



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

MARCH 2010 | VOL: 3 | NO: 3



WEEK ONE:: MARCH 7

IN THE WILDERNESS, PART 3: I CANNOT TAKE THIS:: NUMBERS 20.1-13

Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers repeat a similar story over and over and over again, exposing a basic human instinct. Here is the story most basically: The Israelites are unhappy with their situation and begin to grumble and complain amongst themselves, wishing they could be back in Egypt, happy as captives. Each time they assemble against their leaders, Moses and Aaron. Moses and Aaron in turn bring their complaint to the Lord, who satisfies their request.

First, just after the Lord separates the Red Sea and rescues the Israelites from their pursuers, the people begin to complain that they have only bitter water (Exodus 15: 22-27). The irony in this instance is that the people saw a God who lifted a sea from its bed, but did not believe He would grant them enough water to drink daily. After Moses and Aaron's request, He gives them sweet water to drink (Exodus 15: 25).

This same situation is echoed in the New Testament just after Jesus fed a crowd of four thousand with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish (Matthew 15: 32-39). Jesus and his disciples then travel by boat to Magadan. Here they have an altercation with a group of Pharisees. Soon after, the disciples realize they brought no bread on their journey. Jesus uses the situation to metaphorically warn the disciples of the Pharisees teaching, saying, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16: 6). The disciples' response? "He said that because we did not bring any bread," (Matthew 16: 7) as if Jesus was taunting them for their forgetfulness, instead of trying to teach them. Jesus reminds them, "Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?" (Matthew 16:9,10). Humanity has a history of quickly forgetting the Lord's faithfulness.

Another instance of the story occurs in Numbers 11. After the Lord grants the Israelites water in the desert in Exodus, he continues to bless them with manna that rains down from the heavens for them daily. They are not left to fend for themselves in the midst of the desert, the Lord grants them a daily provision. By Numbers, however, the people are sick of manna. They grind it, they beat it, they boil it, they make cakes of it, but when it comes down to it, it is still just manna. Following their pattern, they complain, they regret leaving Egypt, and assemble against Moses and Aaron. Moses turns his complaint to the Lord. The Lord provides seventy elders to share Moses' burden in caring for His people. He then gives the people their request, meat, and probably more of it than they ever wanted.

Finally, in Numbers 20, we see a final depiction of man's struggle to come to the Lord with complaint, instead of grumbling amongst themselves. This time, the Israelites want water again. Despite the fact that the Lord parted the seas in front of their very eyes, despite the fact that he provided water just after their unbelief, and despite the fact that just months later the situation was repeated and God drew water from a rock for them to drink (Exodus 17), they still wish for the "comforts" of captivity in Egypt. Here, we see once more the Lord honor Moses' request on behalf of the people, though they have not presented it to Him themselves.



God does not ask us to hide our complaint, as Moses was quick to present his before the Lord, nor does He ask us to bear it alone, as Moses was granted seventy men to share his burden. However, He does ask us to remember His faithfulness and believe that He hears our cries in the desert.

CONNECTED TEXTS

Exodus 15:22-27
Matthew 15:32-16:12
Numbers 11
Numbers 20: 1-13
Psalm 77
Philippians 4:6-7

DISCUSSION STARTERS

What types of things do you complain about on a daily basis? Who do you complain to?

QUESTIONS

Throughout the rest of the Old and New Testament, God asks His people to remember His faithfulness. Read through Psalm 77. It is the plea of a servant of the Lord, who in desperation is trying to remember the Lord's faithfulness. What is a time when the Lord was faithful to you? How can you use this memory during difficult times?

Read Philippians 4:6-7. So often we feel pressured as believers to put on a happy face and praise the Lord in times of trial. Is this supported by scripture? What scripture do you know that supports or disproves this habit of hiding our feelings?

What were the differences between Moses' response to hardship as opposed to the Israelites'? Which do you more closely identify with? The Israelites often turned to each other for comfort and to blame, overlooking presenting their requests before the Lord. How can you relate to this?

The story of Moses is also one of a struggling leader. The people under Moses are often, perhaps even always complaining about his decisions. What is Moses' response? How do you respond when your leadership is questioned?

The Israelites often wish for a life that God delivered them from. How can you relate to this response?

ACTION STEP

One ancient tradition is to make a pile of rocks to recognize the Lord's faithfulness, an altar to physically mark a place where the Lord moved in the midst of His people (Genesis 28: 16-18). This altar acts as a tangible reminder of the Lord's faithfulness when difficult times arise. Make an effort this week to recognize the Lord's faithfulness in some physical way.



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WEEK ONE NOTES



WEEK 2::MARCH 14

IN THE WILDERNESS, PART 2: I CANNOT TAKE THIS::NUMBERS 21.4-9

This story in Numbers 21 does not seem fair. The Israelites complain against Moses and God for the basic necessities of life—food and water—and God responds by sending poisonous snakes that kill many Israelites. It seems overly harsh of a God whom Moses called, “the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7). If God loves the Israelites, why would he not only send them into a harsh environment full of life-and-death challenges, but then further their pain by sending poisonous snakes? It seems as if God has gone too far in his use of difficult circumstances to bring the Israelites around to trusting him.

