

Why The Lord Led The Israelites Through The Wilderness

'It is only eleven days journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea' (on Canaan's border) (Deuteronomy 1:2).

Why did the Lord lead the Children of Israel through the wilderness and how does that relate to us, hundreds of years later? There are actually two questions here. The first one is: Why did the Lord lead the children of Israel through the wilderness? 'When Pharaoh let the people go, God led them not by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer, for God said, "Lest the people change their purpose when they see war and return to Egypt." But God led the people around by way of the wilderness towards the Red Sea' (Exodus 13:17 & 18). Clearly the Lord did not want the Israelites to return to Egypt and to the bondage of slavery. He wanted them to progress to Canaan which was to be their Promised Land; the land He promised to Abraham and his offspring. 'On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, "To your offspring I have given this land, from the river of Egypt (Nile) to the great river Euphrates"' (Genesis 15:18). The second question is: Why did the Israelites take 40 years to travel 11 days journey? That is how close Canaan was to Egypt. Even in those ancient times it would have taken only 11 days.

We can see by these scriptures why the Lord led the Israelites through the wilderness (to prevent them going back into Egypt) and now we'll look at why they took forty long years to get there. The Bible says, 'The Lord's anger was kindled against Israel and He made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was dead (Numbers 32:13). The reason the Lord led them around in circles for forty years, is because way back in those days, they were a stubborn, disobedient, rebellious, unfaithful, wicked, stiff-necked people, who complained incessantly and were constantly ungrateful for the good things the Lord did for them. There are so many scriptures that tell us this, we can't write every one of them down but we can give a few to look up; 'Behold, it is a stiff-necked people' (Exodus 32:9); 'You are a stiff-necked people' (Exodus 33:3); 'You have been rebellious against the Lord ... You have been rebelling against the Lord ... O Lord look not at the stubbornness of this people or at their wickedness or at their sin' (Deuteronomy 9:7, 24, 27); 'They were disobedient and rebelled against You and cast Your Law behind their back and killed Your prophets' (Nehemiah 9:26); 'They should not be like their fathers (ancestors) – a stubborn and rebellious generation who were unloyal ... who were unfaithful to God' (Psalm 78:8); 'This is a rebellious people, lying children who will not hear the Law of the Lord' (Isaiah 30:9); 'I send you to the children of Israel ... that have rebelled against Me. They and their fathers have transgressed against Me ... and they are impudent and hard of heart ... for they are a rebellious house' (Ezekiel 2:3 to 5). They were still like that in Jesus' day; 'Jesus said, "O you unbelieving, faithless and perverse generation. How long am I to remain ... and bear with you?"' (Matthew 17:17). They were like that in the days of the early church. They were so sinful, the Apostle Stephen gave them an almighty mouthful of rebuke which infuriated the Jews and they stoned Stephen to death with the help of the man who would become the Apostle Paul (Acts 7:51 to 58). There are a lot more scriptures which can be studied by using a Bible concordance.

The Israelites saw many miracles performed by God in Egypt and later in the desert. Firstly, there were the ten plagues in Egypt (Exodus 7:17 to 12:33) then the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:16 to 22). They had an incredible, supernatural cloud by day to lead and protect them, and a fire by night to lead and warm them (Exodus 13:21). Nothing was burned by this pillar of fire – it was wholly supernatural – yet the Israelites became fearful and complained against God. The Lord purified bitter water (Exodus 15:23 to 25). God gave them Manna to eat (Exodus 16:14 & 15) which was angel's food (Psalm 78:25) but they complained about it (Numbers 11:1 to 13). God gave them quail to eat (Exodus 16:13) then the Lord gave them so much meat it made them sick and many died (Numbers 11:20 to 34). They saw God bring water out of a rock (Exodus 17:6). That Rock supernaturally followed them; the Rock was Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:4). They moaned against Moses (Exodus 14:11 & 12). At one point they wanted to stone Moses (Exodus 17:2 to 4). God gave them everything they wanted and they still complained about their hardships (Numbers 11:1), and finally God's anger towards them came to a point where He disowned them and threatened to wipe them out (Exodus 32:7 to 11). They ended up bringing judgement upon themselves, by kindling the Lord's anger just by their incessant complaining.

