

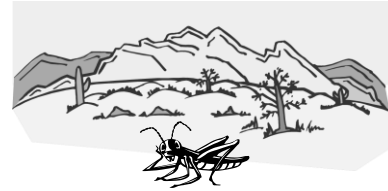
The Wilderness Wandering

From Egypt to the Promised Land

The history recorded in the book of Numbers¹ begins 12 to 13 months after the exodus from Egypt (*Numbers 1:1; 9:1; Exodus 40:17*). The Israelites had spent most of the year in the region of Mount Sinai, where they received the Law. Numbers records the history of Israel during the next 39 years (*Numbers 33:38*), prior to their entrance into the “promised land.”

Discussion Questions

1. Read “*Why did Israel Wander in the Wilderness?*” Why did the Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years rather than entering the “promised land?”²
2. God promised the land to the Israelites, yet an entire generation did not see the promise fulfilled. What does this teach us about God’s promises?³
3. Read “*New Testament Perspective.*” The “promised land” symbolizes the place of ultimate blessing in the presence of God. In what way does the Christian enter into the “promised land” or “God’s rest?” In other words, how is “God’s rest” realized? Is it realized in the present, future, or both?⁴
4. After God told the Israelites that they would not enter the promised land, they still attempted to enter (*Numbers 14:40-44*). However, they were soundly defeated (*Numbers 14:45*). What principle is taught by Israel’s example, and how does it apply to the Christian’s life?⁵ What is your experience?



¹ The name “Numbers” is the English translation of the Greek ἀριθμοί (*arithmoi*), likely referring to the census lists found in chapters 1-4 and 26. The Hebrew title *bemidbar* (“in the desert”) is more descriptive of its contents.

² They were afraid. They did not trust God. They did not really believe in Him because they doubted His promise. They rebelled against God, and attempted to go their own way.

³ God is faithful. He will fulfill His promises. But people may choose to be unfaithful, and forfeit the benefits of God’s promises. God promised Israel blessing in the promised land, but Israel did not believe, so that generation did not enter into that blessing.

⁴ Some Bible scholars say that the “rest” in Hebrews 3-4 is only future, while others say it is primarily future but has a present aspect. Verse 3 says, “we who have believed enter (*present tense*) that rest.” See footnote 9. In any case, we enter “the promised land” and “God’s rest” through faith in Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise for the nations (Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:16, 8-9, 26-29).

⁵ Our “success” is not guaranteed unless God guarantees it. If God promises success if we meet certain conditions, the meeting of those conditions will result in success, regardless of the difficulty (even if it is humanly impossible). “If God is with us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). If God is *not* “with us,” we cannot expect true success, even if we are attempting to do “good things.” If we attempt to do God’s work without God (in our own strength, way, or timing), we set ourselves up for failure. Jesus said, “apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Why did Israel Wander in the Wilderness?⁶



After 11 months in the region of Mount Sinai, the Israelites set out for the “promised land” (Numbers 10:11-12). They soon began to complain about their hardships (11:1). They complained about the food, saying, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” (11:4b-6, NIV) Their complaining angered God and frustrated Moses (11:1, 10). Moses prayed (11:2, 11-15). God showed both judgment and grace (11:1b, 33; 11:2, 16-17, 31-32).

After arriving at Kadesh Barnea (along the southernmost part of the promised land), the LORD said to Moses, “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe, send one of its leaders (Numbers 13:1-2, NIV). So they went up and explored the land (13:21). After coming back, they confirmed that the land was good, saying, “it does flow with milk and honey!” (13:27). However, they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size (13:32). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (13:33b).

That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron (14:1-2b). And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt” (14:4). *But [Joshua and Caleb], who were among those who had explored the land, ...said... “If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us.⁷ Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land... Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us” (14:6-9b). But the whole assembly talked about stoning (killing) them (14:10a).*

The LORD said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me? ... I will strike them down...” (14:11a, 12a). *But Moses interceded for Israel and asked God for forgiveness (14:13-19). God replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked.⁸ Nevertheless, ... not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers” (14:20, 23a). The LORD said to Moses, “[Tell them], ‘In this desert your bodies will fall – every one of you twenty years old or more ... who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land ... except Caleb ... and Joshua (14:29-30). Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert” (14:33).*

⁶ The paragraphs on this page are a combination of Scripture excerpts (from the *New International Version*) and *my notes and summaries of the Scriptures (denoted by italics)*. Read Numbers 10-14 for the whole story.

