

Wilderness Wanderings (Part One)

John W. Ritenbaugh

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I first gave this sermon over 45 years ago when I was pastoring congregations in Columbia, South Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia. It fits directly into one of the themes of the Days of Unleavened Bread, and at the same time, some of it was drawn from subjects that the epistle to the Hebrews touches on. So we have a convergence here, but it is going to take a sermon or two for these convergences to be shown.

I titled it then Wilderness Wanderings, and I have retained that title. You might wonder about the title, and if you will look on a map, you will find that the Promised Land to which they the Israelites were walking was close enough to where they were in Goshen, part of Egypt, that they could easily have walked in one month's time. It was that close. It took the Israelites 40 years to walk that short distance. It is not that they were all walking all that time because they were not.

The real wandering was in the minds of those people who were doing that walking—in their minds, in their character, in their dispositions, in their response to the leadership of Moses, who in turn was under God. And they, the Israelites, were fully aware that Moses had been appointed to that position. At least they were fully aware intellectually. But all during that time they consistently rejected it by their actions. Maybe they did not all raise a voice against him, but nonetheless they went along with what the crowd of people who really were wandering were doing.

This sermon focuses on the theme that holds just as true today as it did then, and it is, in order to make the most of our calling we must come to grips with the reality of how deeply entrenched sin is in the world, and is in us, because it was entrenched sin that motivated the Israelites to do the *mental* wandering that led to a conflict with God. So it was sin, the rejection of God's sovereignty over them in multiple ways, that deterred their walk and had them walking for 40 years to actually get there.

Sin represents a danger that must not be taken lightly, as it teaches in Hebrews 2:1, where the verse actually says to not hold these things that we are being taught *lightly*. They were rejecting them. Jesus said, in addition to the things that I have already said, that sin resides in our heart and therefore it is an ever-present reality, and we are living with what can enslave us and be directly the cause of our failure through death to never make it to the destination that we hold.

Now within the heart itself it may not be actively involved in motivating a sin all the time, but it is nonetheless there. And that is important. It can spring into action almost instantaneously if it is not controlled. Jeremiah 17:9 is where sin resides, Jesus says, and it says there that the "heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." It is feeding out misleading information from time to time and that verse asks, "Who can know it?" Well, after reading that verse we are informed. In addition, the apostle Paul identified it as "sin that dwells in me," that is, in him. We do not stand alone in this regard. Sin is the bottom line cause of making life difficult, and everybody has it. Nobody escapes.

Sin is not literally a separate living, breathing monster within us, but it can clearly be likened to one, because at times it can literally control one from within. It does have major influence on what we do with our life, and therefore our time, and if allowed, it can be very destructive of us and others who are near when the sin is committed. It produces no good on its own. Its fruit is *always* destructive.

We are persuaded to do it from birth, and at the same time, we are surrounded by it because it is the residue of Satan and his world which we live and work and play in.

I hope I am impressing you that it is an ever-present danger, and it is *always* close at hand. It is there. We must face up to it. That sin is an ever-present reality, but it can be beaten because others have done it. There is no easy escaping the possibility of its influence because that residue that is within us keeps generating destructive thoughts, words, and conduct after we are converted. Sin brings us into direct conflict with God's purpose for us, and at the same time makes us feel so badly that we still sin so often.

Be comforted, though. God knows this full well. That is, that it is with us all the time and that it is an ever-present danger. He knows that full well, and He has willed that these battles between us and then with sin must be fought within His character creating program. He knows better than we do by far how often we succumb to it, and His merciful patience has continued with us nonetheless. But let us be resolved to not test Him any further!

We are going to begin by looking into John 8, and we are beginning there because it has an instance in which it feeds into the overall responsibility that the Days of Unleavened Bread supplies us with.

All of the festivals impact positively on us if we will allow them, but perhaps none so directly as Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread. These festivals touch us very, very personally because of the information I gave you at the beginning. It is there and it is ready to spring into action immediately. In many cases I feel sure it does not have to be brought out forcefully in any way. It is just there and we do it.

