Wandering The Wilderness In Faith

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In last month's "Personal," we saw that the older generation of the Israelites whom God had freed from slavery in Egypt died in the wilderness. The story of their journey through the wilderness shows that they never overcame their slave mentality, the mind-set they brought with them from Egypt. Their thinking—and thus their attitudes and conduct—constantly reverted to the way it had been molded in Egypt. Despite witnessing awesome miracles, enduring terrible plagues that demonstrated God's mercy upon them and His punishment of the Egyptians, living "under the cloud" and having their daily needs supplied directly by God, the Israelites found the wilderness to be nothing more than a huge cemetery in which they wandered for forty years.

The warning is clear to those of us "on whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Corinthians 10:11). In this type of our spiritual journey, Canaan, the Promised Land, represents the Kingdom of God. But those older Israelites never made it there! They fell short of the goal because a carnal mind, shaped and hardened by this world into inordinate self-concern, so dominated their choices that they dropped like so many flies.

In graphic language the apostle Paul writes, "Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness?" (Hebrews 3:17). According to a number of commentaries, the last phrase indicates a scattering of dismembered bodies, as if they had been left unburied. These "corpses" were the same people who came out of Egypt with great joy, exulting in their new-found liberty. They yearned for a settled and free life in a land that was their own. But, instead of knowing the joy and plenty of the Promised Land, they chose to sentence themselves to live a life of homeless wandering in a barren land and to die and perhaps be buried in an unmarked grave. Chosen to be the beneficiaries of God's great blessings in a rich land, they instead lived poor and hungry in the wilderness, discontented and often at war because of their sins. Their example ought to be a sobering warning.

In Hebrews 3:19, Paul puts his finger on the source of their problem, why their heart could not be changed, why they consistently and persistently sinned and rebelled: "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief." Paul later turns this thought into an admonition for us:

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. (Hebrews 4:1-2)

Not only did Israel have the witness of numerous demonstrations of God's presence and power among them to provide a foundation for faith, but they were also given the Word of God by His servants Moses and Aaron. In addition, they had living examples of faith in Moses, Aaron (most of the time), Joshua, Caleb and others. God supplied these men with gifts by His Spirit as a testimony that should have provided more incentive for the Israelites to believe Him. But Hebrews 3:17 says He was angry with them forty years! If ever a people almost drove God to the point of exasperation, it was Israel in the wilderness.
We must not allow such a powerful lesson to pass by unheeded. Paul agrees, "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

The lesson is clear. Those who believe God reveal their faith by obeying Him. Those who do not believe, disobey. Hebrews 3:12 warns, "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God." Unbelief is evidence of an evil heart, and an evil heart departs from God. Like Hebrews 3:16-4:2, this verse equates unbelief with disobedience.

**Living By Faith**

How important is faith? "For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him" (Hebrews 10:37-38). "The just shall live by faith" is both a statement of fact about the basis of a Christian's life and a command. It is so important that it appears once in the Old Testament and three times in the New (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11). In each case, the context is somewhat different, but its importance to a Christian's salvation is not lost.

The concept is not difficult to understand. Paul further clarifies it in II Corinthians 5:7: "For we walk by faith, and not by sight." A simple definition of *faith* in *Webster's New World Dictionary* is "complete trust, confidence, or reliance." At the end of the definitions, "belief" is listed as a synonym. *Belief* means "faith, esp. religious faith; trust or confidence." The dictionary definitions show that the two words are virtually synonymous. However, in the Bible and in practical application a very wide difference separates merely believing and living by faith.

The practical application of faith is more than simply acknowledging the reality of God. Living by faith involves qualities that are better expressed by the word "trust." This kind of faith produces loyalty or faithfulness expressed in the Christian's life by works of obedience.

Do you think for a moment that the Israelites in the wilderness disbelieved that God existed? Some few may have argued that the miracles they had experienced from the arrival of Moses in Egypt until they died in the wilderness were nothing more than natural phenomena. There are always some doubters and scoffers of that sort (II Peter 3:3-7).

But the vast majority of Israelites could not deny to themselves God's mighty acts on their behalf. They had heard the voice of God at Mount Sinai, had seen a wind from God part the Red Sea and had escaped death on Passover while the Egyptian firstborn had died. But when God required a higher level of obedience to follow His cloud across the wilderness and depend on Him to supply their every need, the record shows they did not trust Him. Their loyalty dissolved, and they rebelled! They did not have it within them to live, or walk, by faith.

