

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 19

Lessons from the Journey

Michael Card wrote a song entitled, “Joy in the Journey.” It is a simple song with a light melody, a catchy hook, and strong lyrics:

There is a joy in the journey,
There's a light we can love on the way.
There is a wonder and wildness to life,
and freedom for those who obey.
All those who seek it shall find it,
a pardon for all who believe.
Hope for the hopeless and sight for the blind
To all who've been born of the Spirit
and who share incarnation with him;
who belong to eternity, stranded in time,
and weary of struggling with sin.
Forget not the hope that's before you,
and never stop counting the cost.
Remember the hopelessness when you were lost?

I have always liked the song, both for the melody and for the idea. It recognizes life as a journey that can have wonderful things in store, even when difficulties arise.

This journey theme is not new. As a young man, I read Hannah Hurnard's book, *Hind's Feet on High Places*. It was a “journey” allegory that spoke not only to the joys of the journey, but to the difficulties as well. Many journey books do not use the word or image of journey, but they ultimately achieve the same idea. For example, most any well-written biography is ultimately the same.

Journey themes resonate because we recognize that all of us are at some stage in a journey we call our life. We may be at the start, the middle, or the end. The journey may be uphill or downhill. It may be a lonely journey or one with close company. We all understand the idea of a journey, however, and we can look at our own lives or the lives of others for inspiration, success stories, and warnings.

This lesson, we consider some of the journey lessons of the Israelites as they journey from Egypt, through the wilderness, and finally into the Promised Land.

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As we learn their stories, we can personalize lessons for our own individual journeys home to the Father.

SOME THINGS BELONG IN SONGS!

Events were a roller coaster for the Israelites. They had endured centuries of bondage in Egypt, in spite of rumored concerns by a God worshipped by their forefathers. The bondage itself was bad, but then Pharaoh decided that all male children should be killed after birth. Then, one of the “family” made it into Pharaoh’s house. Things might start looking up, but Moses let his temper get to him and became a renegade in the wilderness. After a long time, Moses returned, bearing the news of a God called Yhwh who said it was time for rescue. Yhwh was the God of the forefathers, and he was going to bring the Israelites home to the land promised hundreds of years earlier.

The rejoicing could not start too soon though, for Pharaoh was not on the same page as Moses and his God Yhwh. Pharaoh was intent on keeping his slave labor force because he had much building to do! Then, Moses and his brother went in for a showdown with Pharaoh and his court. As word came back from each visit, it seemed over and over that Yhwh was winning. Yet, Pharaoh never really relented – until the final showdown.

That showdown brought mysteries that seem appropriate only at night. There was sacrifice, blood ritual, packing, and quiet memorial dinners. Then with the wailing of Egypt coming through the windows, gradually the Israelites realized the destruction of the angel of death and the salvation that came their way. That same night, Pharaoh not only allowed the Israelites to leave, but he also sent them out! The other Egyptians also paid the Israelites to leave, and no doubt to try and buy some peace with Yhwh who brought the plague of the firstborn’s deaths.

So off the Israelites went following an awesome display of Yhwh’s guidance—a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Yhwh led the people right up to the edge of the Re(e)d Sea. There, the people saw the dust clouds of Pharaoh’s chariots driving to destroy and recapture the Israelites. Pharaoh’s fright had turned to anger. He wanted revenge, and there seemed no escape.

Suddenly, the outstretched arm of Yhwh brought a fierce wind upon the sea, and the waters parted. Israel walked on dry ground to the other side of the sea as Pharaoh’s army descended to the sea floor. The waters returned to their normal state, sending Pharaoh’s army to a watery grave. Israel safely watched from the other side of the sea as the deceased Egyptian soldiers washed up on the shore.

In this flow of history we read Exodus 15:1,

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD.

For the next 17 verses, we read the song of Moses. It is a personal song of praise to the LORD:

I will sing for Yhwh has triumphed gloriously...Yhwh is my strength...my song...my salvation (Ex. 15:2).