We are going to draw a great deal from Israel's journey through the wilderness because what we are experiencing in our calling is fairly closely patterned after what the Israelites experienced. It took them 40 years. Now I have to ask the question: How long have I been converted? Since 1959. How many years is that? It is more than 60 years already that I have been on my walk from my Egypt.

We are going to be following the experiences of Israel as they went through, but we are not going to be overly concerned about the actual experience itself. By that I mean, we are not going to be concerned about the literal, actual occurrences because we are not trudging to the Promised Land and I do not see any manna following anywhere. But we can still though, be very guilty of doing our wandering in the same place the Israelites did it—in our minds. So I do not mean the same types of physical and emotional pressures that arose from their experiences with God after they were baptized crossing the Red Sea, and as they made their way to the Promised Land after their baptism, with God leading the way.

So we are going to begin with a definition. What is sin? It is brief, but it is going to be a little bit different than we might be tending to give in the way of an answer. Because there is a tendency on our part to define it as an act of some sort. I think we have to go a little bit deeper, further than that, because that may or may not be true. That sort of a definition is not wrong. But I am going to give you one that is simpler, more elemental because we have it from birth. How much sinning does a baby do? Sin, maybe frequently dogging us, and besides that, Jesus clearly explains in the Sermon on the Mount that a physical act does not have to occur. Now, this definition that I am going to give you is its simplest most elementary form.

Here it is; it is not complicated. *Sin begins as an internal influence toward self-centeredness.* That is where sin begins.

King David said in Psalm 51:5. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." He did not mean the act of marital intercourse was sin. He meant sin was already present whenever he was conceived. He instead meant that we are surrounded by it. It is a natural part of life. It resides in us from birth. It is a natural part of our thinking processes. It really hugs us close. If it is in our heart, that is right inside and that is where action always begins.

And so sin has a beginning, and it is that influence toward self-centeredness. That is the influence that *moves* us in that direction. That is, to make use of the situation for us. This clearly points to the fact that God created the potential for us to sin. Why? Because He wants to test our desire to do what is good. He intends for that influence to be controlled. He did not give us something that is overwhelming our nature at all. But most of the time, many times, it does overwhelm us. Maybe because we are not aware that that is the direction that our mind is moving in and it catches us off guard.

But that is part of the purpose of this sermon. We have to catch it before it actually does something bad. But it always does with the same type of beginning. And that is, either no knowledge, not sufficient knowledge, or it is fully intentioned. He intends, though, for that influence to be controlled, and He did not make that influence to be so strong it cannot be controlled. We can do that on our own. So the influence must not be permitted to control our conduct because—this is good—it brings forth only the illusion of producing good. If doing a sin makes us feel good, it may be an illusion.

No, that is what vanity is. "Vanity of vanities," Solomon said, "everything is vanity." That is how much sin there is in the world, because that is all it produces, this vanity. It *never* produces real good, not intentionally anyway. It might accidentally occur but if it does, then the person did not control it. God or somebody else did. Just understand that—all sin produces is vanity. That influence is in large measure an illusion. So knowledge of what sin is, plus the matter of controlling its breaking forth, are the central issues toward defeating it. Thoughts that can lead to an actual act of sin, a breaking of God's law, are inevitable. But they are to be stopped even as they are generated. That is what God desires. They must not be allowed to come to fruition.

To what extent are we to make effort to not allow the sin to develop into something that is actually done? Well, this is the hard part. What does Paul say in Romans 12? We are to be a living sacrifice. God expects us to sacrifice if that is necessary to stop it from ever occurring. I think you will agree we cannot go any further than that. We are supposed to pay the price ourselves for even allowing our mind to produce something like that. We are to sacrifice ourselves to prohibit it from demonstrating its power. This is exactly what the internal influence does not want to do now.

