

LIVING FREE - Week 2

Monday, June 14

Now, the surprising thing about the trip the Israelites had to take from Egypt to the land of promise, after they were freed from slavery, is that it was quite short. I made the trip by bus in a day. A person could walk it in two or three weeks. I had the privilege of crossing the desert of the Sinai during a year in graduate school. A week later, I also spent a day in the Egyptian wilderness riding on a pack animal. The desert is a stark place with few landmarks to chart your course. Even the sense of space is distorted by the vastness of it all. There are stretches of miles without the sign of any plant life. Sand dunes rise all around you. It is easy to feel alone there. I think this is what God intended when he took his people there. But why spend 40 years making a journey that could be made in just a few weeks?

Here is Exodus 13:17 explaining:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt."

In short, the Lord said the people were not ready to go into the land. Here's why. First, they would face the enemy right away, but they would lack the strength of heart and mind to stay the course. Indeed, this is what happened. Later, when spies were sent into the land, though the report from the land was good, the people were afraid to enter it. They refused to trust God. But there was a second and greater reason for God's planned detour for them. The people that came out of Egypt had only ever known slavery. You can't get that out of your system overnight. Indeed, they never got slavery out of their system. A person can be set free and continue to live in their heart as a slave. This is what happened to that first generation that came from Egypt. Sadly, this is why that generation died in the wilderness. There was a third reason for the time in the wilderness. God wanted time with them. God wanted them to be shaped by his presence. He wanted to give to them his word. He wanted them to learn his ways. The desert was a way to have his people to himself, and for them to learn to trust him. It was for them to have time to walk together. In the wilderness, you really do have nothing but your companions. In this case, Israel's companion was the Lord himself. I think we despise our wilderness times. All of us have these times. For example, we have just come through the wilderness of COVID-19. They can be times of loss, times when you feel alone and isolated. These are extraordinary times when we can know the presence of God in our lives. The silence of the wilderness and that lack of distraction also helped bond this people to the Lord. In the wilderness, they could hear and come to know the voice of God. Even Jesus had his time there before starting his ministry. Though he was tested there, the Spirit of God sent him into the wilderness. No doubt, this was formative for him and his ministry. Paul also spent more than a decade in the wilderness where he might come to know the God that redeemed him. The question is: how can these times in the wilderness be beneficial for us? First, I think we need to see the wilderness for the open space that it is. This is the place where we can hear and receive God's word if we make ourselves, like the wilderness, open. Are we willing for God to lead us and teach us during these times, or do we complain that these times come? Indeed, I believe as for Israel, these times are ordained by the Lord. They are not punishment, but the time we need with the Lord to move forward. Are we willing to wait upon the Lord and to take the time that is needed to be with Him? Second, will we listen for the word of the Lord? It is not by coincidence that the Lord gave his people his word there. In the silence of the wilderness, we can listen to and hear the word of the Lord. That is what this time is for. My best times in the day are often early in the morning when the world is quiet and I can hear and receive the word of the Lord. We live daily with the tyranny of noise and constant activity. We scorn silence and rush to fill stillness, but God is there. Indeed, we need white space, time alone to enjoy God's presence in our lives. Will we set aside time to be with God? This was God's reason for bringing the people out of slavery. He wanted time with them, time alone. This is what God wants with each of us. We have to be willing for God to lead us, not on the most direct route to our destination, but along a course that leaves us time to be with him, time to understand and enter into the freedom he has for us in Christ.

Let's pray:

Lord God, moments of silence feel awkward to us. It seems like we must fill each moment and each day. There is little margin left. Forgive us for running from you and hiding from you as Adam and Eve did in the Garden. You are the source of life and peace and joy. Reveal yourself to us, I pray, in the silence of the night and the stillness of the morning. My soul longs for you in the desert, in the dry and weary land where there is no water. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, June 15

As we are learning about the wilderness years this week during our study of the book of Numbers, we have been looking at the experience from the human side, from Israel's side. But how was the experience for the Lord? Remember, he was the God that loved Israel and redeemed them from their slavery. But as soon as they got free, they doubted God, they rebelled against God, they refused to trust God. Hundreds of years later, the prophet Hosea explained what the Lord did with his people.

He shares with us the word of the Lord:

Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. -Hosea 2:14

This is what God did with his people. They had been subject to harsh slavery, but God loved his people. He was gracious and tender with them.

