

"The Heaviest Wait"
[Numbers 14:1-4, 26-35](#)
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27 September 2015

Dying in the wilderness. That doesn't sound like an attractive proposition for anyone, and especially not for an entire nation of 600,000 people—people who are only out in the wilderness to begin with because that's where God had taken them. By the time of today's story, they had been in the wilderness about 15 months, and this was about the fifth time that they had cried out to their leaders and to God and said, "why did you take us out here to die in the wilderness," or "it would be better for us to die out here in the wilderness..."

That's five times in 15 months, which comes out to once every three months, which means that if they were taking quarterly reports on the people's morale, things looked pretty bad. They asked Moses why he took them out to die in the wilderness. When things got tough, they said they should have stayed in Egypt instead of going out into the wilderness to die. When things looked worse, they said it would be better for them to die in the desert than go on.

And, while it would be easy to blame the people, or a few rabble-rousers, for their low morale, their leaders had some problems, too. As much as the people complained about their situation, Moses complained to God about the people. Sometimes Moses asked God to have mercy on the people, but just as often, he complained about them. A couple of weeks ago, we found that Moses even asked to die in the desert. One time, Aaron even allowed the people to make a golden calf so that they could worship the calf instead of God, just to appease the people.

So, needless to say, the people weren't always thrilled about the journey on which God was taking them. You can't really blame them, though. Sure, they had been slaves in Egypt. They were forced to make bricks, which was a horrible job of hauling mud and straw and then waiting for it to dry together, then hauling them wherever they were supposed to go. They were slaves for about 400 years or so, and it was a difficult existence. But as slaves, they were at least somewhat comfortable. Life was hard, but at least it was predictable, and they had their basic needs. It wasn't ideal, but it was life.

So even after 15 months—or especially after 15 months—they started to miss the old comforts. Over and over, the Israelites had said, "it would be better for us to die in the wilderness than to go on like this." God got angry every time they said this, but in today's passage, we discover that He granted them their wish: to die in the desert. Other than Joshua and Caleb, nobody of the adult generation that left Egypt would live to reach the Promised Land. Even though they had seen its goodness in the grapes and figs and pomegranates that the spies brought back, none of them would ever taste it. In fact, they

would spend 40 years in the wilderness as shepherds, wandering from place to place, wherever they could find enough vegetation for their flocks.

That sounds like quite a punishment, and it was. Even though the nation of Israel would eventually see the Promised Land, the actual people—the individuals—to whom it was promised would not. So yes, it does seem to be a big dose of punishment, but there is another way to look at this.

It is easy to look at life in terms of getting from Point A to Point B. If “Point B” is where we want to get, then we don’t want to take too long to get there. We can look at our lives of faith in the same way. I think...well, I hope...that all of us want to have a closer relationship with God, or we want God to do something in our lives, or the lives of our families and friends. That’s point B. Perhaps your Point B involves God leading you through something in your life, or helping you to restore a relationship, or developing a new relationship. Perhaps your Point B is something personal—a point of greater peace, or a purpose that God has not fully shown you.

Maybe you are at Point A in that journey, or maybe you feel like you left Point A some time ago and are currently in the midst of a journey. For that matter, there are probably some who think that we are at Point B, but that’s a false assumption, because there is always another place that God can take us. So, whenever we think that we are at Point B, we are actually at another Point A; but wherever we are, I think that it’s always the case that we would like to get to the next point as quickly as possible.

But the problem with that is that the person who we were at Point A is not the same person that we are going to be at Point B. In fact, in order to get to Point B, we have to be transformed, and we have to let God be the one who transforms us. Until we are willing to let God do His work on us, we cannot arrive at Point B.

Just look at the Israelites here. In 15 months, they had made it from Egypt to the border of the Promised Land. They were right there at Point B. But when the spies came back and told them that it was going to be really difficult to get to the Promised Land, they got scared and even thought about going all the way back to Egypt.

Joshua and Caleb reminded them that God would enable them to take the Promised Land, but even though God had done miracles and signs for them and had brought them this far, they still didn’t have enough faith to believe that God would help them take the land. Because they didn’t trust God, they couldn’t go and take it.