"Walk" is frequently used in the Bible to indicate movement through life. When used figuratively, the context shows the manner or condition of the "walk." For example, "walk honestly" (Romans 13:13, KJV); "walk worthy of the calling" (Ephesians 4:1); and "no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind" (verse 17) are examples of a manner of living life. "Walk by faith" (II Corinthians 5:7); "walk in the flesh" (II Corinthians 10:3); and "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4) are examples of living in a certain state or condition.
The Israelites of the Exodus definitely lived according to the flesh, fulfilling the desires of their bodies and minds. They conducted their lives as if God did not exist, as though they would never have to answer to Him or anybody else. They lived seemingly without regard for what He said and with little or no concern about consequences to themselves or their posterity. They simply moved in the direction their carnal impulses drove them.

Somewhere along the way, they lost the vision of entering the promised homeland. They forgot about settling on their own property and living free under the government and laws of God. Yes, that older generation literally walked in following the cloud as it moved toward the Promised Land, but their manner of life under the cloud corresponded to living in darkness. So, they never made it to Canaan.

**The Right Kind of Faith**

We can tell whether we have the right kind of faith. Hebrews 11:1 provides a definition: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." *Hupostasis*, the word translated "substance," means "that which underlies the apparent; that which is the basis of something, hence, assurance, guarantee and confidence" (Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, p. 1426). The English "substance" is built from a prefix and a root which together mean "that which stands under." *Webster's* defines it as "the real or essential part or element of anything; essence, reality, or basic matter." It is very similar in meaning to *hupostasis*.

Paul is saying that, for Christians, faith underlies what is seen externally in the conduct of their lives. Underlying a building is its foundation, and in most buildings, the foundation is rarely seen. If it is seen at all, usually only a small portion is visible, but it is there. If no foundation exists, the building soon becomes crooked and warped. In most cases, it will collapse and be completely unusable.

Since Paul says, "We walk by faith, not by sight," we understand that underlying the conduct of a Christian's life is not merely believing that God is, but a constant and abiding trust in Him. Since it is impossible for God to lie, we trust that what God has recorded for us to live by is absolute and must be obeyed, and that it will work in our lives regardless of what may be apparent to the senses.

How much of what you do is really motivated by an implicit trust in God's Word? This is how we can tell whether we are living by faith. We must be honest in our evaluation though. We find it very easy to shade the truth through self-deception. We justify disobedience by rationalizing around God's clear commands or examples, saying that our circumstance is special because . . . (fill in the blank).

If we are honest, we also have to admit that Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego, Paul, Christ and a whole host of others could also have rationalized that surely their circumstances were special. But in their cases, faith undergirded how they lived even when the going really got rough.

We like to think of ourselves as rising to the occasion when a time of great crisis arises. We all hope to emulate what the heroes of faith did. But as great as they were, Jesus says in John 15:13-14, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." It is very easy to think of the sacrifice implied in "lay[ing] down one's life" as dying for another in one moment of time. Though that may occasionally occur, the context shows this sacrifice within the framework of friendship. Friendship occurs over months and years, not just in one moment in time.
In true friendships, because we are eager to help, we willingly spend ourselves ungrudgingly, without tallying the cost. Friends open their hearts and minds to each other without secrecy, which one would not do for a mere acquaintance. True friends allow the other to see right in and know them as they really are. Friends share what they have learned. Finally, and most importantly for this article, a friend trusts the one who believes in him, and risks that the other will never doubt his loyalty but look upon him with proven confidence.

Though the principle given by Christ is applicable to all friendships, He has one specific friendship as His primary focus: ours with Him, or more generally, ours with God. Proverbs 18:24 says, "A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." That friend is Jesus of Nazareth, but He made it very clear that if we are His friends, we will show it in our obedience to His commands. But before we can obey, we must trust Him.

Take a moment to evaluate yourself. Are you as open and frank with Him as He is with us through His Word? Often our prayers are stiff and formal, not truly honest. Besides that, sometimes we become bored in His presence and soon have nothing to say to Him. Is it not true that we do not trust Him as fully as we should? That we are often quick to doubt Him? That we easily grow suspicious of Him? That we lose heart or fear that He has forgotten us? That He is not really trying or is unequal to the task of shepherding us into His Kingdom? Though He has never failed us, we are so quick to suspect and blame Him!