Here the Lord says:

"In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master'." -Hosea 2:16

Yes, the Lord didn't look at his people with a master-slave relationship. That is what Pharaoh did with the people. They were his workforce and nothing more. When he feared Israel might become too strong, he asked that the male babies be killed. This likely would have happened to Moses if his family had not secretly kept him, and if he had not been floated down the Nile in a basket. But the Lord God was different. He didn't see himself as the master of his people but the husband. These are beautiful and tender words about the Lord's love for his people. Yet, though the Lord loved his people and treated them tenderly, they were stiff-necked. They were unfaithful again and again. In the wilderness, they complained incessantly though the Lord provided for them at every turn. Now, the Talmud, an ancient book of Jewish wisdom, gathered up many of the stories of the Jewish people and says that the prophet Hosea just could not understand why the Lord put up with the Israelites. Of course, this makes sense to us. If God could choose any people, why choose an unfaithful people? Hosea even told the Lord: *The whole universe is yours. Why not exchange this people for another nation?* The Lord wanted to show Hosea why he would not do this, so the Lord placed Hosea in his story. He let Hosea know what the Lord experienced, and how the Lord felt. God asked Hosea to marry a woman that would be unfaithful to him. Then perhaps Hosea would understand the experience from the Lord's side. Hosea did what the Lord commanded and became one of the prophets of the people in the process. Here's what Hosea experienced. Hosea loved his unfaithful wife. Though they had children together and established a home, though Hosea loved her and was tender with her, she left him and lived life as a prostitute. Hosea had to go and buy his own wife. But he loved her so much he did that. His love drove him to do shocking things to bring her home and have a family with her. The prophecy of Hosea is heartbreaking and, at the same time, filled with hope. It is heartbreaking to see what happens when love is scorned and not returned, when such sacrifices are made out of love. It is hopeful because we learn this is how the Lord loves his people. Now, as we are reading the book of Numbers, we find the people denying God's love, forsaking God's love, and rejecting the Lord. But the Lord loves his people. He will not leave them. He never forsakes them. Hosea is the most shocking love story ever because this is the way of the Lord's love. He will not give up the one he loves. It was this experience that qualified Hosea to tell the story. He came to know this love as well for his wife. He also would not give her up. His book is one of the most beautiful in scripture, not because it is easy or sweet, but because he teaches us the depths of love. It also shows us there is always a high cost to loving. This is the love with which we have been loved in Christ.

God could have walked away from humanity. He could have created another world and another people to love. Why not exchange this world for another? God loves us. There is no other reason. This is love. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Let us pray:

Loving God, you have given us the assurance of a love that never fades, and a faithfulness unchanged even when we turn away from you. This is too marvelous for us to understand. Enable us, by your Holy Spirit, to live in your steadfast love. Give us eyes to know how wide and long and high and deep your love is for us in Christ. For we pray in his name. Amen.

Wednesday, June 16

Today, we look at an interesting scripture about the Nazarite Vow from Numbers chapter 6. Have you ever known someone especially dedicated to the Lord, so dedicated that they largely pulled away from life in the world? We don't live with monastics around us today, but that is the closest example to what this text is speaking about.

Here's the word the Lord gave Moses about this:

Numbers 6:1-6

The LORD said to Moses, ²“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the LORD as a Nazirite, ³they must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or other fermented drink. They must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. ⁴As long as they remain under their Nazirite vow, they must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins. ⁵“During the entire period of their Nazirite vow, no razor may be used on their head. They must be holy until the period of their dedication to the LORD is over; they must let their hair grow long. ⁶“Throughout the period of their dedication to the LORD, the Nazirite must not go near a dead body.

Now, in our world today, we know little of this kind of commitment to the Lord. We may even wonder why a person would take such a vow. What could be the benefit to doing so? It may seem strange to us, but there are those that would like to spend their time completely devoted to the Lord. They want fellowship with God. They want to learn the word of God and desire to walk with God. We may get this idea about Enoch, the man that walked with God. Scripture tells us that he became so close to the Lord, that one day he walked off with the Lord and never returned. I think there is this hunger in each of us for such fellowship with God, like Adam and Eve must have had in the garden before sin came into the world. Likely, this is why the Lord provides for the vow of the Nazarite. But even here, the Lord doesn't give a reason for taking this vow, except that the person desires to enjoy a time like this with the Lord. Yes, the idea was not to take such a vow for a lifetime but for a limited amount of time. That is why there is a provision for what a person is to do when the time of the vow comes to an end. The only person scripture tells us had this vow for a lifetime was Samson, and he didn't take his vow seriously. I think he broke every provision provided by the Lord in this vow. But there is a message in this provision that the Lord gives his people. We may need times to pull away from normal life, times to step away from the trappings of life to enjoy communion with God. Some early Christian monastics sought solitude in the wilderness, and some even spent a lifetime there pursuing God. But we also have to be careful in how we view these times, and the people that take them, for two reasons. First, we cannot be of good in the world if we pull away from it. We do indeed need times alone with God, but God has a high purpose for us in the world. Yes, we are not to be of the world, but we are meant to live in it and not avoid the world. As far as we know, Jesus himself never took the Nazarite vow. Yes, he sought places of solitude where he could be alone with his Father, but it seems he did this a day at a time. Instead, he brought grace into the world at every turn, touching those farthest from God. His model for faithfulness guides us as we walk in him. But there is also a second reason that we need to be careful in how we view this vow. At the end, in the instructions given to Moses about the Nazarite vow, we are told what the person is to do once the vow of time has been fulfilled:

Now this is the law of the Nazirite when the period of their dedication is over. They are to be brought to the entrance to the tent of meeting. ¹⁴ There they are to present their offerings to the LORD: a year-old male lamb without defect for a burnt offering, a year-old ewe lamb without defect for a sin offering, a ram without defect for a fellowship offering...
-Numbers 6:13-14

This surprises us. We are told that at the completion of the vow a sin offering is to be made. Yes, it is assumed you will emerge from the vow in sin that requires a sacrifice. You see, we think that this kind of devotion to God will drive sin from our lives. We think that if we can just get alone with God, and get away from the world, then we won't have a problem with sin. Difficult people are my problem. The struggles of daily life are my problem. There is this scene in the movie *Interstellar*, when astronauts traveling to a new world talk about leaving behind evil on earth, and they believe there will be none where they are going. The response to this idea is: *only the evil we take with us*. Yes, it is with us wherever we go. We cannot escape it because we carry along with us. The truth is that we will not reach the garden, the place of peace without sin, until the Lord Jesus, the messiah, brings the kingdom of God in all its fullness. Yes, the early Christians that took to the wilderness learned this lesson. The most dangerous sins lurk in the heart: pride and envy, greed and lust. By going into the wilderness, you will not leave them behind. Indeed, such vows can stoke our pride, for example, making us think we are super-spiritual or closer to God than others. We don't cease sinning in isolation from others. Sin likes to push us away from others and into isolation. So, taking the Nazirite vow is not a guarantee of finding a better place with God. But it can be a time of retreat with God, a time when you can bring your sin and brokenness before the holy God. I like the pattern of Jesus best. Time each day with God and a healthy engagement in our calling to be salt and light in the world. He demonstrated a balanced and healthy life.

Let's pray:

Lord God, forgive us for thinking that the other people in our lives are the problem. Forgive us for thinking that it is what around me that is my greatest danger, rather than what is in me. Thank you that in Christ you fill me with your Holy Spirit, and you lead me each day by your grace. Help me to trust in you. For in your name, I pray. Amen.

Thursday, June 17

Priest Brennan Manning married, but he never had children. He was one day with a friend that had a large family, and he asked his friend: which of your children do you love the most? He expected his friend to give the right answer, explaining that he loves all of his children the same. But his friend surprised him. He said, "I love my son, Peter, the most. He did not make the track team this year, and his hopes were high for lettering. I could see how much this hurt him. I love him so much." Then before Brennan could say anything, his friend said, "I love my daughter Martha the most. Martha's boyfriend recently broke up with her. This was devastating for her. I can see how heartbroken she is about it all. I love her so much." Soon this man told the story about how he loved each of his children the most. His heart was directed to each of them when they were hurting, when they suffered loss, when they were struggling. Brennan realized each were uniquely special and loved by his friend. Now, we come to a passage like Numbers chapter seven, and we are surprised by the repetition.

Here's part of this chapter:

Numbers 7:11-17

And the LORD said to Moses, "They shall offer their offerings, one chief each day, for the dedication of the altar." ¹² He who offered his offering the first day was Nahshon the son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah. ¹³ And his offering was one silver plate whose weight was 130 shekels, one silver basin of 70 shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering; ¹⁴ one golden dish of 10 shekels, full of incense; ¹⁵ one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; ¹⁶ one male goat for a sin offering; ¹⁷ and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. This was the offering of Nahshon the son of Amminadab.