These elements that I have given us here at the beginning are not complex, but they are nonetheless difficult to deal with because that is the way we are. We are going to turn to John 8. We are going to break into the middle of a thought here.

John 8:33-36 They answered Him [They being the Jews.], "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be

made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Within the context of Jesus' instruction, there are two remarkable all-encompassing statements, first by the Jews and then by Jesus. The Jews' statement in verse 33 is absolutely ridiculous, revealing how far off they were regarding their spiritual understanding. It is a historical truth that the Israelites were from time to time in their history, slaves—slaves of Egypt, slaves of Babylon, slaves of Assyria, slaves of the Greeks, slaves of Herod the Great. And at the very time this conversation took place, they were slaves of the Romans.

Jesus' statement, on the other hand, is as absolutely correct as the Jews is absolutely wrong. Now Jesus applied His thoughts to spiritual bondage. What Jesus wants us to deeply grasp is that regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, academic standing, Pharisee, Sadducee, Democrat, Republican, Socialist, dictator, Catholic, Protestant, atheists, and economic status, *all* are slaves of spiritual sin to some degree. No one escapes this condemnation, most especially coming from God Himself. We have all earned death and the Jews' knee jerk reaction was one of thoughtless self-righteousness. And I think that you can see from this one misunderstanding reaction, a clear reason why Jesus' own rejected Him. It says that very clearly in John 1:12. Their conception of righteousness and sin was so far different from the biblical reality it is almost difficult for one to comprehend it.

Compare their reaction, just for a moment, to the immigrant to America's reaction. Because many of the immigrants to America received some spiritual benefits from the Protestant Reformation that was taking place in Europe, the American public began reasonably close to actually being fairly righteous in the 1600s, 1700s, and early 1800s. But now, at least partly because Christianity has been so attacked by the leftists in this nation, we are now so very far off base because Americans have grown as confused as those Jews were about right and wrong. And biblically, slavery generally indicates a high degree off powerlessness regarding national or ethnic liberty. That is a good thing to remember. That slavery is a biblical metaphor, you might say, for powerless before something. We will not stop sinning in that regard until we can get hold of it.

So being a slave also indicates one who has little independence of choice in matters of righteousness, but rather dependence upon the virtual control of something, as with an addiction, some group, as in a political party, or somebody they desire to have the attention of. So it is very easy. Three major things in life that we can use to buckle us, and lead us into sin.

Peter describes what false ministers produce well when he says in II Peter 2,

II Peter 2:19 While they [that is the false ministry], promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage.

That is one of the things that happened in the United States in the last 100 years or so. The people fell victim to a false ministry. We Americans have *allowed* this degeneration to take place. The corrupting factor is the false teaching which we have received, and followed the examples the false teacher set. Within the context here in John 8, that one who ultimately brings another into a bondage is in reality, the self. Nobody *has to* become controlled by a sin. God did not make that influence so

powerful that it could not be overcome. We really do not need anybody to lead us into sin. We do it on our own. In most cases, we have no one to honestly blame. We are fully equipped to do it to ourselves. And we did.

Again here in John 8:35. This is, I think, quite interesting because it was just in preparing this sermon this time that I came to understand what Jesus was talking about here. He says, "A slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Through Jesus Christ, one's bondage to Satan is broken. However, the effect of that bondage remains within us by means of the residue of Satan's spirit, most noticeably in terms of ingrained habits of thinking, as well as conduct. And this must be overcome if we are to become like Jesus Christ. That is why there was so much wandering. The Jews kept leaving themselves to get wandering away. What Jesus said here is quite important regarding continuing with or within the Family of God, that is the church. Jesus had just used the term *servant*. Servant is, in this context, used in relation to one who is serving sin, being led around by sin. Being a free son of Abraham is used of one who is truly freed from death, and in Abraham's converted family—the church. That is, they have accepted the blood of Jesus Christ, then they have been forgiven, and that bond between us and Satan is broken.

