

That's Why They Call it the Desert!

Text: Numbers 11:4-23

To explore the spiritual significance of the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses. [Deliver this message after the reading for Week 2 is completed.]

Back Story

It started with an aged husband and wife (Abraham and Sarah) and the promise that they would become a great nation. The descendants of Abraham now number in the hundreds of thousands, and they have endured generations of slavery in Egypt. Under the leadership of Moses, the people leave Egypt and move toward the land of promise. But this difficult desert journey will last forty years. As we watch Moses lead the people of Israel in the desert, it becomes clear that God desires to be trusted. After experiencing generations of slavery in Egypt, they resemble a disorganized mob eager to complain and swift to return to idol worship. In the desert, they must learn to trust God.

Sermon Purpose and Outline

This sermon will explore the era of the wilderness wanderings through focusing on one incident that happened in the desert. Life in the desert is always challenging, but it provides one of the best places for faith to grow. A journey through the desert is a journey of trust.

Sermon Question: What survival skills do I need in the wilderness?

- 1. Survival Skill #1: Don't Whine.** Numbers 11:4-6
- 2. Survival Skill #2: Get Help.** Numbers 11:10-15
- 3. Survival Skill #3: Grow Strong.** Numbers 11:16-18

Sermon Introduction

- Dorothy found herself wandering the Land of Oz when she was caught up in a tornado.
- Alice landed in Wonderland after slipping down a rabbit hole.
- Lucy stumbled into Narnia by hiding in the back of a wardrobe.

We're going to talk today about what happens when we find ourselves by surprise in an unlikely place...the wilderness. The wilderness can be as deceiving as Oz, as quirky as Wonderland, and

as transformational as Narnia. But you sure don't think that when you first arrive there. The wilderness is a desolate place, a desert. Spiritually speaking, the wilderness is a season when you feel like God has deserted you. That's why they call it the desert!

How do we find ourselves in the wilderness? Not through a tornado or a rabbit hole or a wardrobe. We usually get there one of two ways: through a crisis, or after a spiritual victory. Moses got to the wilderness once each way. The first time was after a crisis — he had just murdered someone, so he ran away to the wilderness, where he lived for forty years until God called to him from the burning bush. The second time, Moses got to the wilderness on the heels of two huge victories — the Passover, and the parting of the Red Sea. So, sometimes a tragedy or a problem starts us on our wandering. Sometimes, we experience something sensational, such as God using us tremendously or speaking to us in a special way, and then all goes quiet, and we find ourselves in the wilderness.

Have you ever experienced a wilderness, a time of wandering and dryness in the desert, where you felt deserted by God?

- A financial circumstance that is burying you
- Waiting for an adoption to be finalized
- Lacking clarity after graduation
- Attempting to sell a house that has been on the market way too long
- An illness that won't go away
- A family member who is rebelling
- A dream that is turning to disappointment

Far from being times of spiritual stagnation, these desert experiences may provide the most powerful opportunities for our faith to develop.

Connection to the Overarching Theme: The Journey of Faith

We're going to look at one day in the life of Moses. He has successfully led the Israelites out of Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, received the Ten Commandments, and now they're a few weeks into their campout in the wilderness, and the desert is getting to them. On the Journey of Faith, we may have to camp out in the wilderness for a season. The wilderness is a time where our faith can seem to at its low point. We feel hopeless, helpless, abandoned, and despairing. And that's exactly where we find Moses and his people in Numbers 11.

Let's pick up the story with one of their most common complaints — the limited menu selections at this restaurant.

Sermon Question: What survival skills do I need in the wilderness?

1. Survival Skill #1: Don't Whine

Numbers 11:4-6

*“The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, ‘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!’*

Textual Explanation

Manna was the food substance God provided for breakfast, lunch and dinner, day after day after day. And the people were sick of it. They recalled the variety of food they ate during their days in slavery. They exercised something husbands do (at least my wife tells me that some... other... husbands do this), called “Selective Historical Re-creation.” This is where they selectively recall historical facts and leave others out, in order to re-create a past reality that may or may not be accurate, but it helps them prove their point! In this instance, the Israelites seem to have forgotten about that whole slave-thing back in Egypt!