Israel did all of these things in the wilderness because they did not believe God. Much to our dismay, we do them now, in our time of salvation!

The Faith That Saves

Faith's importance to salvation is accentuated by Ephesians 2:8, where Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." Faith plays a role in the entire process until we enter the Kingdom of God. It is the sum of what God is doing in our lives: "Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent"" (John 6:29). In the wonderfully "meaty" fourth and fifth chapters of Romans, Paul mentions faith a dozen times, almost all concerning justification, being made righteous or having access to grace, and thus, having the hope of the glory of God.

The faith that saves has its beginning when God, on His own initiative, calls us (John 6:44) and leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). He does this by His Spirit guiding us into all truth (John 16:7-14). Stirring up our minds to knowledge, His Spirit enables us to perceive from a perspective we never before seriously considered. This, combined with the confrontation that occurs with the carnal mind when we are forced to choose what to do with this precious truth, gives birth to a living faith, a faith that works, a faith that walks in godliness.

This would never occur if God did not first do His part. We would never find the true God on our own or understand His gospel of the Kingdom of God. We would never be able to choose the real Jesus, our Savior and Elder Brother, from the mass of false christs created in the minds of men. Not knowing what to repent of or toward, we would never repent.

As miraculous and powerful as God's liberation of Israel from bondage was, even more so and of greater importance is the breaking of our bondage to Satan, this world and human nature. This is why Ephesians 2:8 says the faith that saves is "the gift of God." Israel's release from Egypt was God's gift
too. Regardless of how much they cried out to Him, the Israelites would never have left Egypt without Him. If God had not been merciful and faithful, if He had not been trustworthy, they would never have been freed.

What did God lead us to that sparked this saving faith in us? He led us to His Word. We can glean a measure of faith from observing God's creation, but this faith cannot save because it does not reveal His purpose. It gives us no direction or outlet for the soaring thoughts and creative energies of the God-given gift of a mind trained in His image. But do we find God's purpose and His revelation of Himself in His Word. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

Of course, this does not mean that all who hear the message will understand and accept it. Without the message, however, there would be nothing to believe in, nothing that one could trust to lead him to salvation. In practical application, this means that one should always most carefully evaluate the message being preached rather than the man or the corporate body he represents. **It is essential that we put our trust in the right teachings.** Most of the people who claim to be "Christian" are living by false gospels.

The Bible shows this principle from beginning to end. Adam and Eve put their trust in Satan's message rather than God's (Genesis 3:1-6). The children of Israel listened to Korah, Dathan and the two-hundred fifty leaders (Numbers 16:1-3), and later they succumbed to the Moabites' appeal to sexual license (Numbers 25:1-3). In each case many died as a witness to us. After Solomon's reign, Israel followed Jeroboam's false message. Christ prophesied that many would proclaim that He (Jesus) is the Christ yet deceive many.

**We Must Choose to Live by Faith**

We must learn the valuable lessons regarding faith shown in the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness because they have direct application to us (Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:11). The people knew the history of their ancestors with whom God had worked, yet they chose to forget His graciousness to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. God demonstrated His presence to them, but the Israelites chose to disregard Him. They had the gospel preached to them, and they chose not to believe it. They had among them the godly witness of men of faith, men in whom the Spirit of God dwelled, and the rebellious children of Israel chose not to follow them.

God does not ask us to believe His message without evidence. He presents us with an overwhelming body of proofs that He does exist and is working out a great purpose that now includes us. We would not even be in a position to read this had He not personally acted to stir our minds to understand things of His Spirit. He has given us His Spirit that we might know the things of God.

When we have faith, we trust God that what He has said and promised are true. Though we may at times feel all alone in the midst of a trial, we can take comfort that so did all those others of the faithful who went before us. The very nature of faith demands that such a feeling of "going out on a limb" occur. If we had what we desire, we would not need faith (see Hebrews 11:13).

Now the weight of responsibility for making choices grounded on trust in God's Word has fallen upon us. It is awesome to think of ourselves as baptized into the history of the same spiritual
company of those greats of the past, men and women of faith whose names are emblazoned in our memories. We must not forget either their standing with God because of their faith or Israel's failure in the wilderness because they did not trust Him.

Remember the warning and advice God gave to Israel in the days before they entered the Promised Land:

For this commandment which I command you today, it is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.
(Deuteronomy 30:11-20)

The choice is ours.