Moses and the people sang the wondrous ways of God's salvation, of the direct ways that Yhwh intervened in their lives and brought them to a place of victory:

Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea...Your right hand shatters the enemy...At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up (Ex. 15:4-8).

They sang their faith that God's work in their lives was not over. For that moment, they knew that he would continue to bless and protect them, fighting their battles, and bringing his people home:

You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed...Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed...Terror and dread fall upon them...till your people pass by... You will bring them in and plant them on your mountain... The LORD will reign forever and ever (Ex. 15:13-18)

Some things belong in song!

Point for Home

Do you have songs of faith? Are there songs of the Lord that you can turn to in times of difficulty? Are there songs of praise you sing when God works wonders in your life? Find those songs. They may be old hymns of the church; they may be new songs. Find those songs that express your heart and faith, praising God for his goodness and make them a part of your life. Some things do belong in songs!

YHWH: A GOD OF PROVISION

Not every song of joy lasts. The Israelites seemed to quickly trade in their efforts at music for a different sound—whining. They went through wilderness and desert areas for three days without water. Finally, they found water at “Marah,” Hebrew for “bitterness.” The water was not drinkable, and the people were grumbling against Moses.

Moses turned the problem over to Yhwh, who immediately solved the problem. The LORD pointed out a log to Moses and instructed Moses to throw the log into

the water. Moses did so, and the bitter water became sweet. God provided the answer, but more than that, he gave Moses and the people a principle:

If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer (Ex. 15:26).

What a wonderful rule, and a memorable story for the people! Not surprisingly, though, as they continued in their journey, the grumbling also continued. Soon, the people were upset over the food stocks they had available. Rather than seeking the Lord for more provision, they went into complaining mode:

Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger (Ex. 16:3).

Yhwh responds with more provision, and manna from heaven descends. The manna comes down daily, lasting only a day (except the manna the people collected before Sabbath). Manna served as a daily reminder that God was taking care of Israel throughout their wilderness journeys.

The people of Israel ate the manna forty years, till they came to a habitable land. They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan (Ex. 16:35).

This segment of Exodus offers a third time of whining, finishing the rapid succession of pathetic whining in counterpart to the song of Praise before. This third time again concerned the lack of water. This time, again the people do not lay their concerns before God. Instead, they “quarreled with Moses.” Over and over, they argued saying,

Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst? (Ex. 17:3).

Moses takes the concern to the LORD who again provides. This time, Yhwh instructed Moses to take leaders of the Israelites to get a firsthand view of the LORD’s might. At Horeb, with the elders watching, Moses followed Yhwh’s clear instructions and struck a rock with his staff. From the rock gushed forth water that allowed the people to drink to their fill.

Yhwh: a God of provision.

Point for Home

Jesus was teaching his disciples to pray. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. **Give us this day our daily bread**” (Mt. 6:9-11). Jesus told the Samaritan woman drawing water from the well, “whoever drinks of the water I will give him will never be thirsty... The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn. 4:14-15). God promises to provide for his people. Why do we grumble, whine and complain? Let us prioritize daily prayer, setting our needs before the Lord. We will see his provision, both in this life and the one to come, for Yhwh is a God of provision.

YHWH THE CONQUERER

A fact of life: sometimes, people do dumb things. That was the story of Amalek. Israel was at Rephidim when Amalek came to pick a fight. Moses turned to Joshua and had him gather men for the fight.

As the fight began, Moses, his brother Aaron, and an Israelite named Hur went up on a hill to watch the battle. Moses took with him his staff, which was the LORD’s directed instrument for working the exodus for the Israelites. The battle seesawed back and forth until it became apparent that Moses lifting his hands (and staff) to the LORD in the sky caused Israel to prevail.

This tandem, Moses holding his hands up to the LORD and the Israelites winning, was so clear that as Moses wearied, he was set upon a rock and Aaron and Hur held up his hands. With his hands steady, the Israelites prevailed.

