

Can God Spread a Table in the Wilderness?

by John Piper

God leads us into the wilderness to humble and test us, to do us good in the end, and to teach us to trust in the Lord with all our heart.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:16, Psalm 37:3, Psalm 78:21, Proverbs 3:5, Hebrews 12:11

Topics: "Trials And Tribulations", "Gods Providence"

Description

John Piper preaches about God's purpose in leading His people through the wilderness, emphasizing the lessons of humility, dependence, and trust that are learned in the midst of trials and detours. He highlights how the wilderness serves as a testing ground to prevent self-sufficiency and pride, ultimately leading to a deeper reliance on God's provision and power. Through the example of the Israelites' journey, Piper illustrates the importance of embracing the wilderness experiences in life as opportunities for growth, gratitude, and obedience to God's leading.

Transcript

November 22, 1981

CAN GOD SPREAD A TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS? There are shorter ways to get from Egypt to Palestine than through the wilderness of Sinai. Mount Sinai is about 200 miles out of the way--which is bad enough if you are driving a car, but if you are walking and there is scarcely any water or shade, then the detour really tests your patience. You would think that if God were your travel agent, he would know the terrain, and the shortest route to Palestine. You would think that if he can divide the Red Sea, a direct and painless route to the promised land would be a snap. Surely he would have given the law at Kadesh Barnea or Hebron or by the Jordan, or some place a little more on the way.

O, how God must become weary with how often we question his itinerary for our lives. How often we think we know better how to get from here to there! We are so much more prone to grumble with the conductor when the train turns south, than we are to sit patiently and wait for lessons from the Lord. He is a very mysterious guide. We never quite know what is coming next. God would never make it in the travel industry because he is always leading his best clients into the wilderness. He even led his own Son into the wilderness forty days. So it's clearly not because he has something against people that he leads them into the wilderness. He must think there is something good to be gotten out of it. He must think there is no hurry to glut oneself on milk and honey.

In fact, he tells us that the prosperity of the promised land is so dangerous to our souls that only the recollection of some sobering wilderness weaknesses and wonders will perturb the river of our self-sufficiency and pride from flooding our lives and drowning our faith. This is what he says through Moses to the people of Israel after a forty year detour in the wilderness just before they cross over into the promised land (Deut. 8:11-18):

Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes which I command you this day: lest when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna which your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware, lest you say in your heart: 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers.

There is the philosophy of our Travel Agent in a nutshell. These trips to the wilderness that he provides for his clients are not really detours - no more so, at least, than a trip to the doctor for a smallpox vaccination is a detour on the way to healthy adulthood. He led them in the wilderness, it says, to humble them and test them to do them good in the end. What good? The full stomachs, and houses, and herds, and flocks, and silver, and gold? No. You don't need 40 years in the wilderness to teach you how to get wealth. The good that God aimed to do through the wilderness testing was to make the people intensely, deeply and lastingly conscious of their total dependence on God for everything. God aimed to give them experiences in the wilderness which would make it impossible for a reasonable person to say, "My power, my might or my hand has gotten me this wealth."

The real testing ground of life is the promised land of prosperity. The wilderness is the boot camp, the land of milk and honey is where the battle for the heart is finally fought. There are more scorpions and fiery serpents in the goodly houses, and flocks, and herds, and gold, and silver on this side of the Jordan than there ever were under the rocks in the wilderness. And none of us is so clever in avoiding their bite or so immune to their sting that we can afford to ignore God's travel plan and bypass the wilderness. The wilderness is God's gracious inoculation against the infections of prosperity. You can count on it, beloved child of God: if you haven't been there yet, you will. "Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you" (Deut. 8:5). "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:11). The wilderness is never easy; it is never easy. But it is for our good if we will be trained by it. And those who are best trained are most happy, most free and most thankful wherever their journey leads.

The history of Israel from the exodus when they came out of Egypt to the time of their crossing the Jordan into the promised land can be sketched briefly like this. The journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai where the law was given took about three months. They leave Egypt in Exodus 14 and arrive at Sinai in Exodus 19; so Exodus 15-18 describe the first leg of their wilderness journey. For almost two years the people of Israel stay at Sinai while the laws are given and the tabernacle for worship is planned and constructed. This period of time is covered in Exodus 19 to the end, all of Leviticus and Numbers 1-10. So from Exodus 19 to Numbers 10 the people are in the wilderness of Sinai. In Numbers 10:11 the people set out from

Sinai toward the promised land. They arrive at Kadesh in the Wilderness of Paran to the south of Canaan and, in Numbers 13 the 12 spies are sent in to spy out the promised land. After 40 days they return. Caleb and Joshua hand in this report: "Let us go up at once and occupy it; for we are well able to overcome it" (Num. 13:30). But the other 10 spies oppose this decision with an amazing argument--amazing for people who had walked through the Red Sea and spent two and a half years in the desert with God. They said: "We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we" (Num. 13:31). My guess is that Caleb and Joshua looked at each other in unbelief and then glanced at Moses and then looked back at the ten spies and cried out, "So what! What does the relative strength between them and us have to do with whether we can take the land?" People who trust in God are always baffled by the practical atheism of nominal believers. If God has said, "Go up and take the land," it is irrelevant that we look like grasshoppers compared to the inhabitants. In fact, that may be all the more reason to go, since God will get more glory that way. Grasshoppers will surely never be able to boast when God gives them the victory.

