

Lesson 10: Wilderness Wanderings (Numbers 14-27; Joshua; Judges)

The Wilderness

Israel's failure to go in and take the Promised Land as a result of their failure in hope, results in forty years of wandering in the wilderness: "Then the Lord said, 'I have pardoned, according to your word; but truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the proof these ten times and have not hearkened to my voice shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers...turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.'" The forty years may seem like an unreasonable punishment, but God is not in a hurry with Israel because the real goal is not the Promised Land but the purification of their hearts. Notice the distinction between forgiveness and punishment: though their guilt is forgiven, the punishment remains. The purpose of punishment is to teach and to heal. Sin has a double consequence: Eternal punishment and disordered attachments – vices – sinful habits - Temporal punishment. Original Sin and mortal sin deprives us from communion with God. Therefore it makes us incapable of eternal life. This privation is called the "eternal punishment" of sin. Through the Sacraments of Baptism and Reconciliation we receive: forgiveness of our sin and restoration of communion with God. This is the remission of the "eternal punishment." But temporal punishment of sin remains. By "temporal punishment" is meant disordered desires or attachments. We want created things more than we desire God or His will. It is this attachment that must be purified that we might receive the reward of union with God. This is the purpose of the wilderness.

Korah's Rebellion

Korah, one of the great-grandsons of Levi, and several others with him, decide to challenge Moses' authority: "They assembled themselves together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them; why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?"²⁴¹ In other words, Korah and his followers refuse to recognize the special office of Moses, which God Himself had instituted: "Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house."²⁴² How does Yahweh respond to this insubordination? The ground splits open and swallows up Korah and his family and attendants, and fire consumes those who were rebelling with him.²⁴³

The point here is that God always works through hierarchical structures: he acts through certain representatives: Noah, Abraham, Moses, the Levites, and others, and when the people fail to recognize His chosen representatives, God is offended. To rebel against those with a sacred office is therefore to rebel against God. This is not to say that every person who receives the authority of the office is perfect, or even necessarily holy. The office is a guarantee of the message, but not a guarantee of the holiness of the messenger. As Jesus will later say to His apostles: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects

²⁴⁰ Numbers 14: 20-23; 34

²⁴¹ Numbers 16:3

²⁴² Numbers 12:7

²⁴³ Numbers 16:31-35

me.” Jesus is not referring to His holiness, but to His message. It is of divine providence that certain men should have unique roles of formalized leadership and hierarchical distinction, and we must follow this program. We should not be like Korah and his family who challenge the authority that God vests with certain members of the church. This should be a constant reminder to us to respect those sacred offices of the Pope and bishops, as representatives of the Lord, with authority over God’s holy people.

Moses fails in Faith

The Israelites, who are returning back through the desert the very way they have come, wind up right back at Meribah, the same place where before Moses struck a rock, and from the rock flowed water to quench the thirst of the people.²⁴⁴ Now again, the people are without water and they “murmur” against Moses, complaining of their situation, and wishing that they had been left alone in Egypt. Again, God promises that He will bring water from the rock that all may drink, but this time His instructions for Moses are somewhat different: now, instead of striking the rock with his staff, Moses must simply command the rock to yield its water. Not heeding this new directive, Moses strikes the rock, and the water does indeed flow once more. Nonetheless, because Moses had not obeyed, and had not kept faith in God instruction, God tells him, “Because you did not believe in me, to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”²⁴⁵

This episode is a marvelous foreshadowing of the sacraments. In each of the seven sacraments a saving event from the past is made present, so that what took place then is made present now for the sake of the people. A sacrament is made of two parts: There is to be a spoken word (sacramental form: e.g., “This is My Body, this is My Blood,” in this case Moses’ spoken command to the rock) and something material (sacramental matter: e.g., bread and wine, in this case the rock). Just as the water from the rock is made present a second time for the Israelites, so Our Lord’s Body and Blood are made present anew for us through the sacrament of the Eucharist. Yet this story also holds a warning not to deviate from the exact directions given with regard to the form and the matter: for Moses the penalty is that he will never enter the promised land.

The Curse of Serpents

Throughout the story of Moses and the Israelites, we repeatedly see the people “murmuring.” This word can also be translated as “dissent,” and it implies a rejection of God’s will. Whenever the Israelites are subjected to anything unpleasant, instead of seeing the difficulty as an opportunity to become stronger and more pure, they become impatient and rebellious, resulting in a need for divine discipline. As they continue on their journey they find themselves back at the Red Sea, near where they started. In their frustration they “murmur” again, and the Lord sends fiery serpents as a chastisement.²⁴⁶ The people, as a result of the infliction, repent. God’s mercy comes in a very unique fashion: a bronze serpent is raised on a pole in the form of a cross, anyone who gazes upon the metal snake is cured from snakebite.