So we are talking about the church here specifically, and Abraham's family is the example. Jesus apparently was thinking of Abraham sending Ishmael, his son by Sarah's servant Hagar, off away from the family unit of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. You can look back in Genesis, and you will find where Abraham did this. Part of it was because of the insistence of Sarah, because she did not like having Hagar around. But it accomplished something, in a way, that is way bigger than that. What Jesus seems to be saying is this: Ishmael really was a son of Abraham. But, he was not what God desired, because Ishmael was produced through Hagar. As God saw this family (remember in the background here is the church), Ishmael, though literally growing up within Abraham's family, but as God perceived him, Ishmael was literally, legally, with the family in regard as a *servant*. He was a son, but he was not a real son because he came into this world through an adulterous action. And even though Abraham was the father, God did not want Ishmael around. He was an outsider, as it were. It was just like he was unconverted but he was associating with the church.

It is, what Jesus was explaining there, because God is not considering Ishmael as part of His covenant with Abraham and Sarah because of the adultery involved in his being conceived and born into that family. Also as an additional factor, Ishmael literally was not growing up righteous either, and by way of contrast, Isaac was giving strong indications that he was growing to be a righteous man. But most importantly, in this case, he was a true son of Abraham and Sarah, with whom God had made the covenant. Ishmael was the result of Abraham and Sarah's avoiding a trial by means of a sin.

So what Jesus is saying is this, in practical. Regardless (you have to go back to John 8 again), of how long a servant may seem to be close to the true family, that is those who have truly made the covenant with God, he, that servant, is still a servant-sinner, and that servant, that sinner, cannot remain in the family, but the true son will. Jesus explains that even a little bit further. He said, "The servant will not inherit the covenant family's blessing." As God is looking at him, he is unconverted. He is associating with the true church. He is traveling with the church. He is being taught by the church, but he is not converted. He is not part of the covenant. Is somebody who has not made the covenant going to go into the Kingdom of God? No! Even though the person is associating with the church.

So what is Jesus' admonition here to those of us? If you are associating with the Family of God, that is the church, you better make sure you are converted! Even though you are receiving the teaching, if you are not converted, you will not inherit the Family's blessing. That is a pretty important factor.

John 8:31-32 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

So, by means of acceptance of the blood of Jesus Christ, though the absolute bondage to Satan is broken, the process of overcoming the residue of that foul spirit is not immediately accomplished. This is another consistent teaching in this John 8 section. It requires consistent, abiding, continuing spiritual contact with the Son, by faith working towards the completion of the project. So, in practical application, this means through study, prayer, and faithful submission to His Word we are to continue on the course.

If there are unconverted among us, God will eventually take care of that. He will either convert them or they will leave us. And I do not mean just the Church of the Great God. I am talking about the church on in its larger scale as well.

So it is the relationship with the Son that matters greatly here, combined with the making practical use of the truth of God that breaks through the ingrained habits of following Satanic lies contained within one's life.

John 8:43-44 "Why [Jesus asked these people] do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and he does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."

Now, some modern commentaries translate that one phrase in verse 43, "You cannot *bear* to listen to My words." It gives the impression it is as though a fairly high and forceful and pretty close to automatic rejection of Jesus' teaching takes place unless God enables Christ's words, to not only be heard, but clearly understood. Brethren, we have been enabled by God to overcome our natural resistance—the resistance that God puts in there right at the beginning of life.

(I just happened to think of something. We have come a long way at the beginning of this sermon, and we have not even gotten into the walk to the Promised land yet. But we have to get this concept about sin—what it is, why it is, and how sneakily powerful it is.)

But that does not mean that we have no battle it all. We still have to press forward by adding our part to the point that we think that we are doing all the work. Now, it must be difficult enough or there really are no tests, and in order to impress this on us, consider what God did with the people of Israel in Egypt. Egypt is a type of this world, Satan's world, and God shows us by this analogy what He literally did with the Israelites, getting them out and away from Egyptian contact altogether. Do not forget that, because in one sense, our walk through our wilderness is more difficult than the Israelites had to go through by far. Because, God lets Satan get after us, and we have to battle him off even before, maybe, that we are able to bring a stop to the sinful thoughts, the influence that is in us.