Really, the very fact that they would even say things like, “It would be better for us to die out here,” and “Let’s go back to Egypt,” proves that they were not a people who were capable of taking the Promised Land and living in it. If that was their attitude before going into the Promised Land, then what would they have done when faced with battle?

If they didn't believe that God could lead them before battle, then they weren't suddenly going to find their faith in battle.

In other words, they were standing on the cusp of Point B—the Promised Land—but they were still the people who had left Point A—Egypt. So while God sentenced them to 40 more years in the wilderness, it wasn't just a punitive act; it was a gracious act. In order to be the transformed people that they needed to be, it would take 40 years of being shepherds in the wilderness, trusting that God was still leading them...

...and God *was* still leading them. Even though they were basically standing still, they were still moving toward the Promised Land. They may not have been getting there geographically, but they were getting there Spiritually. God was still providing them with food every day, and He was still present with them in the tabernacle in the middle of their camp. God gave them additional laws to abide by to help them grow, and He still appeared in His glory from time to time.

His glory was still among them. In fact, the Hebrew word for “glory,” “kavod,” actually means “weight.” It means “heavy.” God's presence still weighed over them, even during this time. These 40 years were indeed their heaviest wait.

In the next few weeks, we will hear about some more of the things that happened during this time span, but the reality of it was that God spent 40 years transforming the people into who they needed to be. After that time had passed, the Israelites were no longer a people who remembered Egypt, but a people who had grown up and grown with God in the wilderness. Instead of being a people who had come from Egypt and were frustrated by the wilderness, they were a people who were in the wilderness and were ready to go where God would lead them. They were no longer the people who had left Point A, and they were finally a people who were ready to reach Point B.

So what does this say to us?

In the New Testament, in the book of I Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says this to his friends:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by

the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. ([1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#), portions)

Listen again to verse 11: "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come."

Timing. When the Israelites got to the border of the Promised Land, the timing was not right because they were not ready. God kept forming them, and eventually the timing was right.

Over and over in the Gospels, we find Jesus himself saying, "my time has not yet come, my time has not yet come." But eventually we are told that his hour was near, and eventually his time came.

But as Paul points out, timing for us is different than it was for the Israelites. The story of the Israelites stands as a lesson for us and quite often as a warning, but our sense of timing is very different.

For us, God is not leading us to a Promised Land, or to some bright future that we cannot yet see. On the contrary, God has already shown us the future. Another saying that Jesus repeats in the Gospels is, "The Kingdom of God is among you." In Christ, the Kingdom of God is among us. In the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God is among us.

In his death and resurrection, Jesus opened up that Kingdom to us, so that when we see God's glory, when we see His grace, and when God does transform us and lead us to new points in our lives, we know that those are signs of God's Kingdom. In one sense, we are already there, but in another sense, we are not fully there yet.

Likewise, in one sense we are similar to the Israelites, because we are wanderers and pilgrims in this world, while we wait for the next. But in another sense, we know that we have a place in that world because Jesus has gone there ahead of us, and because the Holy Spirit shows us signs of it.

So, our Point B is not to get somewhere—our Point B is not to get to a Promised Land, or even to get to Heaven. Our ultimate point is to get to Jesus. If we are not ready to get to Jesus, to receive his grace and his truth, then we aren't ready for the Kingdom.

And while this is true for our individual lives, we cannot neglect the importance of our life together as followers of Jesus. We are together for a reason, and we have identified that reason as “to know Christ and make him known.” We are to do this for one another, and we are to do it for those outside our building, as well. In fact, God didn’t simply take the Israelites into the Promised Land so that they could sit there together forever, reading the law to one another and gathering in the Temple.

No, God put them there so that the whole world could see His goodness and power through them. Even though they were a distinct people, the time came when God appeared as one of them so that everyone can be a part of His people. As Jesus said after his resurrection: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

So while we are to know Christ, and be transformed by his Holy Spirit into greater and greater knowledge of him, we are also to make him known, not just to whoever walks through our doors. We are to make him known to all, like Joshua and Caleb saying, “look how good this Kingdom of God is!”

God gives us this purpose, and it is His purpose that makes us a people, along with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ, wherever they are. As we wait for Jesus’s return, we are to share the knowledge that we are not idle wanderers, but people on a journey to the place he has prepared, being formed and transformed all the way there.