

No Longer Slaves: into the wilderness

In this study we journey with Israel into the wilderness. The Passover has taken place, and the Israelites have been spared the death of their firstborn. Egypt has not been spared; grieving and chastened, Pharaoh releases Israel at last. The land of promise lies ahead.

1. What is the “land of promise” for you?
2. How do you know you’re on the way to it?

As everyone knows, the road to the promised land turns out to be anything but short and sweet. Read Exodus 13:17-18.

3. Why does God take Israel “the long way”, even though they are “prepared for battle” (v.18b)?

We learn so much at this point. God will not take Israel to the promised land until He is sure they are ready. Instead, He sends them into the wilderness. They may be dressed for battle, but their hearts are not ready.

4. In what ways are you “dressed for battle”?
5. How will you know you will be ready to fight?

Though God directs Israel into the wilderness, making the future harder to reach, He secures their resolve in two ways. Read Exodus 3:19, then Genesis 50:22-26.

6. Why did Joseph not arrange for his body to be taken for burial in Canaan, as he had done for his father Jacob (Genesis 50:4-12)?
7. What would it mean for the Israelites to be taking the mummified body of their ancestor with them?
8. Whose “bones” do you carry with you? Whose pledge of faith safeguards your hope and strengthens your resolve?

The second way God acts to strengthen the Israelites is with a constant sign of His presence. Read Exodus 13:20-22.

9. As the Israelites camp on the edge of the wilderness, looking out at wide desolate plains and distant rocky ranges, what might they be thinking and feeling?
10. How would the pillar of cloud, lit up at night with fire, reassure them?
11. Can you tell a story of the presence of God in your own experience of wilderness?

Read Exodus 14:1-9. The Israelites sorely need to know the Lord is with them, as they are promptly directed to turn back and camp closer to the Egyptians, with the sea at their back. This offers them to Pharaoh like a sitting duck. From wandering aimlessly to apparent crazy retreat, the exodus is rapidly coming apart - or so it must have seemed!

12. Can you tell a story of reversal in your own life, when a promising road turned into an aimless wander or a full retreat?
13. What sense can you make of God's actions during that experience or after?

God seriously engaged the hearts of His people in what follows, progressing His plan to transform them into a nation capable of taking the promised land. Read the account in Exodus 14:10-30. What strikes you in the narrative?

The heart of the drama is the night before Israel crosses the Red Sea. On the one side, inland from them, are the Egyptians, baying for blood. On the other, facing the sea, is Moses, his staff raised. A pillar of fiery cloud separates Israel from the certain death behind. The sea slowly transforms, with towering waves and a path between. Fear looks back, forgetting the protection of YHWH, full of the threat of the Egyptian army: the enemy they thought they'd left behind is back! Faith looks forward, witnessing the power of YHWH, yet wondering, maybe, whether they'll all be drowned if God changes His mind!

14. What defeated enemy would you most fear to face?
15. What are you afraid of as you seek to look forward with eyes of faith?

YHWH delivers Israel and the Egyptians are altogether defeated. Because of this they come to believe, at least, that God is powerful and able to save (Exodus 14:31 to 15:3). They dub YHWH "man of war" (15:3).

16. Where in your life - or in the world's need - would you love to see the mighty hand of YHWH, man of war?

Pray (with others or alone) for the might of YHWH to be shown, in all the places you name and in the struggles of your own life.