Now, the gift given by Amminadab and the tribe of Judah is exactly the gift given by each of the tribes. So, this gift list is repeated eleven times. You are exhausted when you get to the end of the chapter. Enough already. Why not just give the names of the tribes and explain the gift that all of them gave? This is a lot of scribal ink to spill over what seems to be unimportant. The truth is this was considered very important. There is no favoritism for the tribes. Each were allowed to step forward to make their offerings to the Lord when the tabernacle was set in place. Why did they make the same offering? It wasn't a competition. The goal was not comparison. I grew up the middle of three boys, and there seemed to be endless competition for the approval of our parents, especially our dad. Many families know this sibling rivalry. For most of my life, I felt like the least favored of the three boys. The youngest was doted on, and when he became sick in childhood, all the attention seemed to be directed to him. My older brother bore the name of my father. My dad was a third, and my brother was a fourth. He was my dad's pride and joy. Often my dad didn't help. When we grew up, my dad often told me about the successes of my brothers. I took this to be pointing out of their accomplishments as if to challenge me. It wasn't until years later that I learned that my dad did this also with my brothers. His goal wasn't competition. It was the opposite. He wanted to curry respect in each of us for what our brothers had done. But each of us had to run our own race. There was no benefit in competing with each other. Our parents loved us differently because we were different, and the challenges and opportunities we had differed as well. So, yes, there is a lot of ink given to repeat the offerings, but it was quite purposeful in scripture. The message was that they were each loved by God, and they shared together in the story of redemption and grace. The tribes, like the twelve different sons of Jacob, were different, and that was just fine. They had different stories, but the same God guided them and cared for them. I learned later in life that of course my parents could dole out love equally because we were not equal. But they loved each of us just the same. Sometimes we wonder if God loves some of us more than others. We see that God chooses and uses some people in ways that he doesn't others. That is true. But we must remember that God's love is unconditional. It is not increased or lessened by our performance. Our successes or failures can't touch the love of God for us. Neither can death or famine or the sword nor height nor depth. We have the full assurance of God's unfailing love. I rather think God does what that father Brennan Manning met said he did. He directed his love to the child that needed it at the moment it was needed.

Let's pray:

Lord God, our loving Father, we long to be loved. We seem to be constantly measuring the giving of love and care. But you can't love us more, and you won't love us less. Help us to rest in knowing your grace. Thank you for the cross of Jesus, the place where we see your love so clearly demonstrated. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Friday, June 18

Have you counted how many years you have until retirement? Have you looked at your savings, your retirement resources, and calculated how much longer you must work before you can hang up your shoes? My dad fully retired at the age of sixty-two. He then lived for another thirty-three years. I am not sure when or if I will be able to retire. But I've never looked forward to retiring because ministry is not a job but a calling. But do you know that God set a retirement plan for the Levites? These were men chosen for the care of the tabernacle and also for providing assistance to the people.

Here's our scripture text for today:

Numbers 8:23-26

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁴ "This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall come to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting. ²⁵ And from the age of fifty years they shall withdraw from the duty of the service and serve no more. ²⁶ They minister to their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard, but they shall do no service. Thus shall you do to the Levites in assigning their duties."

Now, it seems a bit strange that God would be interested in something as mundane as this, but he was. Here's what was going on. First, it was a high honor to serve the Lord as a Levite. This

tribe was selected to facilitate the worship of the Lord. They served as helpers at the tabernacle and later at the temple. They also led singing and organized worship. They were the people that made it happen, meaning they took care of all the necessary arrangements to enable the people of God to worship. Often, we don't see the behind-the-scenes helpers that serve the congregation. For years, a team of older women at Granada met to fold and prepare the worship bulletins. They also prepared the elements for communion. They were a faithful fellowship of women doing the work of the Levites. Also, from among the tribe of Levi came the priesthood itself, from the family of Aaron. This tribe had a special role in the land with some great advantages and disadvantages. Many of these parallel what people in ministry have today. They have the privilege of serving the Lord and extending ministry to the people. The Levites had a teaching responsibility, the goal of which was to keep each generation in the Word of God and knowing the promises and law of God. Their job was to be in the Word and to share it. In a sense, they were invited by the Lord to be close to him. What a beautiful calling! But there was a downside as well. They were allotted no land by the Lord. Every other tribe had real property that would be used to produce food, but Levites had none. This meant that their future was never secure, except as the Lord provided for them through the gifts of the people. This provision rose and fell with the spiritual life of the nation. Rare were the times when the people were close to the Lord. As the people wandered from God, the support for the Levites and priesthood suffered. Now, let's return to the Lord's instruction about their retirement, so to speak. Why did God set bounds around the years of their active work? The Lord wanted the younger Levites to have a chance to serve him. So, at the age of fifty, the duty of a Levite would shift to a support role rather than a leadership role, allowing the next generation to serve the Lord in the tabernacle. Today, we know and think a lot about retirement, but we know little about preparing the next generation to lead. Work is so central to our lives that we need to embrace God's ways and learn to entrust the next generation with leadership and the opportunity to serve. For most of my years in ministry, I've been a pulpit hog, preferring to preach and teach when possible. But a time came when I could see that without giving the younger men experience, they would not be prepared to lead when the time came. Richard Rohr, in his book entitled *Falling Upward*, talks about two major phases to our work lives. He calls the first phase becoming the loyal soldier. During that phase, during youth, you work hard, putting in the time to learn and develop your craft, whether it is medicine or preaching, laying tile or baking cakes. But as your gifts and abilities mature and as you reach middle age, you begin to take on the role of a sage, teaching and empowering others. Each of these phases of work and service are necessary to sustain a society. You are not equipped to be a teacher of others until you have put in a whole lot of hard work yourself. But then if you do not become the sage and mentor the young, the society will lack the leaders needed in the future. Both phases are essential, putting in the hard work and giving the opportunities away. This is what I believe God is after. He asked the Levites, at age fifty, to become the guards at the tabernacle. He didn't ask them to walk away. They would be present to coach and encourage, present to invest in the rising young leaders.

