

“Trusting God”

(Exodus 16:1-12 & Numbers 20:1-13)

“Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.
(Exodus 40:36-38)

Wilderness Whining

A “study confirms that whining is the worst sound in the world”

“If the sound of a child whining makes you want to claw out your own eardrums, don’t worry: Science backs you up. A new study shows whining is, in fact, the most annoying sound to adults—even worse than a baby crying, a high-pitched table saw, and exaggerated baby talk. Participants performed simple subtraction problems while listening to the above sounds, as well as regular speech and silence, and made more mistakes per problem when being subjected to whines.¹

Well, whining may be annoying, but it sure is prevalent.

We learn to whine at a young age: Mooommmmy! Daaaddy! But, I don’t want to...!

But lest you think that it is only children who whine, please think again. For example, how often do you see this expression from an athlete directed toward a referee? “Where’s the foul!?”

Furthermore, whining can even sneak into each of our own lives...I don’t wanna get up and go to work! I’m tired! I don’t wanna do my homework!

And once you start whining, it’s a hard habit to break, no matter how annoying it might be.

Just look at God’s people as they journey through the wilderness, (what is modern-day North East Egypt). You might think--being rescued from slavery and all--that they would be joyously marching on to the Promised Land. But that’s not the case. Rather, the people go kicking and screaming.

¹ <http://www.newser.com/story/121553/science-nails-most-irritating-sound-whining.html>

“Moses, we’re thirsty, we’re hungry, we’re tired...did you bring us out here to die!?! We wish we were back in Egypt! There are so many stories of the people complaining to Moses in the wilderness, that we might as well refer to their Wilderness Wanderings as the time of “Wilderness Whining.”

But, interestingly enough, while the people’s whining does cause Moses, Aaron, and the Lord much angst, their complaining is actually the catalyst for some pretty miraculous memories. In the wilderness, God provided for the people’s basic needs of water, food, and safety. A common pattern for these wilderness stories is that the people complain to Moses, Moses cries out to God, and then God miraculously provides.

Miraculous Memories

- I. *Water* (Exodus 15, 17; Numbers 20)
- II. *Food* (Exodus 16; Numbers 11)
- III. *Safety* (Exodus 17; Numbers 21)

Now, let’s keep the context in mind as we look into a couple of these miraculous accounts in the wilderness. Israel’s journey across the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land was not a quick day’s drive to the mountains of Colorado. In total, their journey took 40 years! They traveled in stages, following God’s presence in the cloud.

And it wasn’t an easy journey. The wilderness is not an easy place to live, especially for hundreds of thousands of people who are used to living in the fertile land of Egypt. Wilderness, by its very definition, means that there wasn’t an over-abundance of water or food along the way. Let’s just say that there wasn’t a McDonalds or Starbucks to stop and catch a snack or coffee. So what were the people to do when they found themselves in a place without water or food?

Well, first of all, in Exodus 15, we read that they complained to Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” And God directed Moses to throw some wood in the bitter water so that it became sweet and drinkable. Seems fairly straightforward: water is a necessity of life, both for the people and their herds of animals, so it seems reasonable that the thirsty people would cry out to Moses and God. And God heard their cry and miraculously provided for their need.

But instead of the people rejoicing in gratitude, they began to act fairly entitled. In the very next chapter in Exodus 16, we read another account of the people complaining against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. This time, however, it sounds a lot more like whining.

“Why didn’t God let us die in comfort in Egypt where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat? You’ve brought us out into this wilderness to starve us to death, the whole company of Israel!”

No longer are the people simply asking a question, “What shall we drink?” Rather, they are not only suggesting that it would be better for them to be dead, they also remember Egypt not as a place of slavery, but as a place of feasting! Oh, how we long to be back in Egypt again! The people have forgotten the joy of deliverance. But still, God responds in a miraculous way, which is a common theme for how God treats the people.

Remember back in Exodus 2 (23-24), the people groaned under their slavery, and they cried out. And their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groanings and responded with a miraculous act of deliverance.

Here in the wilderness, the people’s groanings have turned to grumblings, but God still hears them and God still responds with deliverance. This time God promises to rain down bread from heaven so that everyone will have enough to eat each and every day. And, along with God’s gracious response comes a test of trust. The people are to collect only the manna they need that day and not save any until the next day. Furthermore, on the sixth day they are to gather twice as much and not gather on the seventh day, which is a holy Sabbath, a time of worship and rest.