The LORD spoke to Moses clearly after this battle. It was Yhwh who won the battle.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua [important because Joshua needed to know that it was not Joshua’s battleground skill that won the battle] that ***I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek***... And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD is my banner (Ex. 17:14-16).

Yhwh is the conqueror.

Point for Home

Do battles crop up in your life, sometimes unexpectedly and totally uncalled for? When they occur, do you go to war using your best efforts (Joshua was, after all, Moses’ top general!)? If you do, that is good, but it is not good enough. Turn also

to the LORD. Sustain yourself in his presence for the duration of the battle. Hold yourself before him in prayer, for he is the conqueror. Then, when the battle is over, do not take credit. The victory belongs to the Lord. Raise high his banner! Yhwh is the Conqueror!

GODLY ADVICE

There is a lot to be said about godly advice! Good counsel breeds good decisions.

Moses was the Israelites' judge, their referee over disputes. One day, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was visiting Moses, his daughter (Moses' wife Zipporah), and the grandkids. Moses was a good host the first day, but the second day Moses spent from sun up to sun down working through the long line of people that came before him with their disputes.

Jethro saw a problem! He pulled Moses aside and told him,

What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out... Now obey my voice; I will give you advice (Ex. 18:18-19).

Jethro told Moses to find some good men who were honest and trustworthy. Those men should be the first court of decision in matters of dispute. Then, there should be other good and competent men who serve as overseers of the judges. Ultimately, Moses could then serve as the final court of resort for those matters of great complexity or importance.

Moses followed Jethro's advice and saved himself from burnout, no doubt also adding significantly to his family time. There is power in godly advice!

Point for Home

Do you have godly counselors in your life? Are there people who have not just common sense, but a godly understanding of priorities and values? Are there people in your life who are prayerfully in touch with God and who walk in his will? If there are, do you stay in touch with these people where they are able to offer you advice? Do they have enough insight into your life to know where you might need counsel? Proverbs 15:22 explains, "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed."

Make sure you have godly people in your life who are in touch enough to give godly counsel. Then, remember to have a soft heart to listen to advice and counsel!

TIME WITH YHWH CHANGES YOU

There is an adage that we become like the things we are around. It happens on many levels.

Moses had a strange manifestation of this from his time before the LORD. After the loss of the first set of Ten Commandment tablets, Moses went back up Sinai to get a new set. Moses spent forty days and forty nights on Sinai. During this time, Moses was not alone!

So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights (Ex. 34:28).

Moses spent solid time in Yhwh's presence, neither eating nor drinking. He learned from Yhwh more of the law for the people. While Moses was there, the Lord interacted with Moses intimately:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who by no means clears the guilty...and Moses bowed his head toward the ground and worshipped (Ex. 34:5-8).

This time with God changed Moses—visibly—even though Moses did not realize it! When Moses returned to the people down from the mountain,

Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him... When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face (Ex. 34:29-33).

Time with Yhwh changes you!

Point for Home

This is not a new truth. Paul knew those with whom we spend our time affect us. He told the Corinthians, "Do not be deceived," "Bad company corrupts good morals." (1 Cor. 15:33). This is not simply a call to monitor carefully where your time is spent, but it is much, much more.

How much time are you spending with God? When I was studying for the ministry, the head of the Bible department was an elderly and godly preacher Dr. Batsell Barrett Baxter. Dr. Baxter sat me down in his office and offered some incredible advice. He told me that I was taking sixty plus hours of courses

connected with God and the study of his word. The temptation, he told me, was to reckon that time spent in study as my daily quiet time with the LORD. “Do not let that happen,” he explained.

The time we spend before God is the most important time of each day. Time with Yhwh changes you!

THE UNEXPLAINABLE AND UNFAIR TRAGEDY

I am sure you have seen the books. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is one well-known example. It is a frequent reason people give for questioning God’s very existence. “If there is a kind and loving God, then how could xyz happen?”