Let us pray:

Gracious Lord, thank you for opportunity of joining you in your work in the world. Thank you for those that invested in me when I was younger, for teachers and mentors, and encouragers. Thank you for those that believed in me and provided places for me to grow and learn. We pray for the middle-aged and older people among us, that they would be faithful to serve the next generation for the good of everyone and for your glory. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, June 19

It's been passed along to us as the Irish blessing, possibly coming from St. Patrick himself. It goes like this:

*May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields and
until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

The book of Numbers, along with the end of the book of Exodus, tells us what happened when the Tabernacle, the sanctuary used during Israel's wilderness years, was finally set up.

Here's the description:

On the day the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant law, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. ¹⁶ That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire. ¹⁷ Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. ¹⁸ At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. ¹⁹ When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the LORD's order and did not set out. -Numbers 9:15-19

Now, this is an important text explaining the way the Lord appeared to the people. Here's why. First, the way the Lord appeared. The Lord did not appear in any physical form that could be reproduced or made into an idol. Yes, you could light a fire or bring steam from boiling water, but a fire would die down, and steam would dissipate. The Lord purposely appeared in a manner that could not be turned into an idol. This was important to the Lord, and also is to us, because with representations that can be reproduced people will tend to reproduce them. We'd all have wood or stone idols in our homes. The Lord warned his people that he has no physical form, and they are not to make an idol of anything to represent him. This means that we relate to the Lord face to face, person to person. There is nothing that can stand for God. We must come only to him. God was very strict with his people about this because he wanted to spare them the dangers and griefs of making, serving and living for idols.

Deuteronomy 4:15-18

You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, ¹⁶ so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, ¹⁷ or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, ¹⁸ or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below.

So yes, they would hear the voice of the Lord, but never see a form, never have an image they could make an idol of. But the Lord came in the cloud and the fire because he wanted to be with them. He would be in their midst. He would lead them and guide them. When the cloud or fire moved, the people were to move as well. If the cloud remained over the camp, they were to stay put. Talk about being led by God. Why did God lead his people in this way in the beginning? They were called the children of Israel for a reason. Like little children, they needed to be led until they grew up. The time in the wilderness was time for them to grow to trust the Lord, to learn his ways and to come to know his character. But a day would come when there was not cloud guiding them, no fire lighting their way. Then they would live even more by faith. But, as I think of this time, I think of the Irish blessing. Yes, God had them in the hollow of his hand. He provided for them each meal. He gave them the water they would need in the wilderness. And, he guided them step by step along the way to the fulfillment of his promise of a land, a place for them. Now, today we have no cloud and no pillar of fire. But what we have in Christ is even better. God has given us his Spirit to dwell in us. Of course, just like the people of God in the wilderness, we must grow to understand the way of the Spirit and know the leading of the Spirit. We must, in a sense, grow up in Christ to enjoy the fullness of the presence of God in the Spirit God has provided to us.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, we may be tempted to think your people in the wilderness had life better than we do. They had the fire and the cloud. But remind us that you have given us your Spirit to dwell within us. Teach us a sensitivity to your Spirit and how to yield our lives to your guidance. Lead us, we pray, in the name of Jesus. Amen.