

HEADING FOR THE PROMISED LAND SERIES Exit Ramp 1 Numbers 10 and 11

What surprises us about the Bible is that it records people's lives with an honesty that is disarming – even disturbing. It does not reflect a rosy picture when there is none to tell; it records failures and mistakes that people make with accuracy. It's almost like God strips back the veneer of nicety that we humans like to portray and shows us what is truly in our hearts. Why is this? **Because God tells the truth to us and about us.**

After forty years in wilderness Moses, when God calls him to do a task he clearly previously thought he could do – he goes – not me! **Send someone else.** I cannot speak – I'm not competent. But Moses has to step into what God calls him to do and to speak and say what God asks him to say. The truth is that most of us find it hard to follow God too closely because we are afraid to, and reading stories like today's does nothing to lessen that.... he is not like us. We don't always understand his ways. **Today I want to speak about the ways of God.** The ways of God that can make **streams of water flow in the desert and wasteland.** Where there appears to be no life, God can make it. The ways of God that are not like our ways, the ways of God that are incomprehensible and sometimes difficult to understand.

In 2017 when I travelled through Israel, I went through parts which were desert and wasteland and nothing would grow. Then I came to an oasis with an orchard of date palms....and what made this possible - water. What God was saying through Isaiah 43 was that when everything looked a wasteland, he would bring the water and life would flow. God's word to some of you today is this.... if you feel you are in a wasteland or a desert – don't turn aside or back because he can meet you there. God seems to specialise in deserts.

But what happened in **Numbers** and through most of the Bible is the story of us choosing badly – to say no to God. And we still do it with the wealth and lifestyle of luxury that we now enjoy. We live our lives without God, as though he does not exist. And we cry out to Him mostly when we are in **trouble**...or facing something we cannot manage.

In church, we have learned a kind of Christianity that is a comfortable, cultural construction of the Gospel, mostly with **us at the centre of our lives.** And this is not only our problem – since the dawn of time we humans have done this – learned to live independently of God and chased after things God calls idols. I am convinced there is a **brand of Christianity** around today that elevates the **rational over the spiritual.** For many people, becoming a Christian is all about the **knowledge** and the teaching and there is very little, **if any, connection with God the Spirit.** **The brain is elevated** to a place God never intended – and here is the truth – **you cannot connect with God through your brain. God is Spirit** and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. There is a kind **gnostic dualism** around that has constructed a kind of **cultural Christianity** that bears little resemblance to following Jesus or being a disciple.

A true disciple is **born of the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, walks by the Spirit and is anointed by the Spirit**. Without the Spirit and the spiritual dimension, you are just a walking shell made up of minerals and mostly water. But because you are a **living spirit, you are of immense value** to God and it is your spirit that is saved for all eternity, not your body or your brain for that matter. Most of you goes underground, but some of you goes up and off....

Now why am I passionate about this? Because **without the work of the Spirit in our lives, without us connecting deeply** to God the Spirit, in worship, praise and daily living, without letting the Spirit transform our daily choices, we are not saved, not Christian and not on board God's kingdom. You can know all the theology possible but not be born again into God's kingdom.

We might be living a brand of Christianity that is all about the thinking and a kind of **moral-ethical sort of life**, but we have never been regenerated. How long has it been since **God spoke into your life**; something you know was from him? How long has it been since your **Spirit so connected** with God that you just knew, that you knew, that you knew, it was Him? How long has it been since you **consecrated** yourself from head to toe piece by piece and declared Jesus Lord of your life and every part **without reservation**?

It was for the very same reason the whole nation perished in the wilderness; because they rebelled against God. They were on board a kind of experience that as **long as it went well, they bought into it**. But as soon as a better alternative came by, they were off....on an exit ramp. We have taken what I'm calling in this series, 'exit ramps' from the path to life and there are many of them.

The main theme of this book of Numbers is an **explanation of a journey that should have taken 11 days but took 40 years**. Today we are going to start the journey. **Chapter 10** tells the story; it's a story about a journey through the desert from Egypt to Israel which was to be the Promised Land for the nation. **They learned to follow the cloud and the fire**. When it moved they moved, when it stopped so did they. It was pretty simple really – look out of your tent each morning and listen for the trumpet...if you heard nothing, go back to bed and pull up the sheets! So here was their first lesson – **God's presence with them required their obedience**. God's daily provision for them of manna was dependent upon them being in the right place to receive it. But they took exit ramps, off-ramps into the wilderness.

Exit ramps are very attractive – they look good; they even look like the right way. But they lead to a **wilderness experience** without God in your life. There would be many people here today who could stand up right now and tell you their stories of years in the wilderness before they come back to God's pathway. It happens a lot....

The Ways of God (The path to life)

Before we look at the first two off-ramps in the wilderness. I want you to understand something about what the Bible calls the 'ways of God'. **The ways of God are a process more than a destination**. We tend to think of direction first – getting to the destination,

goal orientated, get the job done. But in fact, God seems to think more process first before direction. Firstly, I want to speak a little about Gods ways in the wilderness.