Why is it that the minute things get a little uncomfortable, we whine? Yes, the wilderness has its drawbacks. It's dry, deserted, barren, ugly, and there are no good sushi restaurants. But complaining about it only makes you feel more miserable. When the Israelites complained, they lost sight of their blessings. They forgot that their menu of cucumbers and melons came with a little price tag called slavery, and they lost their thankfulness for food, any food, in the middle of the desert.

What's so bad about whining?

Well, whining in the desert is sort of like drinking salt water when you're lost at sea. You're floating along in a dingy, desperate with thirst, surrounded by liquid. It can be very tempting to just take a sip, to take the edge off your thirst. But that sip can be deadly. Listen to what happens to you if you succumb to the temptation:

Illustration

Ocean water is about three times as salty as your blood, so if you drink it, your metabolism will shift into crisis mode. Water will flood out of every cell in a vain effort to dilute the salt and cleanse the body of it. The cells need water, though, and this outward flood leaves them

dangerously dehydrated. The flipside of the problem is that blood cells are dangerously overworked in their effort to carry the excess water and salt down to the kidneys. Drinking salt water can rapidly result in seizures, unconsciousness, and even brain damage. The overwhelmed kidneys will simply shut down, causing death. [From an internet website on clean water]

So, am I saying if you complain you'll have seizures? No, not exactly. But complaining in the wilderness is the start of a downward spiral. When we complain, we're focusing on the negative, and that can lead to despair and hopelessness, which leads to giving up and failure. A little whining can lead to a total system shut-down. In fact, look at what the Israelites were saying a short time later:

Numbers 14:2-3

*“All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, ‘If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to **go back to Egypt?**”*

Their complaining escalated until they despaired and actually mixed up Egypt with the promised land! They had been promised a home, but they wanted their slavery back.

Application

If you find yourself in the wilderness, and you're tempted to slip into complaining about the living conditions (If only my back didn't hurt; If only my aging parents weren't so needy; If only my kids would cooperate; If only my spouse shape up; I could use a better job; I wish they'd give me a chance; I have too much work; I don't have enough work; Why doesn't God speak to me? I feel deserted. I'm all alone. Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I'm going to eat some worms). STOP IT!

Creative Teaching Tool

Here's a **survival tool** to help you counteract whining in the wilderness: Make an encouragement card for yourself, and pull it out whenever you're tempted to complain. On one side write out what you're waiting for or struggling with. On the other, write the text of Isaiah 64:4:

“Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.”

2. Survival Skill #2: Get Help

Numbers 11:10-15

*Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. **He asked the Lord**, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? **What have I done to displease you** that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all these people by myself; **the burden is too heavy for me**. If this is how you are going to treat me, **put me to death right now** — if I have found favor in your eyes — and do not let me face my own ruin."*

Textual Explanation

This is Moses in meltdown. He is weary and overwhelmed. The people are all standing by their tents, wailing. What a bunch of babies! He feels all alone and all used up. He's probably remembering that he didn't even want this job to begin with. He is so over-the-edge, he gets a bit melodramatic, doesn't he?

Now, what's the difference between Moses' Meltdown and the whining of the people? Notice at whom the complaints are aimed. The people complained to Moses. Moses complained to God. Sharing your misery with another person, or just rehearsing it in your own mind, gets you nowhere. There's an old saying, "*People make enemies by complaining too much to their friends.*" So, instead of talking to other people, who probably can't help much, turn your complaints into prayers and go to God for help.

Cross-References

The problem with prayers in the desert is that it can feel like God isn't hearing. When God doesn't answer right away, we think he has deserted us. His silence can be baffling. Praying in the desert for a long time without any discernable answer is sometimes the very experience that God has in mind for us. He is purposely slowing down our pace, giving us space to restore. Having no clear direction or word from God forces us to stop so that God can recharge our spiritual batteries.