If we look at the scriptures regarding the Israelites desire for meat, we can see that God sent them quails. What we know now but they could not have known then, is quail meat is extremely toxic. It must be consumed within an hour or two after killing the bird, or the toxins can cause severe food poisoning resulting in death. When the thousands of quails came to the camp, the birds 'fell', or died of natural causes. The people then had to travel a day's journey (there and back) to gather up the birds, then the Israelites 'spread the quails out around the camp' – to dry them – so the birds had been dead for two whole days before the drying process had begun. The Israelites were eating the meat for a whole month. Some meats can be salted, dried and stored, but not quail meat and especially not after two whole days. The scriptures describe possible widespread food poisoning. The people vomited violently and the meat came out of their nostrils ... while the meat was still in their mouths, before they swallowed it, they died (Numbers 11:20, 31 to 33).

Another reason one whole generation passed away before they could settle into the Promised Land was idolatry. Idolatry was normal practice in Egypt and the Israelites did not know any better than to worship idols. Once the Israelites were out of Egypt, it took another forty years to get the Egyptian influence out of the hearts of the Israelite people. The Lord commanded the Israelites not to make or worship idols, and at first they agreed and promised not to, but went back on their word and disobeyed God (Exodus 20:4 & 34:17; Leviticus 17:7; 19:4; 26:1; Deuteronomy 27:15). The Lord considers idolatry as serious as unfaithfulness in marriage (Ezekiel 23:37).

Moses' brother Aaron helped the people make a golden calf, which they then worshipped (Exodus 32:4 to 8). The Israelites had promised the Lord they would obey Him and serve Him, but they sinned so much, they had broken their initial covenant with God. They complained so much and made the Lord so angry, He swore that first generation would never enter the Promised Land and they all died, except for the only two obedient men in the whole of Israel; Caleb and Joshua (Numbers 32:10 to 12). It was the second generation of the new nation of Israel who inherited the Promised Land, later called Israel (Joshua 10:42).

So how does this relate to us hundreds of years later? This situation can be observed by us, to warn us not to be like the Israelites were back in those days. 'These things are examples for us not to lust after carnal things as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were, as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink (the burnt offerings and sacrifices offered to the golden calf at Horeb – Exodus 32:6 to 8) and rose to sing, dance and play (Exodus 32:18 & 19)." We must not commit sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell dead in a single day! We should not try the Lord's patience as some of them did, and were killed by poisonous snakes; nor complain and grumble as some of them did, and they died. These things happened to them for a warning to us; they were written to admonish us, in whose days the ages have reached their end. Therefore let anyone who thinks he stands be careful lest he fall into sin' (1 Corinthians 10:6 to 12). The Lord does not want us to go back to the bondage of our old sinful lives and back to the slavery of sin, but to continue to walk with Him and live in freedom from sin. That is freedom from sin, not freedom to sin. No, we may not bow to idols as the ancient peoples did then, but if we have someone or something in our life that means more to us than the Lord does, then that person or thing is an idol and we are not worthy of the Lord Jesus. 'He who loves his father and mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and he who loves his son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me' (Matthew 10:37). There are explicit scriptures that show us what the Lord wants from us. 'We must love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength' (Mark 12:30).

If we want God's blessing, we need to be faithful to Him, to be compliant, obedient, grateful and spend much time in prayer, praising Him and offering thanksgiving, serving God with all our hearts. We need to be content with what we have (Hebrews 13:5) and we will fear nothing from God (Philippians 4:7). We need to avoid bringing judgement upon ourselves by acting in the same manner the Israelites did, and trying the Lord's patience. We can all learn from their mistakes.

We must make a note here: The Lord is no longer angry with the Israelites. He has already pardoned them (Isaiah 40:2). Several times in the Bible, the Lord says He would forgive and restore Israel which He has done; and one day all Israel will be saved (Isaiah 45:17; Romans 11:26) because the Lord delights in loving kindness (Micah 7:18).

Amen and God bless you.

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