But in Numbers 14 the people prove that two and a half years in the wilderness has not been long enough to teach them to trust God alone, and they rebel against Moses and against God. In Numbers 14:11 the Lord says to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs which I have wrought among them? I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them." But Moses, one of the most patient and committed leaders that has ever lived, applied himself in prayer for the people. He argued with God that God's name would be scorned in Egypt if it appeared that he could not bring the people into Canaan (Num. 14:15,16); and he argued on the basis of God's self-revelation on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34:6,7, that God is "slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and forgives iniquity and transgression" (Num. 14:17,18).

So God relented from total destruction and said (in Num. 14:20-25):

I have pardoned according to your word but truly as I live, and as 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; and none of those who despised me, shall see it. But my servant Caleb because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land in which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. Now since the Amalekites and Canaanites dwell in the valleys turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.

The whole class flunked their final exam of the Wilderness training and were not allowed to graduate. And all the children are sent back to school. If two and a half years of human helplessness and divine wonders doesn't put trust into the hearts of Israel then we will make it forty years. And so it was that Israel wandered in the wilderness (cared for by an amazingly patient God) until a generation of unbelievers died out. (This period is covered in the rest of the book of Numbers from chapter 14 to the end.)

It is not hard to see the lesson God wants to teach us from the wilderness experience of his people Israel. God says that even though they saw his glory and the signs he wrought in Egypt and in the Wilderness, yet they put him to the test time after time with their grumbling and did not harken to his voice or rest in his power (Num. 14:22). The implication is clear: God's purpose in the exodus and in the wilderness wandering was to humble the people (Deut. 8:2) and then to show his wonders for them, so they would learn to trust in the Lord with all their heart and lean not on their own insight or power (Prov. 3:5,6). The curriculum in the wilderness is designed to lay bare human helplessness. It is designed to show that Albert Ellis in his Rational Emotive Therapy (RET), which considers belief in God to be a babyish thing, is not so

rational after all; that man in the wilderness really is a helpless baby and unless we turn and become like little children we shall all likewise perish.

But that's just Wilderness 101, a course entitled: "Deflating the human ego." The more advanced seminar is entitled, "How to spread a table in the wilderness." The course is a snap if you are ready for it; but if you're not, it can be very humiliating. It is taught in two halves, one going to Mt. Sinai, one going from. The first half of the course was taught in Exodus 16 on the way between Egypt and Sinai. The Israelites have learned the lesson of Wilderness 101 and know they are done for without food. They say, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Ex. 16:3). Lesson 101 is learned, they are helpless; but now comes the advanced lesson. God says:

'Behold I will rain bread from heaven for you' (16:4). 'At twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.' In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning dew lay round about the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground (Ex. 16:12-14).

A very short course, but a very clear lesson: God can spread a table in the wilderness. And therefore, helpless as we are, we should trust, obey and be thankful. We should rejoice even in the wilderness knowing that it is for our good in the end (Deut. 8:16) and that even here our needs will be marvelously supplied.

But Israel did not learn well from the first half of the seminar. The months passed and soon the miraculous manna was old hat (like the gift of air and health and freedom and family and even salvation). They forgot its source and felt no more wonder at God's power and grace. And so on the way between Sinai and Canaan (in Numbers 11:18) the people grumbled and cried out for meat. "Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt." They had lost all sense of gratitude, and murmured saying, "O that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing ... but now our strength is dried up and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Num. 11:6). This attitude makes the Teacher of the seminar very angry, so he tells Moses to say to the people (and this is the second half of the seminar): "The Lord will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall not eat one day, or two days, or five days or ten days, or twenty days but a whole month until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you because you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wept before him saying, 'Why did we come forth out of Egypt?'" It is a terrible and foolish thing to say to God: "My life would be better if I hadn't ever followed you." Only very shortsighted and stubborn students want to drop out of God's wilderness prep school. It is not easy. Almost nothing worthwhile on earth is easy. But it is absolutely essential if your destination is the promised land.

The explicit purpose that God had in leading his people into the wilderness and doing wonders for them there is given in Deuteronomy 8:16, "to humble you, and to test you and to do you good in the end." In the wilderness, we are stripped of all the devices by which we give ourselves the impression of self-sufficiency; the test then is whether we will be thankful for God's merciful provision and rest in his power; and the good that comes to us is the solid assurance that every looming giant will fall before the grasshoppers of God as we march straight for the promised land on the road of obedience.

God did spread a table in the wilderness, even for a stiff-necked and rebellious people. How much more, then for those who believe in him and trust his saving power (Ps. 78:21f).

Trust in the Lord and do good; so you will dwell in the land, and enjoy security. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will act. He will bring forth your vindication as the light and your right as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him (Ps. 37:3-7).

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/can-god-spread-a-table-in-the-wilderness/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net