Isaiah 40:31 NKJV

*"But those who **wait on the Lord** shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."*

Once he has slowed us down enough, praying in the wilderness is a matter of hope and trust:

Micah 7:7

“I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.”

Psalm 37:5 GWT

“Entrust your ways to the Lord. Trust him, and he will act on your behalf.”

Creative Teaching Tool

Here’s another **survival tool** to help you dig out the gold in the wilderness:

Keep a wilderness record. Every day during this time, write down three things: a prayer of honestly pouring out your heart to God, one thing you are thankful for, and one way you saw God that day. This is your record that God is with you and working for your good, even though it may not feel like it. Look for unexpected connections between what you prayed for and what God is actually doing.

3. Survival Skill #3: Grow Strong

Numbers 11:16-18

*“The LORD said to Moses: ‘Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. **They will help you** carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.’ Tell the people: ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat.’”*

Textual Explanation

After Moses has his meltdown, which he directed at God, God now comes to his rescue. Moses’ cry for help gave God the opportunity to answer and provide. You’ll note that God’s provision is two-fold. God provides additional leaders so Moses won’t feel so overwhelmed and alone, and God provides meat for the nourishment of the people.

In the rest of the book of Numbers, God keeps the Israelites in the desert, and continues to provide them things they needed, some of which they didn’t even realize they needed: he gave them clothing that didn’t wear out, victory in battle, laws that formed their society, the tabernacle where he met them, the sacrificial system, and a gradual weeding out of the faithless people in their midst.

Timeless Principle

In the wilderness, there is something going on that you rarely notice while it's happening, but it's a purpose of the desert. God is growing something in you. He's bringing people to help you and to share the burden with you. He's providing for your needs. He's answering your prayers. He's teaching you life skills that you might not even be aware you're picking up.

Cross Reference

For the Israelites, when they emerged from the wilderness, they were going to have a huge job to do: possess the Promised Land. But as their failed foray with the spies proved, their faith was very, very tiny. So, God took forty years to build, form, refine, teach, discipline, and provide for a new generation of Israelites who would trust him enough to step into the rushing Jordan and conquer a city of giants by marching around it seven times. That's probably why the wilderness journey takes longer than we think it should.

2 Peter 3:9 (NCV)

"The Lord is not slow in doing what he promised the way some people understand slowness. But God is being patient with you. He does not want anyone to be lost, but he wants all people to change their hearts and lives."

Since God wants to prepare you for what's next after the wilderness, he needs to let you stay there long enough to grow. When a seed starts growing, it germinates and sprouts below the earth, long before there is any evidence of growth above the earth. If God knows you need to grow into an oak tree for your next challenge, he won't move you out of your wilderness if you've only sprouted a few buds. Oak trees take time to grow.

Creative Teaching Tool

Here's a third **survival tool** for growing, even while you're in the wilderness:

Use this time to prepare. God uses the wilderness to get us ready for the next challenge, so do whatever you can to grow while you wait. Meet regularly with a trusted friend who can help you with your spiritual dryness and confusion. Choose one spiritual discipline and go deeper with it than you have in the past (worship, giving, Bible study, meditation, scripture memorization, fasting, etc.).

Closing

The wilderness is not a place where great deeds are done for God. No, it's a place where God meets people. Israel didn't conquer any cities or build any temples in the wilderness. They just did laps around Mount Sinai, and as they walked, God went with them. He fed them every morning. He gave them water. He guided them with a cloud. He protected them at night. He spoke to them. He just gave them simple, everyday, loving care — which they usually took for granted — but which were measures of his affection for them. Theirs was not a lifestyle of achieving something new every day. Rather, the wilderness was where their slavery was banished, their major tasks were on hold, and they got to know God in a deeper, more intimate way than ever before. Instead of feeling deserted in the desert, you can actually welcome the wilderness.