What God did in getting the Israelites out of Egypt is He sent the ten plagues to prepare their minds somewhat and to prepare, of course, the Egyptians' minds to let them go. God shows us by this analogy what He literally did with Israel by getting them out and away from Egyptian contact. Make sure that you do not forget about the ten plagues because they are part of this process of overcoming sin. From this analogy, we gain understanding as we perceive our life in Christ and can make practical applications to it at this present time, rather than merely see it as a part of the Israelites' historical record.

We will shift gears here just a little bit. And I have titled this section here: What is the direction of your life? This becomes very important.

There is a scene in the Cecil B. DeMille "The Ten Commandments" movie in which Edward G. Robinson, playing Dathan, utters a question of supreme significance to us. In the movie, he said this on the morning that Israel was beginning to leave Egypt following the death angel's passing through Egypt as the Israelites were assembling to leave. The Israelites in the movie were in a joyous mood. The background music swelled to a vibrant march, and John Derek, playing Joshua, had come to day Dathan's home to claim his love, played by Debra Paget. She was being held captive in Dathan's home as a prize for Dathan's submission to the Pharaoh. Now Joshua announced to Dathan that they were leaving their slavery and Egypt. And Dathan, in a rather cynical tone of voice combined with a perplexed look on his face, asked, "Where are we going?" In the movie, nobody answered him as though nobody knew where Israel was going. But the Israelites knew *exactly* where they were going. They were going back to the land that God gave to Abraham. The same land that Jacob's family came from during a long-lasting famine to live under Joseph, and they became slaves there.

In one sense, this issue of where we are headed with our life is of greater individual importance to us than it was to the Israelites coming out of Egypt. The individual Israelite was pretty much going to go along with the crowd, that is the crowd of Israelites. But in our calling God is far more individualistic. Let us go back to Exodus.

Exodus 13:17-18 Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.

Let us take a fairly serious look at Israel's way. In one sense the Israelites knew where they were headed, the same manner as we know today where we are headed.

It is doubtful that any of them had ever been to the Promised Land, even as none of us has never been to the Kingdom of God. But they knew the promise to Abraham because Hebrews 4:1-2 says the gospel was preached to them. Moses would have told them, and indeed he did. They knew the Promised Land's location, but it was still nonetheless a vague, generalized goal about which they knew few particulars. They particularly did not know anything about their pilgrimage through the wilderness that lay ahead, and this is where it got difficult for them. And this is where it becomes difficult for us!

It is on the way there. I said to you at the beginning of this sermon. I have already been on the way over 60 years. That is more than the Israelites. The Israelites were in store for a great number of

surprises. They knew nothing of its length, or of manna, of water from rocks, a huge flock of quail, or times of privation and scarcity. The most direct route to Canaan was through Philistia. But they were a warlike people, and surely they would have resisted. Israel was in no way prepared to overcome them. Israel did not know that but God did. And so even two years later, on the very borders of the Promised Land, they lost their faith and refused to confront the people of the land in war. And so here, at the very beginning of their pilgrimage, we mark the first of many completely unexpected twists and turns that would occur before they got to Canaan.

Are you beginning to get the picture? Your life under God is going to be full of twists and turns. Are we going to use our faith? Or are we just going to allow it to slide by?

I John 3:1-3 Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. [In a way, we do not know at all what Jesus is like in terms of what He looks like. Do we? We do not.] And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

How much do we understand regarding the preparations we need for God's Kingdom and have unwittingly maybe worked on in our lives during our calling in order to be prepared for our inheritance? I think I am fairly certain that the Israelites hardly ever gave that a thought while they were in the wilderness for 40 years.