²⁴⁴ Exodus 17

²⁴⁵ Numbers 20:1-13

²⁴⁶ Numbers 21:4-9

It is very interesting that the sign of their suffering, that is, a serpent, should also be the sign that brings them relief and healing. It is as though God is attempting to show them suffering's potential for evil and its potential for grace. After all, suffering apart from faith, apart from a loving trust in God, is absolutely pointless. On the other hand, suffering that is united to a loving trust in God becomes redemptive: it heals and purifies. Remember, Christ did not come to remove suffering from our world, but rather to transform it and give it meaning: it is up to us whether we will make use of the opportunity suffering affords to grow in union with Our Lord. It is through suffering that love is purified. It is easy to love when things are easy, but when suffering is involved, love becomes more than self-gratification, but is a true offering of oneself for the other. St. Maximilian Kolbe once stated: Suffering for love nourishes love. As such, we can say that suffering is the nourishment of love.

The Gospel of John sees the image of a serpent on a pole as an image of the crucifixion. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life."²⁴⁷ So, just as the Israelites are saved by the cross raised in the wilderness; we too have been bitten by the serpent and need the healing that comes by way of the Cross of Christ.

Balak and Baalam

As the forty years wandering near an end the Israelites reach the eastern border of the Promised Land on the plains of Moab.²⁴⁸ Balak, the leader of Moab, is terrified of the impending Israelite invasion, and hires a false prophet named Baalam to curse the Israelites, hoping that some magical incantation will immobilize them. Yet much to his surprise, the donkey upon which Baalam is riding becomes very stubborn, and actually tries to *talk him out of it!* Further, an Angel appears to Baalam, and tells him that he will only be permitted to speak what the Lord has authorized. When Baalam finally gets to the point where he is supposed to curse the Israelites, what actually comes out of his mouth are four beautiful blessings upon them. God has shown that His power is far greater than any magic: he has made a donkey talk, sent an angel to do His bidding, and made Baalam a speaker of blessings rather than curses.²⁴⁹

The Sexual Immorality of the Israelites

Since the curse idea failed miserably, Baalam comes up with another plan: have the Moabite women entice the Israelite men, causing them to succumb to the idol worship at Beth-Peor.²⁵⁰ Like many in our own age, the Israelites were tempted by pleasures of the flesh into grave sin. And, like our own age, no one made any protest or showed any outrage.

²⁴⁷ John 3:14-15

²⁴⁸ Numbers 22:1

²⁴⁹ Numbers 22-24; One of the statements by Balaam tells of the coming of a king, symbolized by a star. Jewish traditions connect the arrival of the Messiah with the appearance of a star, and a number of Church Fathers interpreted the star of Balaam as the same star the Magi saw when Jesus is born. See also CCC, #528.

²⁵⁰ Numbers 31:16

Here we see again that God will protect the Israelites from outside threat, from the military forces of their enemies, from the curses of hired magicians, but in spite of all this, it is still within the power of the people to destroy themselves by the turning away from God's plan for their fulfillment. As we have seen, this self-destruction is frequently linked with sexual sin. How common this is in our time, where sexual immorality is constantly attacking the root of society, namely, the family. Premarital relations, homosexuality, cohabitation of non-married couples, contraception, and divorce destroy countless marriages and wreak havoc upon our culture.²⁵³ The choice is very simple: remain faithful to God's plan for marriage and receive His blessing, or give in to sexual temptation and commit personal, familial, and cultural suicide.

The second generation of Israelites fell into idolatry at Beth-Peor as hard as their parents did at Sinai with the golden calf. This was nothing less than mortal sin resulting in a broken covenant. Only one thing was different: the Levites didn't lift a finger, no one did, that is, except for one man named Phineas, who, in his indignation at the people's sin, stabs an Israelite man and a Moabite woman while they were lying together.²⁵⁴ For this act he is rewarded with a high priesthood for his family, and the Israelite people are saved from the plague, which God had sent upon them.²⁵⁵

As we reach the end of the Book of Numbers Moses is prepared for death and Joshua is prepared to take his place. The broken covenant is renewed and before he dies, Moses gives the Israelites a last ditch effort to explain to them the lesson of the Exodus. Standing on Mt. Nebo, looking into the Promised Land, of which he will never set foot, Moses turns to the Israelites to teach them one last time: this is the book of Deuteronomy. Here he teaches them the lesson of the Exodus. The key question is "Whom will you serve (avad)? Serving Yahweh depends on knowing (yada) him. They didn't know Him and thus failed to serve Him and so the second generation needed forty years in the wilderness to come to know him. Yet now they have fallen. So once again Moses teaches the Israelites and begs them to drill this into their children – otherwise they too will fall and wind up slaves to sin and slaves to the people around them, just as their fathers were in Egypt. The lesson of the Exodus is this: serving depends on knowing."²⁵⁶

Joshua and the Conquest of the Promised Land

Joshua succeeds Moses as head of the Israelites, and gathers the people together to prepare them for the conquest of the Promised Land.²⁶⁰ He instructs them to follow the law that Moses gave them, and to "meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful

²⁵³ The divorce rate for couples who have sex before marriage is sixty percent. The divorce rate for couples who cohabitate before marriage is eighty percent. The divorce rate for couples that use contraception is more than fifty percent. On the other hand, couples who abstain from sex until marriage, who do not live together until marriage, who live according to the Church's teaching on contraception, who attend Mass regularly, and tithen ten percent have a divorce rate less than one percent.