Can the people trust God to provide for them each and every day? Well in this chapter we read that several people do not trust God. Some save bread overnight and it becomes moldy. Others go out on the 7th day when there is no bread to be collected. These people have a long ways to go in learning to put their trust fully in God. They have a lot to learn before they truly know God.

But, maybe fortunately for them, they do have a long wilderness journey ahead of them. 40 years to gather their daily bread. 40 years to learn to know and trust God so that they will be ready for the Promised Land, so that they will continue to trust God when they live in a land flowing with milk and honey.

But this is not a people who learn their lesson quickly. Do you know anyone like that? Throughout the rest of their journey in the wilderness, we read more accounts of the people whining to Moses about this and that, refusing to trust God even in the midst of God’s many provisions.

When we come near the end of their wilderness wanderings, the people have still not forgotten how to whine. It's a hard habit to break, after all. In Numbers 20, we read another account of the people complaining to Moses about water. Only the language here is different, instead of complaining, the people are now quarreling against Moses and Aaron. What began years ago as a simple complaint or request has now turned into a full-out argument between the people and Moses, who of course represents God. They say, "We wish we'd died when the rest of our brothers died before God. Why did you haul this congregation of God out here into this wilderness to die, people and cattle alike? And why did you take us out of Egypt in the first place, dragging us into this miserable country? No grain, no figs, no grapevines, no pomegranates—and now not even any water!"

Once again, the people fail to trust God's provision and instead wish they were already dead. Furthermore, they continue to remember Egypt as this place of luxury, not slavery. They still have the mentality of "the good old days" back in Egypt.

Well Moses and Aaron seek God's guidance, and God directs them to gather the people and command a rock to yield its water, thus revealing God's holiness. But here's where Moses' years of frustration with a stubborn people begins to come through. Instead of speaking to the rock, he speaks to the people, "Listen, rebels! Do we have to bring water out of this rock for you?" Then, still instead of speaking to the rock, Moses strikes it twice with his staff!

Now we might think, what's the big deal? Back in Exodus 17, God told Moses to strike a rock with his staff, he did so, and water poured out. But throughout the wilderness journey, God is trying to teach the people, and Moses and Aaron, to trust more fully in God. Moses and Aaron, as God's spokespersons, are to draw attention to God, not themselves. Instead, Moses yells at the people and draws attention to himself by Kung Fuing the Rock with his staff! (act it out)

As a result, Moses and Aaron faced the consequences of their own lack of trust, they would not lead the people into the Promised Land.

But don't worry, God's holiness still shone through and water burst forth from the rock. And the people and their animals drank.

You see, God's grace was poured out in these wilderness accounts. Even in the midst of the people's perpetual whining, God stuck with them. God provided for their basic needs in miraculous ways. God gave the people numerous opportunities to remember their deliverance from slavery, to put their trust in God, and therefore to journey forward with hope.

Forming Faith

But still, the people never seemed to get it, even over 40 years! Their whining grew worse, their trust remained in the “good old days” of Egypt. The wilderness stories are characterized by the people’s failures to trust God. Why didn’t someone write down any memories of success? The truth is, people learn best from failure. Sure, we love to get it right, but it’s those times when we get it wrong, when we fail to trust God, that we learn the most about what it really means to trust God.

These are stories of God’s people failing, but even more importantly, as the people look back on these stories, they learn to be formed in their faith. As they journeyed through the Wilderness away from Egypt and on to the Promised land, they learned what it truly meant to trust God to care for their daily needs, even if they didn’t always act like it.

We also are people on journeys that lead us through the wilderness. We also have found ourselves in desolate places where we need God’s provision. We also have failed to put our full faith in God.

The wilderness tempts us to forget our deliverance from slavery. The wilderness tempts us to forget who we truly belong to. Yet it is in the wilderness where we can often draw closest to God, not through whining, but by submitting our requests to a God who journeys with us and who longs to provide for our every need. We can learn from the people’s failings and thus grow in our faith. We can learn to trust God to catch us when we leap out in faith.

In looking back on the wilderness experience, Jesus says this: “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. **I am the bread of life.** Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever has faith in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:34-35).

Therefore, as we journey through the wilderness in our own lives, may we follow Jesus, who will provide for our every need. May we put our trust in a God who is with us, urging us on to the Promised Land, the Kingdom of Heaven. This is a kingdom we can catch glimpses of right here, right now, as we freely share God’s provision and grace all around. May it be so.