

Following God through a Spiritual Wilderness

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Here we are. We have arrived at the Last Day of Unleavened Bread. I find it interesting that the word "arrived" can have two usages. The word "arrive" can refer to traveling over a physical distance, as well as traveling through a period of time, just as we have just kept seven days of Unleavened Bread, having now arrived at the last day.

For the Israelites, whom God brought out of Egypt, it was both. It was traveling through the wilderness over a period of time, which God did, working out His purpose as He led them to the land He promised to their fathers. Also, they traveled over a distance as well.

Exodus 13:11 And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you,

I Corinthians 10:1-4, 11 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was ChristNow all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Here we are told that the Israelite's experiences were recorded in the books of Moses for us in our current day, in this time of the end. When we read these passages in I Corinthians 10, we think of all of the glaring, obvious things that they did wrong. This made God very angry, and He dealt, as could almost be viewed as, very harsh with them, but that was God's purpose at that time.

Yet, there are some other things that came to mind, things that we have in common with the ancient Israelites in our modern journey through a spiritual wilderness, whereas, of course, they were traveling through a physical wilderness.

It is equally important for us to know what God expects of us in the same capacity. I have four points, and I have put each one of them in the form of a question that we can ask ourselves.

1. Do we see the hand of God in our lives, in how He brought us out of this world?
And do we see His ongoing oversight and intervention in our lives?

When we think of the example of God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, and then rescuing

them in a spectacular manner with the display of His power by parting the Red Sea, and then drowning the enemy behind them, we usually think of this use of His power as doing the impossible which defies the normal physical realm as the miracle. Yet, is it not equally a miracle that He had the idea in His mind to individually tap each of us on the shoulder and to say, "I want you!"—to just those few whom He has called in this era, and those still few in number throughout history out of all of the billions of all who have lived and died who are otherwise totally oblivious to who God is and what life is all about.

John 6:44 No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.

Still, I think that is a miracle of and by itself, and I hope that we appreciate that and think about it. In addition, we are free from the bondage of sin which has a firm grasp on the world. Even though we are free, we are still subject to the effects of this sinful world not wanting to let go of us, just as the Pharaoh's armies were in hot pursuit of Israelite after letting them leave Egypt.

John 8:32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

The Israelites in the wilderness failed to appreciate the freedom that they were given, and more than once they yearned to return to Egypt. They failed to trust that God knew what He was doing with them in His plan to lead them to the Promised Land. And, perhaps, we could have even more freedom than we realize. God seems to know us better than we think we know ourselves, and perhaps He is waiting for us to exercise the faith to go beyond what we think our limits are.

Matthew 14:22-32 Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

Peter was one of the more zealous of the apostles. Here he was, jumping at an opportunity with perhaps more enthusiasm than faith. Christ knew Peter well enough that He knew that He could do it, just as later He told Peter that he would deny Him three times.

Matthew 26:34 Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

And, God knew the Israelites as well, before He took them out of Egypt.

Exodus 13:17 Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by 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."

Perhaps the lesson for us, from this example, would be that we put more trust in God's knowing exactly where He is leading us, and not limiting our view of ourselves.

I remember when I was first in the church; I think that I was 23 years old. I had heard about the church since I was 13. I had listened to the radio broadcast and started taking the literature, and then finally, when I was a young adult, decided that it was time to do something about this. I was baptized just after the Days of Unleavened Bread. I was living in the Seattle area, and I was out of work, and I was beating the streets. I did not have a car at the time.

One afternoon, after four months of job hunting, there was a business in downtown Seattle that would have employed my type of work as a Customer Service Technician, and so I walked in and submitted my application. They had an opening and they wanted to hire me just like that. But I found out later that they required work on Saturday. So, I had to tell them that I was sorry but I could not work on Saturdays.

It turned out that I got a phone call from somebody who was the brother of one of the sales reps who worked there. He said, "I hear that you are looking for work." I met with him, and it was another position that they needed someone to fill. I was interviewed by two district managers the following week, and I was hired on the spot. They bought me a plane ticket for St. Louis, sent me to a training school for two weeks. Then they flew me home, via San Francisco, and then I picked up a company vehicle and drove that home. I was employed from that time on with a company car. It was God's hand. It was God's providing, definitely.

2. Are God's laws being written in our hearts?

Leviticus 18:1-5 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing

you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances. You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the LORD

God gave His law to the Israelites in the form of the Ten Commandments. (Mr. Armstrong used to refer to it as a "codified" version of His law.) He also gave detailed instructions as to how He wanted to be worshipped, and how He wanted Israel to live with each other, in the keeping of His law. Yet, we have a more complete application of the spirit of God's law.

Hebrews 8:9-10 not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

And the sum total of the entirety of God's law:

Matthew 22:36-40 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

This would be taking on the very character and mind of God, total selfless and outgoing concern taken to a higher level than just doing what is expected, more than just the minimum.

According to the example Christ set for us:

I Peter 2:18-25 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before for to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own

body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

We have no end of opportunity to put this into practice, more so than the Israelites in the wilderness. We are in the world, but yet not of the world.

John 17:14-16 I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

Matthew 5:43-48 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

3. Do we see ourselves as the materials with which God is using to build His temple?

Exodus 25:1-9 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering. And this is the offering which you shall take from them: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and scarlet thread, fine linen, and goats' hair; ram skins dyed red, badger skins, and acacia wood; oil for the light, and spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones, and stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate. And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it.

The Israelites left Egypt with a high hand, and God worked things out for them so that they took spoils with them. Then God commanded them to build the tabernacle, out of the finest materials they could put together.

Do we understand and appreciate the fact that God has personally chosen each one of us to

make up His spiritual tabernacle?

I Peter 2:4 -5 Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

God has personally selected each of us, and has placed us all into the Church of God, into the Body of Christ with all of our differences, being fitted together to serve His purpose.

It may not be apparent to each of us what our individual gifts or talents may be. The more we work together and grow closer in fellowship, the more we will recognize each others' God-given gifts and talents.

I Corinthians 12:4-5, 12-14, 18 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

And then the prophetic scripture about how this will all come together in the future:

Revelation 21:1-3 Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

4. Are we preparing ourselves so that we will not lose faith as we get closer to Christ's return?

Numbers 13:1-2 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel; from each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a leader among them."

Numbers 13:25-32 And they returned from spying out the land after

forty days.

Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan." Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we." 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.

Numbers 14:1-2 So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. 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!

So here they are closer than ever to receiving the land which God promised them, falling right back into their old murmuring ways! We should ask ourselves the same question, "Could we make the same mistake? Could we fall into the same trap?" Here is a similar warning for us in these last days:

II Peter 3:1-4, 9 Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

As the world around us, or perhaps better said, the world which surrounds us, continues its

downward spiral, we need to keep a watchful vigil, never allowing ourselves to grow weary nor complacent, nor allowing the world's ways to wear us down.

Just like those who preceded us, we are following God through a spiritual wilderness. We need to keep our vision focused on God leading us along this very narrow and difficult path. This was never advertised as being easy. Yet we can trust the one true God to finish that which He has started in us.

Being called out of this world and keeping God's ways is like swimming upstream against a strong current. It is simply not easy. Here are reassuring words that all of us can depend upon, which would have equally served those in ancient times in the physical wilderness.

Luke 12:32 Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.