had raised up Moses to deliver His people from slavery. There had been a series of plagues that had been sent against the Egyptians to convince Egypt to free the nation of Israel. The water was turned into blood, there was a plague of frogs; a plague of gnats; a plague of flies; a plague on the livestock; a plague of boils; a plague of hail; a plague of locusts; and a plague of darkness. Through all of these, the Pharaoh had remained firm in his resolve to not allow the Jews their freedom. Finally, the firstborn of every Egyptian home died; and Pharaoh had had enough and ordered them out of the country.

Estimates are that 2 million Jewish men, plus their wives and children and livestock assembled together for the journey from Egypt to Canaan.

The Israelites

They were a tired people; a people who had spent their entire lives in slavery, as had their parents, and their parents before them. They were used to having people tell them what to do and when to do it. They were beaten when they disobeyed; their lives meant nothing to their Egyptian captors. Now they were free.

They were free but just what kind of people were they? How do you react when you are a slave, the child of a slave who was a child of a slave and you have just been given your freedom? What do you do? What are the thoughts that go through your mind?

We can get an idea from a more contemporary example. During the waning days of the U.S. Civil War in the 1860's, General Sherman was fighting his way across the state of Georgia, burning cities and liberating all of the slaves along the way. Did these newly freed people go and find themselves some land and begin to build a life for themselves? Not initially. Their overwhelming response was first relief, and then fear. The question for them was, what do we do now?

So they gathered all of their belongings and simply trailed along behind General Sherman's army as he first traveled South and then North. It must have been quite a sight to see. First you'd have the cavalry, scouting territory ahead for enemy troops, then you'd have the infantry, walking by column, then you'd have the supply wagons, then you'd have this huge mass of humanity trailing along behind because they were terrified of what would happen to them if they were left to fend for themselves without the protection of their liberators. It would take some time for these slaves to learn how to function as free men and women. The same could be said for the nation of Israel.

As they left Egypt, it was with a sense of relief, but there was also fear hovering just beneath the surface. God would very quickly undertake to break their bad habit of looking over their shoulder in fear. He would do so by leading them into direct conflict with their greatest fear.

Exodus 13:20 tells us that the Jews left Egypt and camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. He lead them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. It was very clear to them what they ought to do. Just like the slaves in the Civil War, who traveled when the army traveled and camped when the army camped, the Jews moved when the cloud moved and stopped when it stopped. However, in chapter 14:2 God tells Moses to do something that doesn't seem to make sense. He says to "*Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea.*"

If you look at a map you'll note that he was basically telling them to turn around and go almost all the way back to Egypt. Not only that, but the place that He told them to stop was really a dead end. They had the sea on the north. To the West lay Raamses and Goshen, the land from which they'd

just come; and to the South lay the Egyptian desert. They were boxed in, and God had led them there. They were right where God wanted them.

In Exodus 14:3-4 we see that God's plan was to deceive the Egyptian Pharaoh into thinking that they were wandering aimlessly in the desert so that he would change his mind and come after him. God's design was to demonstrate to the Egyptians that He alone was God.

Sure enough, we find that Pharaoh heard that the Jews had backed themselves into a corner and he gave chase. He gathered his armies; his chariots and his horsemen and took off in pursuit of the Jews. Verse 10 says: *“As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert.’”*

How do you act when you're in a predicament? What do you do when the pressure gets turned up? And there are times in all of our lives when that does happen. These people responded in typical fashion, they started pointing fingers. The obvious culprit was Moses; he's the one who talked them into this in the first place; he's the leader. What did he think he was doing leading them out into the desert to die? What kind of stupid plan was this?

Moses response is remarkably calm considering the circumstances, but remember, he hadn't spent most of his life doing back-breaking labor under the threat of a whip if he disobeyed. He didn't have his self-esteem destroyed by having to bow to men who called themselves his masters. Moses had been prepared for leadership by God Himself over a period of years. He knew God in a way that the people didn't. So notice how he responds in verse 13. *“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”*

We should note that God hadn't spoken to Moses yet; this was Moses speaking to his people from what he already knew about God. What did he tell them?

1. Do not fear.

This is a remarkable statement in light of the circumstances. They are camped basically at the end of a dead-end street. They have an army behind them and the Red Sea in front of them, and Moses tells them not to fear. But he says that because he knows God and has seen Him work miracles. Moses also knows that fear is a paralyzing force.

