From Wilderness to Promised Land

In the Psalms God commands us to “remember His marvelous works which He has done.” While this may seem a simple thought it is in fact one of the most profound and beneficial practices the child of God will ever engage in. When Israel entered the land of Canaan, God’s express command for them was to remember the One who had brought them in.

God has always made good use of the wilderness. It was in the wilderness that Moses was transformed from a headstrong, impulsive semi-Egyptian into the meekest man on the earth. Here David discovered his leadership skills and John the Baptist grew strong in spirit “until the day of his manifestation to Israel.” Jesus was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and after forty days emerged “in the power of the Spirit.”

It was not the original plan that the Israelites, freshly delivered from Egyptian slavery, should have to spend forty years in the wilderness. Their wilderness time could have been more like a couple of weeks, had they walked in obedience and faith in their great Redeemer. But God is the ultimate Expert in making good use of secondary plans. He used Israel’s time trudging through the desolate places to shape a new generation of Israelites into a people who could enter by faith into that blessing their fathers had forfeited.

Because these experiences “happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition,” it would do us well to consider the significance of wildernesses and promised lands in our own lives. Let us consider certain fundamental truths of wilderness living, as exemplified by Israel’s forty years of experience.

Wildernesses are places of Need – Because the Israelites were a roving people throughout their time in the wilderness, they had little opportunity to accumulate any kind of abundance in material things. They could plant no crops and could only maintain small numbers of livestock that were able to live on the meager grasses that dotted the rocky landscape. They consisted of millions of people who were constantly on the move with almost no means to support themselves. They did not trade with other nations, they possessed only what they could carry, and were never established in any permanent dwellings.

Wildernesses are places of Dependence – As a result of their desperate need, the Israelites were totally dependent upon God. Had God failed to provide for them they would soon have perished. In a sort of “pep talk” Moses gives to Israel shortly before they are to enter Canaan, he reminds them, “Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years… (God) led you through that great and terrible wilderness in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water, who brought water for you out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna…” (Deuteronomy 8:4, 15-16)

While in the wilderness Israel had little and needed much. They needed a miracle every day just to survive, and they got it! Each morning (except for the Sabbath) the manna lay on the ground for their sustenance for the day. It may not have been terribly filling, and certainly they longed for variety, but it was enough!
Wildernesses are places of Learning – The Israelites were doing more than just marking time as they followed the cloud and moved from camp to camp. They were being given the greatest lesson men and women can ever learn – God is faithful. Indeed their continual situation of need was for the express purpose of teaching them to keep their priorities straight:

So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord (Deuteronomy 8:3).

When God’s people are in situations of great need their natural inclination is to look to the One who is the Source of all that is good. When things are too comfortable, too pleasant, and too easy we tend to take our eyes off of God and simply enjoy the blessings. But it is not by “bread alone” that we are to live. Man was made to live by the words and the grace that come forth from the mouth of the Lord. Wilderness times are highly useful to instruct us in this.

Wildernesses are never the Final Goal – God may make good use of our wilderness experiences, but the wilderness is never His ultimate intention for us. The Promised Land is the goal; here we find our greatest fulfillment and ultimate destiny. Israel was not delivered from Egypt simply so they could march around the wilderness forever. The Scriptures tell us, “Then He brought us out from there, that He might bring us in, to give us the land of which He swore to our fathers” (Deuteronomy 6:23). To be sure there was a great delay in attaining Canaan due to Israel’s unbelief, but the eventual outcome had not changed – a place where Israel could exchange the scarcity of wilderness living for the abundance of their promised homeland.

Our Wildernesses

While still a young man I became fascinated with God’s purpose for Israel in the wilderness. I began to recognize various situations in my life as wildernesses or promised lands. Throughout my years I have at times been in situations of great need, times when I practically needed a miracle a day just to keep going. This sometimes involved finances, but it could also involve ministry situations, emotional needs, or simply some great desire that I was believing God for, and waiting for the fulfillment of His promise.

Again and again I have watched in amazement and wonder as God has turned such wildernesses into promised lands. While Israel was told the exact amount of time their wilderness would last, in most of our cases we have no idea. As we wait and pray and wait and pray and trust and pray some more, we recognize that a sovereign God is in absolute control of our lives, and we bow to His perfect will. The outcome is not in doubt, but the timing is in His hands. While in this time of waiting our faithful God makes sure we have all that we need (emotionally, spiritually, and physically). We may not have much in excess, we may need to wear the same clothes that do not wear out and live on some form of manna that does not measure up to a rib eye steak, but we have enough.

Our Heavenly Joshua

Israel needed a leader to get them into the Promised Land! There was no way they could get in by accident or even the keenest human planning. What was required was a man of God’s own
choosing. Moses seemed the natural choice but, as the representative of God’s law, he was not the man. No amount of legalistic striving and human willpower can get you into God’s promised lands. It surely was no accident that the man God chose to lead Israel into their inheritance was named Joshua, the Hebrew equivalent of Jesus. Moses’ faithful and able assistant was a man who loved to linger in the tabernacle of meeting, soaking in the glory of God, long after Moses had received his instructions and left to carry them out. When Moses passed off the scene, God spoke to Joshua, “Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan.” The time had come.

In our own lives, we too, need a Leader to get us into the inheritance our Father has prepared for us. That leader is our Heavenly Joshua, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Good Shepherd, He is the Consuming Fire who goes before us, destroying enemies, removing obstacles, and leveling mountains to make the way for our entrance into our own personal Canaans.

The victory always comes through faith. Just as Israel simply needed to believe God and step out into the Jordan by faith, we too are called to trust our divine Shepherd to lead us from grace to grace and victory to victory. Recognizing our inability and His absolute ability is the key to entering in. With patience that allows God the time to accomplish His purposes in us as we wait, and faith that declares the outcome is certain, we look to our great Leader to do what He does so well – make a way where there seems to be no way.

**Don’t Forget**

Once we get in, we can by no means forget the One who brought us there. As we look around at the huge clusters of grapes, the rich soil, and the bountiful crops, we can be tempted to become so enamored with the blessings we lose sight of the Blesser. For this reason God warns Israel:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills… a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper… Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today… and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage… (Deuteronomy 8:7,9, 11, 14)

Our Heavenly Father is far more generous than most of His children realize. He gives wisdom liberally to all who ask (James 1:5), blesses us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), freely gives us all things (Romans 8:32), gives good things to those who ask Him (Matthew 7:11), and does exceedingly abundantly above all we can ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). But He generally finds it necessary to take us through times of need and deep dependence before He opens wide His hand of blessing. Having been shaped and forged in the harsh wilderness, we are now prepared for the plenty of the Promised Land. For this reason most believers must learn, as Paul did, “to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.”

Our Father delights as we enter into those blessings for which we have prayed and yearned. He does not begrudge us any “good thing.” He does make one request of us as we rejoice in His goodness – do not forget the One who brought you here, nor the way He so faithfully preserved you during those difficult wilderness days.

God is good – all the time. In the wilderness and in the Promised Land.