

## Series – Surviving the Wilderness

VBC

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Numbers 14:1-11

October 30-31, 2004

### “Do We Despise God”

Introduction: Nikki

Read Numbers 14:1-11

Reading this, I asked myself what God might be saying here

- Is the key theme FEAR?
- For it would be fitting to speak about fear

This whole week has been one of candidates, commercials, Osama, and everyone else preying on our fears

- We should all be paranoid, crippled wrecks by now, if we have believed everything we have heard

But this is not a text about fear so much as it is about falling away, in the midst of grace

- You can't help but ask:
  - How is it God's tangible presence was amongst these people
  - Delivering them with His outstretched arm
  - Being faithful and generous
    - Here in this wilderness He generously provided the rules for living (Exodus 20ff)
      - Laws intended to promote health and happiness and holiness - and intimacy with God
      - Laws that intended to make them God's treasured possession (Exodus 3:6)
  - He guided them by day and by night (Num 9)
    - Searching for places to camp, showing them the way they should go
  - Provided them their food miraculously every morning, and their drink when they became thirsty (Exodus 16)
  - He poured out His blessings on them (Numbers 6)
    - Putting His very name on His people like a brand
    - That they would be a blessing to the nations
  - Promised His protection and power (Exodus 23)
  - “I will send My terror ahead of you,” “I will make all of your enemies run”
  - Prepared a place of rest - where all their desires could be fulfilled

- One asks, "Could God have done any more?"
- And yet, they turned from God

How does this happen?

- They saw God's deliverance, and with a spiritual passion that erupted like a geyser, declared on the banks of the Red Sea:
  - "Who among the gods is like You"
  - "In Your unending love, You will lead, You will guide"
  - "And the nations will tremble"
  - "The people of Canaan will melt away"
- And now, only months later - their fickle hearts had nothing but contempt (vs. 3)
  - Preferring their past to His future (vs. 4)
  - Preferring their leaders to His leaders (vs. 5-10)
  - Themselves - to God

How could this be?

- This God - who carried them like a shepherd in the wilderness
  - Now is treated as a spurned lover
  - As One "treated with contempt" (vs. 11)
  - A word that speaks of being scorned and despised
  - As God would later say, "I am like a moth to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah"

But then, I have to stop and ask

HOW IS IT OUR HEARTS ARE PRONE TO WANDER--TURN COLD?

HOW IS IT WE TOO CAN DESPISE GOD?

Illustration: I was reading the story of Chuck Templeton

- Joined with Billy Graham in the 1940's and rose to the top of protestant evangelism
- Thought by some to be the most effective communicator of Christ in his day
- Experienced God's grace, pursued God's promises
- Went on to seminary, and then rejected his faith, and eventually wrote the book *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting Christianity*

How does this happen - that people who have once tasted grace - sometimes turn away?

Illustration: One day on a long Dutch bike ride, I saw a cathedral that got my attention

- A monument to God's glory - at least it began that way
- But then I noticed it was closed - and had been for years
- The only signs were those of Satan - sprayed on the outside

How does this happen? How do hearts turn cold?

I look for traces of an answer in this story

- Rereading the journey of Israel, it is apparent

### 1) WHAT FAITH THERE WAS, WAS THIN

- They turned TO God - only when things got rough
- They turned FROM God - when He did not meet their expectations
  - They wanted to be transported to the Promised Land with as little discomfort as possible
    - Any discomfort was immediately met with complaint
    - Any challenge was met with anxiety and fear
    - Any doubts quickly bloomed into full blown disbelief
    - Any alternative gods were quickly met with embrace
    - Any distraction quickly pushed God from the center to the periphery
- They were like the seed in Jesus' parable, that had no root
  - More specifically, as Heb 4:2 puts it:
    - "The message those in the wilderness heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith"
  - It was going through the motions
- Could that sometimes be us?