Things are supposed to be cause and effect. Things are supposed to make sense by our reasons of fairness and justice. Then, we see a story like that of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10: 1-3, and we stop and think.

The story itself is short—three verses:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD has said, ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’” And Aaron held his peace.

Well, some will point to the harsh justice and be satisfied. God said, “Don’t do it,” and they did it anyway. In other words, “They had it coming and let this serve as a warning to any who do not do what God tells them to do.” Is that a fair reading of the story? Is that all we have here?

If we keep reading the chapter, we get hints that there was more at play. God spoke to Aaron after the events and gave him a statute for the rest of time:

Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die (Lev. 10:9).

From there, the chapter tells us of Aaron’s two surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. At Aaron and Moses’ instruction, these sons take the grain offering and the goat of the sin offering and service the altar. In the process, they both wrongly burned up the goat offering when they were supposed to eat it! These last two

sons sin before God's instructions at the end of Leviticus 10 in a way reminiscent of their brothers Nadab and Abihu in the beginning of Leviticus 10.

Yet, these brothers are not consumed in fire. Instead, when Moses challenges their actions, Aaron explains their grief prompted the mistake.

In this story, in its fullness, we see disobedience that seems to come from a drunken disregard for the Lord and his holiness contrasted with disobedience from a non-rebellious error that proceeded from stunned and hurting people. One received a harsh judgment while the other did not.

Does this tell us all satisfactorily why things seem to unfairly happen? Probably not. But in this vignette, we find the importance not only of the Lord's holiness, but also of the attitude of the one who approached the Lord. We also find that there is more to the mind and actions of God than we understand or see. At some point, we must accept that, because life has its unexplained and unfair tragedies.

Point for Home

Do you have unexplained and unfair issues in your life? We cannot make the jump that they come from a drunken disregard for God! But, we can say that our responsibility before God is to trust him, to try to follow his will, and to keep an humble and contrite heart before him. After that, we are left in the hands of a loving God who will deal with us as he sees fit. With that, we live in trust, even when we see the unexplainable and unfair tragedy.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS!?

My father was fond of telling us about his five-mile walk to school each day. It was only when we were adults that we had him drive that five-mile walk and record the true distance. Somehow between the 1940's and the 1980's those five miles had shrunk to 3/4ths of a mile! Memory is an interesting phenomenon!

Sometimes it happens in the reverse of Dad's. Instead of remembering things more difficult than they were, we can remember things more rosy than they were! The good old days were not always truly good old days!

In Numbers 11, we read about the people complaining again over food. This time they were complaining that the manna was getting boring to their palettes.

Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at (Num. 11:4-6).

Free fish? They had to catch those fish, when they weren't in slave labor to Pharaoh that is. The Lord expressed his displeasure over the ingratitude of the people to Moses.

The Lord had Moses set out seventy elders over whom his Spirit descended, bringing them words of prophecy for the people. The Lord then brought a wind with innumerable quail that dropped in the camp. The people gathered a great deal of meat, but it came with a price. God brought forth a plague that struck down a number of people.

The people were way out of line blaming God for robbing them of the good old days.

Point for Home

Do you blame God for where you are or what is happening to you? I hope not! God has graciously in love given himself fully, to the point of dying as a human, to place you in his fellowship. There are days we can look back on fondly, appreciative of what God has done to bring us where we are today. May we never accuse him of robbing us of a good life and saddling us with misery. We must learn that any suffering we have is mild compared to his, and it is an honor to be found worthy of sharing in his suffering.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, some of the stories of the Israelites' journey spark inspirations and admonitions about your own journey before God. Next lesson, we will conclude these journey devotionals and see the Israelites into the Promised Land.

WANT MORE?

Start reading Judges. Which character do you relate to? Email me and let me know who and why! Emails remain anonymous! Email us at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com.