'Let me know your ways' Ex 33:11. A MIRROR FOR US TO REFLECT

The ways of God are a reflection of who God is in our lives.....they are a style of living and acting based on what God is like. He is Powerful and we tremble before Him. He is Holy and we need to humble ourselves before Him He is Purposeful and we need to obey Him.

'Teach me your ways' Psalm 86:11 A PATHWAY FOR US TO WALK

And these ways were, to put it bluntly, strange, they were foreign. Boundaries and rules set in place by God were to be obeyed. People with specific tasks were to be put in place, and if they ignored or to have a better idea, they were met with discipline or even death. We need to learn to walk on this pathway.

'Remember to walk in His ways' Duet 8.6 – A LIFESTYLE FOR US TO ADOPT This was the message Moses gave to the tribes when they were about to go into the land. Moses is about to die so he charged those going into the new land to be obedient to God's law. Their daily lives were to adopt godly choices. 'His ways are perfect' 2 **Sam 32:1 A PROCESS FOR US TO EXPERIENCE**

How many of you know how hard it is to see purpose in God's ways when you are in a wilderness time? When it appears like you are waiting, God is not moving, nothing seems to be happening and you ask, "God - are your ways perfect?" We just want to get out of the sand. But it is here that God does his best work in us. Going through trial and difficulty is part of the direction God leads us at times so he can shape us deeply and as a result, we lose a taste for the secondary things that don't matter and desire Him in our lives more than anything else. They are a process to bring you to maturity.

'His ways are Holy' In Psalm 77:13 A PURIFYING FOR US TO ENDURE

David is having one of his 'where have you gone God' moments – then in verse 11, he starts to remember what God has done in the past and by v13 he is acknowledging something even more powerful; that God's ways are holy. God's ways are designed to make us more holy than happy. The wilderness is a place of stripping from us things that don't really matter. Repenting from sin in our lives; it's a place of separating us from what displeases God in our lives. The whole design of the nation on the march was set up around a separation between what was holy and people. The tabernacle where God's glory dwelt had to be carried in a certain way by certain people. Nothing was left to chance or last-minute planning. A failure to do exactly as God commanded resulted in severe consequences. Why? Because God is holy – and for him to live with his people required their complete obedience to his commands.

'The way you live will produce every kind of good fruit' Colossians 1:9-10 A FRUIT

BEARING FOR US TO YEILD It seems like God is as concerned with the journey through the wilderness and what the people will learn rather than just to get them to their destination. The NT picks up on this thinking and speaks of the way of God being producing good fruit (outcomes) in our lives.

OK, let's look at the first off-ramp the people took.

EXIT RAMP NO 1 Lie of Entitlement - "*Life is hard I am entitled to find some relief...whatever makes me feel better I will take*". I will complain about my hardships, grumbling and murmuring my way through life. I have an entitlement and I deserve relief. Surely God doesn't mean for me to be in this wilderness!

I'm going to find somewhere more pleasant and someone or something that will treat me better than this unreliable God. Numbers 10 – things were going well....but by Numbers 11.1, everything had changed. Because their eyes were now on problems and difficulties, they had lost sight of the future God was calling them to. Are you complaining about your life and the way God is leading you? Do you feel that you are **entitled** to a better life? So you go – "Well God if you won't give it to me, I will go off and find it because this is not the abundant life that you promised me! I didn't sign up for this kind of life, I signed up for heaven and a good life here." And when they thought like this they got burnt. Now I cannot make it say anything different than it does. That's what it said – that the fire of God scorched them and as Moses prayed the fire stopped.

Sometimes the **only way God can get our full attention when we are determined to take an off-ramp to personal entitlement is to burn us...** is to allow us to take that pathway knowing that it will lead to some kind of burning or scorching in our lives. It could be anything that wakes us up, that comes to us from out of left field, that is beyond our ability to control. And the purpose of it is to **startle us into making a better choice**. Next time something happens in your life that burns you badly – maybe instead of praying "God take this away – God fix the problem," a better prayer might be – "God what are you trying to say to me? What am I doing that might be causing this in my life?"

So here is the question today.....***do you want to surrender to the ways of God in your life or do you prefer to take the off-ramp in search of an entitled and pampered life spend your time grumbling about why you're going through some wilderness experience?*** Or will you submit and surrender to God's ways in your life, as difficult or unpalatable as they might be.

This chapter reminds us that the ways of God are not easy at times.....But they lead to life. **We need to die to the lie.....that God guarantees us an entitled life here.** We need to clearly understand what the gospel teaches us ; that we need to take up the cross of Jesus daily and stay on the road to life. There are times when we need to repent from the kind of thinking that trips up many followers of Jesus who have an unbiblical view of the kind of life God promises here and now.