Now, what are we going to do? About as far as we can go is say confidently, because of a scripture or two in the Bible, that we are going to assist Jesus Christ, and we are going to be a kingdom of priests. What do priests do? I do not think we have a great idea if we look at the priests today that are out in the world because surely God does not run things the way they do. So how much do we understand regarding the preparations we need for the God's Kingdom and have unwittingly worked on during our lives during our calling?

Would the uncertainties of Israel's journey create anxieties for *us* to bear? How well do you know what they went through? Well, like I said, what they went through is less important than the fact that they went through them. And they did not do well at all. A whole generation, except for a few people, *died* in the wilderness. What good did what they went through in the way of prospering them spiritually and physically? Is our mind truly fixed on faithfully following regardless of what the responsibility might be? We are commanded to live our life by faith, so we too, like the Israelites, must learn to trust Jesus Christ's judgments.

God says through Isaiah, that He knows the end from the beginning. We too may say that we know the end. The end is the Kingdom of God. But the reality is we have never been there. What is it really going to be like to live there? We can only make suppositions, guesses, of what it is going to be like to live eternal life. Maybe think of the greatest day you have ever faced in your life. And you think, "Well, it's going to be like that." Maybe it will not. I am sure that we are going to be facing a great many problems. The world is not going to be in good condition whenever that occurs.

So how do we get the opportunity to have practice fixing those things? Well, we are to learn them as we go along in our period of time that we are in *our* wilderness. So let us admit to it that we truly look through, as the apostle Paul says, "a glass darkly." And like the Israelites, we most surely have never been along this way by faith before, and so we are as unfamiliar on that count as the Israelites.

Numbers 9:15-23 Now on the day that the tabernacle was raised up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the Testimony; from evening until morning it was above the tabernacle like the appearance of fire. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, after that the children of Israel would journey; and in the place where the cloud settled, there the children of Israel would pitch their tents. At the command of the Lord, the children of Israel would journey, and at the command of the Lord they would camp; as long as the cloud stayed above the tabernacle they remained encamped. Even when the cloud continued long, many days above the tabernacle, the children of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not journey. So it was, when the cloud was above the tabernacle a few days: according to the command of the Lord they would remain encamped, and according to the command of the Lord they would journey. So it was, when the cloud remained only from evening until morning: when the cloud was taken up in the morning, then they were journey; whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud was taken up, they would journey. Whether it was two days, a month, or a year that the cloud remained above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would remain encamped and not journey; but when it was taken up, they would journey. At the command of the Lord they remained encamped, and at the command of the Lord they journeyed; they kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by the hand of Moses.

This inset of instruction is positioned on the first day of the first month of the second year after leaving Egypt began. The Tabernacle, the central place of worship, had just been established. In the analogy, we are to understand that God occupies the same position in relation to us. Did you hear that? We cannot literally see the cloud, but nonetheless, by faith, we know that God is there. And one of the major elements this section is establishing is not only God's presence with them, but His sovereignty over them at all times. In terms of their overall movements toward the Promised Land, which was the goal, He *always* triggered them.

Let this bore into you. If you are called and you are converted, He is with you and me *always*, regardless of where we are. His mind is focused on His Family that He is, along with Jesus Christ, preparing for the Kingdom of God. I want you to see that except for individual decisions that we make, God is in control of our lives—every day. So in terms of their overall movements toward the Promised Land, He always triggered them. That is what that section is there for. And even as He triggers their movements, He triggers *our* movements as well, because He is going to make sure that His children are prepared when Jesus Christ returns, so He will not let up.

If we are starting out on a journey, we make all kinds of advanced preparations in the hope that we can meet any eventuality. If it is the Feast of Tabernacles, we reserve motel space, clothing for every occasion, rain gear, sufficient money, credit cards, auto in good repair, plot your route, and project ahead. Now consider this contrast. God led Israel through the wilderness and they apparently had no advance notice whenever He would move. They had to be ready all the time! Somebody else is, in a sense, controlling life. Are we going to be content with that? Somebody bossing us around, as it were. We better be ready, and we better be ready to take orders. And Americans, we are finding out

in this corona thing, do not seem to follow orders very well. I know the feelings that were in me. I want to do what I want to do, when I want to do it, and how I want to do it. Now, we are receiving some of that with God.