Edmund Burke wrote: *"No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear."*

These Jews were free people, but in their minds they were still slaves. That's what fear can do. Bill Hybels wrote that, *"The truth is, if we let the fear of pain or failure keep us in our comfort zone, we will continually dwell in the land of the familiar - the whining humdrum of predictable days and months and years. But if we are willing to move through our fear, God has promised us that we will live in the realm of the supernatural - the daily and unpredictable adventure of a Spirit-led life, filled with miraculous leadings and experiences we could never have imagined."*

Moses knew that, for his people to become the people that God intended for them to be, they first had to conquer their fear.

2. Stand still.

Stand still. Is there a more foreign concept to us today than those two words? There was no command to grab whatever weapons you can find or to start building barricades or to make sure that the women and children are put in a safe place. The command was for them to do nothing.

The point of this was to take the focus off of them and to place it squarely on God. We've seen clearly that God had lead them to this place. For some reason He wanted them here and here they were. God was responsible for them. He had already told Moses what He was going to do, now Moses was teaching to people to rely upon God.

3. Watch God come through.

Moses told them to watch God destroy their enemies before their eyes. This nation that had held them and their ancestors in chains was about to find out what happens when you stand against God. The humorous part of this is that what Moses was telling them to do was all they could do anyway. It's not like they had any choice.

They were in one of those places that many of us have found ourselves in at different points in our lives. There are different terms for it. We call it "*between a rock and a hard place*", or "*up a creek without a paddle*." You may be "*in a jam*" or "*in a pickle*" or "*in a catch 22*" or simply "*cornered*." The bottom line is that you're helpless to do anything to help yourself. In many of those times it is God Himself who has lead us there, and He's lead us there for the expressed purpose of showing us that He is able to get us out. It's lesson time. So Moses says to watch God come through.

4. Keep Silent

The final thing Moses tells them is to be quiet. For some people this is the hardest part of the whole ordeal. Some people live to gripe. We just have to tell everybody about the predicament that we're in and who's responsible for us being there. We have to give our perspective on what happened and how it could be avoided and what we would have done if we were the ones in charge. And on and on and on...

But Moses tells them to keep silent. Learn this lesson. There are times in our lives when God is simply waiting for us to look to Him and keep silent. This was a huge lesson for this nation. They were not used to having God fight their battles for them; they were used to submitting themselves to a beating and yielding themselves to brute force. Things were to change for them forever today. Some of you need to learn this truth - God can be trusted.

As they stood there God spoke to Moses and said, "*let's get this show on the road*." He told him to get the people ready to travel and to hold his rod over the waters so they would divide. Then the angel of God moved between the people of Israel and the Egyptian army, as did the cloud. On the Jews side the cloud gave light so they could see; on the Egyptians side it was dark. God's presence kept the enemy at bay. All night long the east wind blew and dried up the sea bottom as the waters formed a wall on either side. The Israelites crossed on dry land. As

the Egyptian army followed afterwards, God threw them into confusion and the wheels of the chariots wouldn't run straight and fell off and they were getting in each other's way. Then God commanded Moses to again stretch his hand out over the sea, and the waters returned to their place and wiped out the entire army.

Verse 31 states that *"when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in Him and in Moses His servant."*

Lessons Learned:

I. It takes tough times to break tough habits.

God loves you the way that you are, but don't deceive yourself into thinking that He's happy to leave you that way. There's so much potential in you, and God is bound and determined that He is going to see it released. He wants to use you. All of us resist change, but God's desire for your life is for you to be all that He has made you to be. For that reason, He'll allow you to end up in places where all of your crutches have been broken and your self-reliance becomes unreliable. Then He says *"don't be afraid, stand still, watch Me come through, and be quiet."*

*PS 46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."*

II. When you're cornered, the only place to look is up.

This point really speaks to our independence. Many of us have a tendency to solve all of our problems by ourselves. We don't need or want anybody else. Let me say this clearly. That's a lie. God did not make you to be independent. He made you to exist in an interdependent community and He made you to rely upon Him.

We think we're so tough but we forget that everything we have, we have because He allowed us to have it. Are you healthy, thank God? Are you talented or gifted, thank God? If we don't understand that all that we have are gifts from His hand we will have a large problem with pride. And if you have a large problem with pride, you'll have a large problem with God.

III. If the Lord is to get the glory, He must do the fighting.

This was a lesson learned throughout the history of the Jewish nation, and it's still being learned today. God uses the weak things and the small things of the world to humble the strong and the mighty things so that people will recognize that it had to be God. We must learn the discipline of surrendering our battles to God.

In Romans 12:19 we read, "*Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.*"

IV. We go through the wilderness to learn to trust.