²⁵⁴ Numbers 25:6-8

²⁵⁵ Numbers 25:10-13

²⁵⁶ Deuteronomy 32:45-47

²⁶⁰ Numbers 27:18

to do according to all that is written in it.”²⁶¹ This is a very powerful statement, for it reminds us that the only way to attain to true union with God, the only way to conform our actions to His will, is to consistently meditate on Him, all He has done for us, and what He has commissioned us to do.

Then Joshua sends in two spies to scout out the Promised Land, (apparently Joshua has learned from the mistakes of the last spy mission). Once in Jericho the two spies encounter Rahab, a prostitute of Canaan who allows them to hide in her house when the king of Jericho hears that certain men of Israel have come to search out the land. Rahab is an amazing Gentile, she has heard of the saving deeds of the Lord and she knows that He is LORD and there is no other. Listen to her words to the two spies:

“I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan...whom you utterly destroyed...For the LORD your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.”²⁶²

It is remarkable how this non-Israelite understands the history of the Exodus in such a profound way.²⁶³ Rahab has heard of all that the LORD has done, she believes that he is God and there is no other, and she is ready to serve (avad) him with her whole life. This was what the Israelites were supposed to learn and have not, as evidenced by their continual falling into idolatry. This is also the lesson the Israelites are supposed to teach their children. Will they, this remains to be seen.

The entrance into the Promised Land takes place at Jericho, on the other side of the Jordan River. Just as the Israelites escaped from Egypt through the parting of the Red Sea, God parts the waters of the Jordan so Israel might pass through the waters on dry land. It is a reminder to Israel of God’s saving action, but it is also an image of baptism when we pass through the water from sin and slavery to the life of grace and the kingdom of our Father.²⁶⁶ The capture of Jericho occurs in a very unconventional way. Yahweh has the Israelites march around the city once a day for six days while the priests blow trumpets, and on the seventh day they march around the city seven times and the walls of the city come crashing down. The Israelites then marched right over the rubble of the wall and into the city.²⁶⁷

Finally, once the conquest is complete, Joshua recounts all of salvation history from Abraham to the present, and he concludes with this statement, “Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your

²⁶¹ Joshua 1:8; Joshua means “the Lord saves” or “the Savior” which will take on added meaning when Jesus takes the name for himself.

²⁶² Joshua 2:9-11

²⁶³ Rahab later marries an Israelite and Saint Matthew tells us that she was one of the ancestors of David, and thus one of the ancestors of Jesus (Matthew 1:5).

²⁶⁶ CCC, #1222

²⁶⁷ Joshua 6

fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”²⁶⁸ He is summing up the great question of the Exodus, “Whom will you serve?” Would they serve the gods of Egypt, or the gods of other foreign peoples? Would they serve their own gods of money, sex, and power? Or would they serve the true God, Yahweh, and receive the happiness that comes from knowing and serving Him? At the end of the Book of Joshua we are given the answer to the question of the Exodus. In chapter 24 verse 31, we are told: “Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work which the Lord did for Israel.”²⁶⁹ Here, at the end of their journey from Egypt, after forty years of wandering the desert, countless sufferings and battles, the people have at last come to know (*yada*) God.

Decline into Idolatry and Slavery

Sadly, although they were themselves faithful to God’s covenant, the Israelites failed in one way: they did not follow the counsel of Moses in Deuteronomy 32; they did not instruct their children in the ways of the Lord. In the book of Judges (which is the continuation of the story), we read that “there arose another generation after them, who did not know the Lord or the work which he had done for Israel.”²⁷⁰ The result is that they immediately revert to paganism, which in turn ends in political slavery to their enemies.²⁷¹

So we see the critical importance of education our children in the faith. Although the parents may be holy, and devout, and hardworking, if they do not teach their children to be faithful, the result will be pure havoc, as we have seen in our own day. Generations who have not been taught the faith, who have not been formed according to the teachings of the Church, or encouraged to live a life of Christian virtue and the sacraments: these generations have been lost in a life of confusion and worldliness. If we want to change the modern tide, we must be sure to educate our children along the path of holiness. As for the Israelites, this finish to the Pentateuch is absolutely tragic: after all God’s efforts to bring His chosen people out of slavery, here they are again in submission to idols and foreign peoples. So the saga continues.

²⁶⁸ Joshua 24:1-13

²⁶⁹ Joshua 24:31

²⁷⁰ Judges 2:10

²⁷¹ Judges 2:11-15