There may not be a fully satisfying answer to this question, from the modern perspective, that would justify why God did what he did. Scholars talk about how it foreshadows Christ’s work on the cross—the snake being lifted up on a pole, as Christ was lifted up on the cross, and all who look to him will find salvation. As a symbol it has powerful effect, but at the cost of killing people? One could also surmise how rebellious the Israelites were becoming at this point, and assume that the rebellion was so bad that if God didn’t make a statement of his power by killing some, that the Israelites would disband their community and many more would perish in the desert. That may have been the case, but we can’t really know. The question comes back around to the issue of life: is it really justified by God to kill some and let others live in order that the remaining people would come around to trusting him?

This is not a one-time occurrence, either. Through Israel’s forty years of wandering in the desert, there are several occasions where God allows or directly brings about death or hardship in order that the remaining Israelites might turn to Him. The question of fairness is brought up for us as observers again and again, and God’s character is really at the heart of the matter.

The character of God is mysterious and does not always operate according to what is “fair.” What we can note about the incident, and the many similar incidents in the desert, is much more striking than simple black-and-white fairness. To a greater degree than life or death, God cares about molding people’s attitudes. He cares more about the patience of the Israelites, and whether they would turn to him, than he does about their *physical life*. It’s astounding to think that God would go to these measures. From God’s perspective, death is inevitable, but turning to Him is not, and He is willing to risk the death of some so that others might change their inner selves.

The implications of knowing this about God’s character is enough to shake us up. God is jealous for our inner lives, for shaping our attitudes towards Him and our thought patterns, so much so that if He has to bring hardship, disease, or even death, into our lives, He will do so in the risky gamble of attempting to direct our hearts. The soul of a person is what is at stake for Him; any means He has to bring us closer to Him, He will use.



RELATED VERSES

Deuteronomy 8:1-5, Deuteronomy 4:23-25

QUESTIONS

Read Deuteronomy 8:1-5. The passage is part of a speech Moses gives the people of Israel before going into the promise land. Discuss these verses in light of the passage in Numbers 21.

Why does understanding the character of God matter?

Read Deuteronomy 4:23-25. In general, jealousy is not considered a particularly “good” quality. What is God jealous *for*? How does God’s jealousy reconcile with his sense of justice and fairness?

If God purposely puts trials in your life, what is he risking?

Discuss one trial that you’ve gone through that has helped shape you into a better person.

ACTION STEP

Make a list of trials that God has brought you through that have made you into a better person. Thank God for them.



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WEEK TWO NOTES



**WEEK THREE :: MARCH 21
IN THE WILDERNESS, PART 5 :: NUMBERS 13**

A young girl had made it two months into her freshman year of college. Drained from a new schedule, a new place, and new faces, the recently released midterm grades were the cherry on top. Though she prided herself in high school on being a straight-A student, the D on the carbon paper stared back at her hard, confirming that she could no longer make that claim.

Dejected she trudged across campus to her dorm. None of her floormates were around, and had they been, it wouldn't have mattered—she hadn't made close friends with any of them. Her boyfriend was still back at home and would have still been at work so he couldn't pick up the phone.

Suddenly, all the promise that college and newness had offered vanished. She curled into a ball on her bed and began to cry. She hadn't liked high school—she couldn't wait to graduate just a few months before; but in the midst of her frustration, going back was all she could think about. Adjusting to the roughness of college didn't seem worth facing the pain and fear, and from where she stood, it seemed she'd never make it through. Instead she yearned for the comfort of what was familiar.

Even if you didn't have this experience, we've all wound up in a place that ended up completely different from our expectations. We pictured a glorious place, got dropped in the middle of something seemingly God-forsaken, and what is the first response? To look back.

The Israelites did this too, believe it or not. Wandering the desert, suddenly even slavery in Egypt seemed a better alternative. They lost sight of what lay ahead should they make it through the desert, and in a state of weakness and vulnerability, they longed for what was behind them.

There are a couple of reasons that our natural tendency is to revert. First, we don't like what is unfamiliar to us. Being surrounded by unknown things and not knowing where the next step will lead—that's a scary feeling. Most of us are planners by nature, at least in some sense, and we're conditioned to drive ourselves forward, not wander aimlessly.

Secondly, it's difficult to face pain. When the unknown resembles a desert—when it's hard—we're forced to meet our true selves. Perhaps you think a loving God wouldn't put you in that situation. Perhaps you don't like the you that you find in the desert. That's when the pain of yesterday seems to beat out the pain of today.

But just as God was with the Israelites in the desert, he doesn't leave or forsake us today (Hebrews 13:5). And even when it doesn't seem like it, God has a plan and there is purpose to the desert. We must simply focus ourselves on being present in it, pushing forward through it, and willing ourselves to not turn back.