Let us look at something else here. The word 'wilderness' does not necessarily mean a barren desert, though that might apply at times during that 40 years, But so would a jungle, so would Antarctica fit the meaning of what wilderness it means. The basic meaning of the biblical term wilderness is simply that of uncharted territory, a place in which there are no roads. I can say from my own experience there were times when that occurred to me, when life suddenly made a change. Like when I was ordained. I was not looking forward to being ordained. I was not campaigning for the job or anything. I was giving sermonettes in the congregation there in Pittsburgh, but that was about it. And then suddenly they moved to ordain me. So, that was quite a change.

You might want to recall that Moses asked his father-in-law, Hobab [Jethro], to be as eyes for us. What he wanted was Hobab to be a guide, so Moses would be as prepared as he could get, because Moses, although somewhat familiar with the wilderness area, might be able to do things that will alleviate situations. But the only visible guidance that the Israelites really had was the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, and it moved at God's command or sat at God's command.

So if you begin to wonder, why is not anything happening to me, or why is so much happening to me, there might be a clue in that. The cloud and the fire were symbols of God's presence. That circumstance by itself was somewhat comforting. But it also added a fairly stressful situation into this mix because they *never* knew when the cloud and the fire would move. God always set the timing. This is a truism, because God does not change patterns that work. So Israelites had to be in a more or less constant state of readiness with one eye cocked on the cloud. And in that sense, God was showing, teaching them, and teaching us now, that they were literally living by sight.

However, do we see God? We went through a scripture in Hebrews 2 when this applied, because it says in Hebrews, "We see Jesus." Now our lives, once converted, are totally tied to when and where the invisible God is leading. Do we allow Him to do so? If God handled the Israelites in this way, He is pretty much going to handle us in this way as well, because it works.

Numbers 13 beginning in verse 32. This, of course, is that time that I mentioned just near the beginning of the sermon where the Israelites fell into a condition of rebellion against Moses, and against God as well. They went into the land, the Promised Land, and the twelve men came back with a bad report. Now let us look at it.

Numbers 13:32-14:4 And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." So all the congregation lifted up their voice and cried, and the people wept that night. [This is only at the end of the second year, brethren.] And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let us elect a leader and return to Egypt."

So on this occasion, two years after they began their walking with God to the Promised Land, they met a challenge of greater magnitude than they ever expected they would have to make in the wilderness of their pilgrimage. God made Israel's way narrow and difficult, and so now they were ready to give up. And if we are following this analogy, God gives right in His Word that we should understand that when God made that unexpected turn of direction right at the beginning of their pilgrimage, it should signal us that He has more in mind than merely taking us to the Kingdom of God. It should signal us that there is far more preparation than we can begin to imagine in getting us ready for living in the Kingdom of God. For Israel, their life was just as stressful as ours, but in a somewhat different way and for much different purposes than it had been for them in Egypt.

Using this analogy as a backdrop, here is a major question for us to consider in relation to our calling. Knowing that we are required to live by faith, how would a people, who were slaves all their lives, use the liberty given them? This confronts us, too. Because it is not until we are converted that we begin our trek to the Kingdom of God. And during that time before, if we fit into this analogy, then we were slaves all of that time. So how would we use our liberty?

The answer is, unless there is overall guidance from above, they would, with a few adjustments, use it in the same way that they had been trained in their world—Egypt. Now, if you go back to the Ishmael thing, you can begin to see why Jesus said, "That guy will never be in the Kingdom of God the way it is. He's a slave. He doesn't think like a free person who has control of the impulse within us to sin." So what would they do? They would begin, or they would continue to on the journey there, turn to the terms, the systems, and so forth of how they had lived their life to that point. Now, we have to face this. Is ours any different than theirs?

