

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 19 Pt. 2

Lessons from the Journey

Last week, we discussed some Old Testament stories of the Israelites journeying from Egypt to the Promised Land. We looked at the events as vignettes that can offer us some insight into our own lifetime journeys with God. To set up our study, we considered Michael Card's song "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?

In our abbreviated class this week, we consider a few additional vignettes as part of our "journey musings." Last week, we were not able to reach the last vignette in class. We are reproducing that short story first in this lesson (with slight modification) to keep the stories in their chronology. Then, we will have the new stories.

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!

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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

Sometimes the good old days, are not necessarily what we remember them to be. Multiple scholars point out the recurrent biblical theme of exile and a longing to be home. Here we read of the Israelites wandering in a land that doesn't meet their needs, on a surface level and on a deeper level. Their memory of "home" might seem warm and fuzzy, but in truth it was a miserable slave existence.

C.S. Lewis wrote of this "nostalgia":

These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not yet visited...Our life-long nostalgia, our longings to be reunited with something in the universe from which we feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fantasy but the truest index of our real situation.¹

¹Lewis, C.S., *The Weight of Glory*, (Adobe Digital Edition 2009) at 49-50, 66.

So if the good old days were not so good, why do they seem so? Lewis would tell us it is the inner desire for a better place, for another world. Augustine called it the heart's longing for God.

That said, there are still problems that arise and afflict us today. These problems hurt, confuse, and threaten to immobilize us in fear. Do you blame God for where you are or what is happening to you? I hope not! God is not the problem; he is the answer!

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. But 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.

GOD TRUMPS FAMILY THE MEEK INHERIT THE EARTH (AND A FEW OTHER THINGS)

How is your family life? Are you in a close family or is your family distant? Do you “get along” or are your family get-togethers strained? Family problems can strike even the most holy people, bringing pain and hurt where there should be support and comfort.

Moses had family problems. His sister and brother (Miriam and Aaron) did not like the fact that Moses had married a Cushite woman! Because of this marriage, Miriam and Aaron “spoke against Moses” (Num. 12:1). The text does not give us great details, but scholars recognize that Moses’ marriage to a Cushite was a mixed marriage, certainly outside of the Israelites people, and likely to a woman of dark skin.²

In their “speaking out” against Moses, Miriam and Aaron bolstered their authority by informing the people that Yhwh had spoken not only through Moses, but also through them.

Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also? (Num. 12:2).

² Ashley, Timothy R., *The Book of Numbers, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 1993) at 223ff.

Moses evidently did not arise to his own defense, at least not very strongly. The text reminds us,

Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3).

While meek Moses seems to be getting run over, as well as perhaps undermined by his own siblings, the LORD takes action! The LORD calls Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to the tent of meeting (It is interesting to note that this story began with the characters listed in the order opposite of their calling here by God). Miriam is listed first, likely as the principal complainer, followed by Aaron and then Moses as the direct object of their “concern.” Here, God reverses the order giving Moses top billing and Miriam last in his summons.

Once the three got to the tent of meeting, the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud calling Aaron and Miriam to a private encounter. God then sets out the special nature of his relationship with Moses, not only in the way God speaks to him, but also in the faithful way Moses walks as God’s servant. God was not pleased with the talk of Aaron and Miriam, and he let them know it. The cloud then left, and Miriam’s skin had turned diseased and white from the encounter.

What did Aaron and Miriam do? Aaron went running to Moses, asking him to intervene with God on Miriam’s behalf. Evidently, Aaron realized he was not as close to the LORD as his brother after all!

Moses the meek immediately seeks the LORD, crying out to him on Miriam’s behalf. The Lord issues a relatively light punishment, but issues one nonetheless,³ and removes her disease. Once Miriam’s time of punishment is over, life in the camp moves on. The lesson was learned; God trumps family and protects the meek!

Point for Home

It is found over and over in Scripture. God provides for the meek to inherit the earth, through God’s hand, not the hand of the meek! By definition, meekness does not typically reach out in self-defense. This is true, even though the meek are often challenged and taken advantage of.