Illustration: It's a little bit like the story of Aron Ralston, the climber who was trapped in Blue John Canyon

- His arm pinned by a rock, he was only able to get free when he took a dull knife and crudely amputated his arm
- I'm reading from his journal: "It's Day 3 - things are becoming desperate. A subtle stirring tells me it's time to pray. I haven't tried this yet. 'God, I am praying to you for guidance. I'm trapped here in Blue John Canyon - you probably know that - I don't know what I am supposed to do. Please show me a sign.' I slowly tilt my forehead back until I am looking up through the pale twilight. Nothing. What was I expecting? A swirl in the clouds? 'Okay God, since you're apparently busy - devil, if you're listening - I'll trade you my arm, my soul, whatever you want. Just get me out of here.'"

- Talk about thinness
  - Israel's trust in God seemed to go about as deep

## 2) AN UNDUE PASSION FOR SECURITY

- Even if it meant bondage to the Egyptians
- Illustration: Czech

## 3) A FORGETFULNESS - A SPIRITUAL AMNESIA

- They quickly forgot His power to liberate, His kindness to provide

## 4) THERE WAS THE WORK OF THE DARKNESS

- There is something satanic in this story
- There are his fingerprints - to be sure
- At work here was more than a combination of voices
  - There was a spirit at work in this story, that became more intense as the promises of God became more possible
- And why not? Israel was being thrust on the stage of world history - just as the church is today
  - To do, be something significant for God
  - To be His movement
- All of these go into our own possibility of falling

## MORE IMPORTANTLY - I WANT TO KNOW - HOW DO WE AVOID THIS?

- Guard against the same possibility of sliding into indifference
- Capitulating to unbelief
- Despising God

Scripture tells us

### 1) WATCH THE HEART

- The Psalmist - going back to the Numbers story - speaking to his generation, warned
- "DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS THEY DID IN THE WILDERNESS" (Psalm 95:8)
- The writer of Hebrews, quoting from the Psalms and speaking to his generation, warned the early church:
  - "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as they did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the wilderness" (vs. 7)
  - "See to it that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (vs. 12)
- Watch your heart!!
- Surrendering to sin results in a hardening, a reduced sensitivity of conscience, making it more difficult to stay on course

- In similar fashion, Paul writes in I Corinthians 9:27 -
  - “No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I will not be disqualified from the prize.”
  - For (and note his reason [vs 1-6]) they all saw this:
    - We too are in this wilderness trek
    - We too feed on the same spiritual food
    - We too drink of the same spiritual rock – Christ, who nourishes in our journey
    - We too are being guided; we too are being led to our heavenly rest
  
- AND WE TOO CAN CAPITULATE
  - What did they see that we must see?
    - 1) That each generation faces its own temptation to be like Israel
      - Its own possibility of heart hardness, spiritual amnesia, spiritual thinness, of falling away
    - 2) That if you think you are standing firm, if you think being part of the people of God has placed you above the danger - TAKE HEED LEST YOU FALL (vs. 12)
    - 3) That continuance in the spiritual life is the test of its reality
    - 4) That if we are going to be faithful to the end, nothing less than a rigorous discipleship is required
      - CS Lewis: “What is concrete but immaterial can be kept in view only by painful effort. That is why the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes rush at us like wild animals - and the first job each morning consists in shoving them back – in listening to that Other voice, letting that other, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.”

Finally -

## 2) BE THE COMMUNITY

- “Encourage one another, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (vs. 13)
- Encourage - for in isolation, believers are more liable to succumb to temptation
  - Rather - like runners in a race, encourage each other to the finish line

APPLICATION - The church must ask the same question

- How do we despise?

1) When we focus on marking time in the wilderness till He takes us to the Promised Land

- Rather than astonishing the world with the beauty and wonder of God

- God also lives among us - providing, protecting, empowering, guiding, instructing, extending hope

- The Word of God is not some ancient text, it is a portal into the presence of God, where we come to know his mind and heart, but also are transformed to become like Him

- This is not God's Word - frozen in time to be defrosted when we need it

- This is the living Word - inviting us to fellowship with Him, that when approached with humility and hunger invite us into His presence - to Him who is a consuming fire (Jeremiah 20:9, Hebrews 4:12-13)

- God is always speaking to those who will listen, revealing Himself and His ways to those who would see