



Weekly Devotion

That time we got lost for 40 years

It's easy to judge the Israelites for spending four decades in the desert.

But maybe there is more to the story.

When I was a child, my mom and I shopped for groceries together and often lost our way en route to the store. In her tiny two-door Plymouth Champ, we searched for a grocery store in Blue Springs, Missouri, almost as long as the Spanish Conquistadors looked for El Dorado.

As an adult, then, I could understand being lost for 40 minutes on the road in the pre-GPS era. Before reading the Bible in its entirety, however, I could not comprehend how the Israelites could wander the wilderness for 40 years before finally finding the Promised Land.

As I read Numbers chapter 14, I learned that the Israelites bumbled around in the boonies for four decades not because they shared my mother's navigational—ahem—skills, but because God condemned them to do so as punishment for their distrust and rebellion. In

Numbers 14:29, the Lord declares, "Your corpses will fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me."

Could it be then, that the Israelites spent the next 40 years not wandering, but waiting for those guilty of grumbling to perish? Such a grim sentence is difficult to square with a God who is supposed to be "gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in loving kindness" (Psalm 145:8).

More than anything, I am troubled that the innocent among the Israelites had to share in the sentence of the guilty. Why should they, too, have been forced to wander aimlessly for 40 years, waiting for the last grumbler to go into the ground before they could enter the Promised Land?

Surely God could have cut the Israelites some slack, I thought. Did He really expect them to trust Him implicitly after He allowed the Egyptians to enslave

them for 400 years?

But the Israelites had every reason to trust their Creator. In Numbers 14:11, God laments, "And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?" (emphasis added). I mean, how could they fail to trust Him after He opened up the Red Sea with the effortlessness of a barber parting someone's hair?

I also began to see glimmers of grace in this chapter where before I had seen only the rule of a heavy hand. Even though God forbade the guilty from seeing the Promised Land, He never abandoned the faithless in His flock—He remained with the rebels until the end.

But then there's the matter of those 40 years. I'm 38 now, so I almost have an experiential reference for the amount of time the Israelites spent wandering. What must it have felt like to endure aimlessness through four decades?

The innocent among them—those who hoped the hand that parted the Red Sea would prepare

a place for them—perhaps saw each new day as a continuation of their covenant relationship with God. Maybe they related to Yahweh as one partner does to another in a healthy marriage, choosing love each day despite hardships.

Even if the Israelites suffered daily for forty years, I suspect God's view of suffering is very different than ours. Consider Isaiah 48:10: "I have refined you ... in the furnace of affliction." The idea that pain might be purposeful—even part of the Creator's plan—certainly flies in the face of our tendency to think of pain as a thing that

must be relieved rather than experienced. Nevertheless, I wonder if God used those 40 years like a furnace to purify His people.

A part of me wonders, too, if God intended for that period of 40 years to serve as a reprieve for the rebels who would never see the Promised Land. He could have wiped those whiners from the Earth, but instead He let them live before they died—an act of mercy one might mistake for cosmic cruelty.

As I write this, I'm about to take my 5-year-old grocery shopping—and thanks to GPS, we seldom lose our way. I

wonder what my daughter will make of Scripture's more perplexing passages. No booming voice from heaven will ever tell her—or me, for that matter—"You've arrived at your destination" when it comes to reaching a definitive understanding of the Bible's contents. More than anything, I want to teach her that she can expect a lifetime of wandering through the Word. That journey, however, will be an adventure, and one she will undertake with God Himself.

BY CHAD THOMAS
JOHNSTON
In Touch Ministries

VBS 2021
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