⁷ The idea that God commanded Israel to take over an already inhabited land may be disturbing to some. The Bible’s claim that the inhabitants were extremely evil may help lesson that concern. The Bible is clear that particular people were enemies of God, not merely enemies of Israel. The battles for the “promised land” were part of God’s war, undertaken at a particular time in history according to God’s program of redemption. (See Jay’s “War in the Old Testament” on the ICF website) What about all of the other people and groups who have claimed to fight “holy wars” for the sake of God? What is the difference between them and ancient Israel? This leads to other questions such as: Is there a God? Who is the true God, and what is his nature? Has God revealed himself and his will to human beings? Which supposed “revelations” of God are genuine? Christians have good reason to believe that the God of the Bible is the one true God, and that all of his actions are righteous and just.

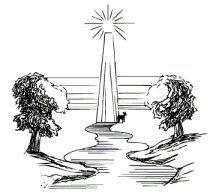
⁸ God’s forgiveness does not mean that they would escape all punishment, only that they would not be completely annihilated as they deserve (14:11-12). Forgiveness does not necessarily mean escape from the consequences of sin.

The next day, the Israelites decided to enter the land anyway (14:40). But Moses said to them, “Why are you disobeying the LORD’s command? This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the LORD is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies” (14:41-42). Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the high hill country ... Then the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah (14:44-45).

New Testament Perspective

Referring to Israel’s wilderness experience, the apostle Paul wrote, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). Hebrews 3:7-4:13 is one of the New Testament passages that applies Israel’s wilderness experience to Christians today. Read the following Bible excerpts:

- 📖 “Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? ... And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.” (Hebrews 3:16, 18-19, NIV)
- 📖 “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest⁹ still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest.” (Hebrews 4:1-3a, NIV)
- 📖 “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.” (Hebrews 4:11, NIV)



Reflection/Application

- Like the Israelites in the wilderness, the Christian is between promise and fulfillment (in the ultimate sense). Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we have been delivered from slavery, but we have not reached our final destination and resting place. As a Christian, how are you handling “the wilderness?” Are you just wandering in the wilderness? Or are you entering God’s rest? Are you trusting and obeying God? Are you experiencing His “rest?”¹⁰
- Perhaps you are still “enslaved in Egypt.” You cannot enter the “promised land” (God’s rest) until you’ve been set free from “Egypt”! The Bible says that only Jesus can set you free.
- The Israelites “turned back” when the road ahead looked difficult. They failed to obey God’s instructions and trust in his promises. Is there something in your life that you know God wants you to do, but you have not proceeded because of fear, or lack of faith. Humble yourself before the Lord, seek His help, and “make every effort to enter that rest.”

⁹ The term “rest” in the Old Testament refers to the peace and well-being that Israel would experience in the promised land (Deuteronomy 3:20; 12:9; Joshua 1:13, 15; 21:44). However, the New Testament makes it clear that the temporary, earthly rest experienced in Canaan was not the ultimate rest, but pointed to a rest that is spiritual and eternal. The ultimate rest is future (in the age to come), but the kingdom of God has entered into this world with the coming of Christ. Those who have received Christ have the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the “deposit” guaranteeing our full salvation. Thus Christians can enjoy many of the benefits of God’s rest in the present age (e.g. love, peace, joy, hope, security, purpose).

¹⁰ Even if “rest” in Hebrews 3-4 is only future, the following principles are still true. The Christian enters into God’s blessing when he/she receives Christ. The full enjoyment of that blessing will not be realized until the end of our present lives. However, we can experience God’s blessing right now. The more we doubt and disobey, the more likely we will feel like we are wandering in the wilderness. The more we trust and obey, the more likely we will enjoy the blessings of God; experience His peace and joy; and have the abundant life available in Jesus Christ.