CONNECTED TEXTS

Numbers 13
Numbers 14:1-4
Philippians 3:12-26
Hebrews 13:5

DISCUSSION STARTERS

What's a scary situation in your life that has put past pain into perspective, perhaps even made you want to choose the past over the present?

QUESTIONS

Why is what is unknown so scary to us, regardless of personality? What are some ways that it could be exciting if we could wrap our minds around that perspective.

We are humans who know nothing of the future; and the God we worship is an all-knowing God. Does that give you peace or is it unsettling? Why?

How can our minds manipulate situations? Talk about the Israelites yearning for slavery over wandering in the desert. What is the modern-day equivalent?

Talk about what you're striving for. What are your promises from God? Do they keep you moving forward?

The Israelites were in the desert for 40 years. What is it like to remain in a difficult life situation for an extended period of time? How can you long for what is ahead, not behind, and still be present while learning in your wilderness situation?

ACTION STEP

This week, let go of something in your past—pain, fear, hurt, an old relationship. Hand it over to God and pray that he leads you to reconcile that old part of yourself with where you are currently. Find something symbolic to represent your forward motion—coffee with a friend to heal a relationship; removing memorabilia from a past part of your life; documenting the changes in your heart as you move forward.



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WEEK THREE NOTES

**WEEK FOUR :: MARCH 28****IN THE WILDERNESS, PART 6: THE GOD OF THE WILDERNESS:: 1 KINGS 18:21-39**

Wilderness can mean many things depending on one's geographical context. In general, *wilderness* is any open expanse that is uncultivated and/or uninhabited. In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), wilderness was the desert. What comes to mind when you think of a desert? Sand dunes? Intolerable heat? Probably something like that. What about this: *a place filled with God's presence?*

Because the Israelites wandered in the desert/wilderness for 40 years, Yahweh (the God of the Israelites) was considered God of the desert – which, for all practical purposes, also meant God of the uninhabited wasteland, the no-good land that couldn't sustain life.

Contrarily, Baal was the name for popular false gods in the eastern Mediterranean area (Baal simply means "lord"). Baal was eventually considered the god of all life, controlling sustaining entities such as rain, fertility, and agriculture. The Old Testament is filled with Hebrew prophets – guys like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Ezekiel – who busied themselves warning Israel about the eminent dangers of worshipping the false god, Baal .

From our perspective, it's hard not to blame the Israelites for wanting to forsake Yahweh for Baal . After all, Yahweh led the people into barren wasteland and let them walk in circles for 40 years. From all appearances, Yahweh wasn't making much sense.

The scene in 1 Kings is equivalent to a prize-fight: two heavyweights going head-to-head. The irony is that Yahweh, God of the wasteland and barrenness, delivered fire and rain, while Baal, the supposed "god of all life," never showed up.

The perspective of the desert changed significantly over the next several millennia. Around the 3rd century, Christian hermit monks began moving to the desert around Egypt, intentionally entering a life of solitude and spiritual conflict. These men are known as the "Desert Fathers" or "Desert Saints," and they believed that the desert was a fitting place to engage struggle. They believed that spending time in the desert wilderness "forces us to face our weaknesses squarely, strips away illusion and pretension, and enables us to recognize our absolute need for God."¹

Today, we experience desert lands in our life. We refer to them as "dry spells" or as "dark nights of the soul," and they are times when God seems distant and we're circling around in the wilderness of career and community. Wilderness can feel very isolated and disparaging, yet with its implied (and actualized) difficulties, the desert is "a place that humans can make nothing of themselves, where only God can do anything."² It is God who sustains us through these seasons, and we often emerge with a renewed faith that had become relaxed and too easy claim.

¹ *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries*, p 81.

² Same reference, p 82.



CONNECTED TEXTS

1 Kings 18:21-39
1 Corinthians 1:18
1 Corinthians 1:26-29
2 Corinthians 12:9

DISCUSSION STARTERS

If we believe that God is truly the “God of the wilderness,” then why do we so dread those seasons of wilderness and wondering in our own life (seasons when it seems like there are many more questions than answers)?

QUESTIONS

Why is it so difficult to heed the warnings not to worship false gods and only focus the attention of our hearts on God?

Have there been any moments for you like what occurred on the mountain when the people realized that Yahweh was God and Baal was not? They “prostrated themselves” before the LORD...

Can you and your small group identify some of the false gods that our society worships? That you worship? What are some consequences that you can discern of continuing down these paths?

Consider the idea that God is made strong in our weaknesses. How does this play out in your life?

How can you and your small group guard against becoming overly comfortable with your faith to the point that it is something that’s disregarded in your life?

ACTION STEP

If wilderness is space that is essentially unknown to you and, therefore, uninhabited according to your understanding of the place, take some time to insert something different into your schedule. Go out of your way to explore an area of the city or the mountains that you would consider “wilderness” and ask God to meet you as you expose yourself to Him in this new way.



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WEEK FOUR NOTES