The shocking part of the story is not simply that Moses was meek and God defended him. The surprise is that the attack on Moses comes from his close family. He ministered and worked with Aaron and Miriam. Aaron and Moses had

³ Miriam was shut outside the camp for seven days. Under the law as given to Moses, someone suspected of having leprosy was put outside the camp for seven days for observation (See Lev. 13 and 14). So, the punishment was really nothing beyond what would already happen to Miriam.

been arm-in-arm each step in the Exodus. This was not a frontal assault on Moses. It came from those who should have had his back!

What do we do with this story? The lessons reach in a number of directions, but we stop with the admonition of our Lord, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt. 5:5). Let us seek meekness, confident that the LORD is our protector. We can join the Psalmist who prayed:

I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!—as they scheme together against me...But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors! (Ps. 31:13-15).

Over lunch today, take time to consider some other lessons from this story. In that regard, consider these discussion questions: What can we learn from Moses’ actions about forgiveness? What is the proper approach when one has issues with a family member? What did Miriam and Aaron do that stirred God’s anger?

**LISTEN TO GOD; IF NOT THE FIRST TIME,
THEN AT LEAST THE SECOND!**

Moses and the Israelites had made it to the Promised Land. As they approached Canaan, Moses followed the LORD’s instructions and sent twelve spies into the land (one from each tribe). Moses wanted to know from the men how populated the country was, how strong the people seemed, features of the land, and a sampling of the land’s produce.

For forty days, the spies went throughout the land, returning with grapes, pomegranates, and figs. The spies also brought back fear. They were afraid of the size of the cities and the size of the people. All but two spies were so distraught that they said to the whole congregation,

Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! (Num. 14:2).

They called God on the carpet for placing them in this position.

Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt? (Num. 14:3).

This rebellion then took a plan,

And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” (Num. 14:4).

(As a side note, one might realistically ask what they thought Pharaoh would do to these people after the devastating loss of his first born and chariot force.)

The two spies of faith were Joshua and Caleb. Both stood before the pressures of the ten fearful spies and proclaimed their faith in the LORD:

If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us... Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them (Num. 14:8-9).

The people reacted to this faith by calling for the stoning of Joshua and Caleb. Before the rioting can take their lives, the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting and God spoke with Moses.

God identified the decisions by the fearful spies and the congregation as not only unfaithful, but also despising to God and his previous actions. The Lord offered to replace the fuller Israelite people with the Israelite subset of Moses and his descendants.

Moses recited the reasons God should use an alternate punishment and pardon the people. The Lord agrees to the pardon, but adds a punishment of, in essence, granting some of the ill chosen words of the Israelites who said, “would that we had died in this wilderness!” The Lord proclaimed that only Caleb and Joshua out of the Israelites over age 20 would actually see and dwell in the land. The rest would be doomed to wander in the wilderness until they died. The wilderness wanderings were set at one year for each day spent spying (forty days spying equaled forty years in the wilderness). As for the unfaithful spies, God sent a plague that took their lives.

One would think that the disobedient and fearing people would have accepted this punishment, perhaps even repenting of their sin. But, no—instead the people decide to go ahead and try to conquer the Promised Land. Moses warns them not to further disobey God, but they try anyway. The people were soundly defeated.

Point for Home

What happened? We read this story from the vantage point of over 3,000 intervening years and we wonder how the Israelites could be so dumb! It just seems almost beyond comprehension. Yet if we pause, we might reconsider such a harsh judgment. Do we really want our own lives under a microscope? Do we live consistently following the commands of God? Do we not find times where we think the circumstances might bend what we know to be right?

Now as we consider this, we must be careful to note that this is not a story about how people find or keep their eternal salvation. This is a journey story. It is not

simply about sin, but also about answering God's calling. In that sense, the lesson is no different from what Paul taught:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap (Gal. 6:7).

God equips us to follow his calling. He gives us everything we need to walk in his will. As we do so, the blessings flow. As we rebel, things turn out differently. What is God calling you to do within your journey? Where is he leading you to live and to serve? Are you following his leadership? If not, why not?

CONCLUSION

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

WANT MORE?

Start (or keep) 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.