Another vital question. How much experience had they had in governing themselves God's way in the land of Egypt? In Goshen? Well, the answer: As slaves, because they were slaves, it is entirely possible that others had structured their lives for their entire existence, and that entire existence was structured under Satan's dominion. From the time they got up in the morning until lights out at night, somebody else was telling them what to do, how to do, and when to do what it was that they did. And in Egypt, in their world, they were hardly ever confronted with making a truly meaningful choice, except within their families. And those choices were very important. But beyond a very small circle, a slave has few choices. Being free means the added responsibility of making choices relative to one's life within a way of life that one has never lived before. That is why the journey takes so long.

In one sense, we have to learn truth from the bottom up. Very important to consider is that background of spiritual, moral, and ethical instruction and decision-making they did have was from within a totally anti-God system.

So here is the question. Is it any different in the United States? It is not. We are living in a totally anti-God system, surrounded by it, and being almost forced to live at the mercy of those who set the dictates of the United States of America's population. We have to kind of take off on this a little bit. We are going to turn to do Deuteronomy 29 and I hope that I am giving you plenty of fodder to understand why it took them so long to march for that short period of time, short period of a mileage.

Deuteronomy 29:1-4 These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He made with them in Horeb. Now Moses called all Israel and said to them, "You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land—the great trials which your eyes have seen, the signs,

and those are great wonders. Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day."

Brethren, they went through the whole 40 years *unconverted*, except for a few. So on this occasion, after two years of walking with God to the Promised Land, they met a challenge of greater magnitude than they ever expected. And in the wilderness of their pilgrimage, God made Israel's way difficult and narrow. So Israel, we find here in Deuteronomy 29, never got the point of what was going on in their lives. But there is far less excuse for you and me. Well, they knew the name of the land where they were headed and to the general location, but they never grasped the significance of the land or of the significance of the events that they went through.

We are commanded to live our life by faith. So we too, like the Israelites, must learn to trust His judgment. The Israelites never grasped the significance of Moses or of Aaron, the giving of the law, sacrificing, being accepted into the presence of God, the priesthood, the tabernacle and the tabernacle ritual, the making of the covenant, manna, water from the rock, or the length of time that they trudged through the wilderness. Moses preached to them, but they still, brethren, never got it!

And I specifically went through that earlier in this sermon that, because we are converted, and even though we are going through things that are similar in terms of the pressures that are put on us, we better understand because we have been enabled by God to understand, and we better respond. They never made the proper connections because they allowed their then present difficulties to overshadow their trust in God's promises. And the result was the wilderness became strewn with their bones from Sinai to Canaan as they died in their misunderstandings.

We will end with just a little comparison with the United States of America. I will compare the world that we have come out of. A recent poll shows that still about 80 percent of Americans believe God exists, and that over 70 percent believe there is a heaven, and that about 65 percent to 70 percent (in another poll), think that they have an excellent chance of getting there.

But a very recent poll (I mean, this just hit my email box just within the past two weeks), revealed that only six percent of evangelical Christians—these are supposed to be the strongest people, biblically, and in life, in the whole United States—would admit that they looked at world news through the Bible. They do not have a Christian worldview. You know what they did to test these people? It was pretty good size test, I cannot remember the exact number of people they sent it to. These people gave these people 50 questions that they got from the Bible and tied it together with what is going on in the world. Only six percent handed in acceptable papers of the thousands they sent out.

We are not really living in a Christian world here in the United States, and even though those people way back in the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s were, I think on the whole, a great deal more righteous than the average American is today, it was not Christian then, either.

And here is something I just learned this week from a CD from the Heritage Foundation. The man who gives the commentary on that CD said that there were, amongst the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, some who believed we are Israel. Did you hear what I said? They believed that we are the Hebrews of the Bible. Now, just a few of them. You know who is one of them? Benjamin Franklin. He does not have a good reputation as being a Christian, but he did enough reading and so forth, and thinking, that he could piece things together that maybe these people are the Hebrews. Interesting.

