

SESSION 5: THE WILDERNESS NARRATIVE

PREPARATION FOR THE SESSION

Read Exodus 16-19, 24, 32-34; Numbers chs. 11, 13, 21:1-9, 24:10-25 and ch. 25.

Summary of the Video: Module 1, Episode 5

The story continues after the people of God leave Egypt and head toward Israel. The “Wilderness Narrative” covers this forty-year long journey. It didn’t need to take this long; it’s not that far! They weren’t allowed to enter the land until God went in, and he wasn’t going into the land because the people of God needed to be judged for their disobedience.

It is while they’re on this prolonged journey that God delivers the entirety of the law to Moses. So, if we were to divide the rest of the Pentateuch into two categories we would have “the Wilderness Narrative” and “the Law”. The story is continuous, but sections of law or lists of people interrupt it.

Andrew Wilson shows how the story repeats itself. God’s people seem to be stuck in a cycle of not getting what they want, complaining, seeing God’s miraculous intervention, not being satisfied, and being drawn toward idolatry. Comparing this to the very repetitive book of Kings, Andrew Wilson suggests that the storyteller wants us to feel like we’re going around in circles because idolatry is unproductive and confusing.

In a very practical aside, we examine some leadership lessons with Jethro (Moses’ father-in-law; Exodus 18).

But the big idea of the Wilderness Narrative is that God reveals himself in these stories. So far, God has expressed his judgment and wrath (upon Egypt), but now the people pick up new insights from God. He heals, provides, satisfies and provides safety. God meets with his people in awe-inspiring moments; in these moments he climactically declares his commitment to the people in terms of his covenant. In three mountain encounters on Sinai, God meets privately with Moses, with Moses and 73 leaders, and then again with Moses privately. In each episode, God gives Moses greater revelation about the law that will guide and govern his people in their relationship with God.

The people rebel by worshiping other gods, lacking faith, grumbling and complaining, and testing God. For this reason, the people start to wander around rather than enter the promised land.

In the Balaam and Balak story, God dramatically reiterates the Abrahamic covenant. Two aspects intensify the drama: 1) God’s people have been so horribly rebellious for the whole story, 2) it is a pagan prophet enlisted by a pagan king who announces the blessing of God’s covenant for God’s people. It includes a vibrant prophecy of the coming Messiah.

Terms You'll Need to Know:

Archaeology—the study of ancient cultures by digging in the ground to uncover what has been left behind.

Nomadic—a person or group of people who don't settle in one place; they typically live in tents and move from place to place.

Up sticks—pack up your tent and move to the next place.

Og, king of Bashan—one of the fiercest and most feared kings ancient Israel encountered. In Psalm 136:20 God is praised for defeating Og on behalf of his people.

Chorister—someone who sings in a choir, and may lead the singing in a traditional church.

Panto—short for pantomime. A funny musical play based on traditional children's stories, often performed around Christmas time.

Watch Video

Watch Module 1, Episode 5 (37 minutes).

Pentateuch

- I. Overview of the Pentateuch
- II. Primeval History (Gen 1-11)
- III. Patriarchal History (Gen 12-50)
- IV. Exodus Narrative (Ex 1-15)
- V. Wilderness Narratives (Ex 16-19, 24, 32-34; Num 11-25; Deut 1-4)**
- VI. Laws, Lists & Land at Sinai (Ex 20-23, 25-31, 35-40; Lev 1-27; Num 1-10, 26-36; Deut 5-28)
- VII. The Punchline of the Pentateuch (Deut 29-34)

1

The Journey to Sinai

- The sequence of stories between the Red Sea crossing and the arrival at Sinai bring fresh revelation to Israel, particularly relating to the character of Yahweh
 - Ex 15:22-27 – Yahweh-rophe, or Yahweh-who-heals-you. Healing is part of the character of God
 - Ex 16:1-36 – provision of manna from heaven. Note also that Israel is observing the Sabbath before the Ten Commandments, because of Genesis 2:1-3
 - Ex 17:1-7 – water from the rock, and testing Yahweh at Massah and Meribah
 - Ex 17:8-16 – Yahweh-nissi, or Yahweh-is-my-banner. The banner was the way you knew where you were needed, and where you were safe
- Then there is the very practical leadership encounter between Moses and Jethro, his father-in-law (Ex 18). There are at least five helpful leadership lessons in this brief story
 - Know your limits: "you are not able to do it alone" (v18)
 - Know your unique contribution, and do it (v19-20)
 - Only delegate to people of high competence (v21a)
 - Only delegate to people of good character (v21b; cf Acts 6:3)
 - Differentiate levels of responsibility: thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (v21c-22)
 - The question is, of course: what if you don't have enough good people to delegate to?
 - Whose fault is that?
 - What needs to be done about it?

38

Encounters with God on the Mountain

- Three narratives, each about encounters with God on Mount Sinai, give shape to the narrative of Exodus 19-40
- Yahweh descends on the mountain in fire (Ex 19)
 - Yahweh makes a covenant promise to Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:3-6)
 - God speaks the Ten Commandments in the hearing of the people (20:1-21)
 - Then Moses goes up, and Yahweh gives laws to Israel about slavery (21:1-11), violence (21:12-27), property (21:28-22:15), justice (22:16-23:13), festivals (23:14-19) and idolatry (23:20-33)
- The seventy elders eat and drink with Yahweh on the mountain (Ex 24)
 - "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank." (24:9-11)
 - Then Moses goes to Yahweh for forty days and nights, and receives laws about the tabernacle (25:1-27:21), priestly garments (28:1-43), consecration (29:1-37), offering burnt offerings and incense (29:38-30:38), and the Sabbath (31:12-18)
- The people make a golden calf, and Moses sees Yahweh's glory (Ex 32-34)
 - The people make a golden calf (32:1-8), Moses intercedes for them (32:9-14), and the people face judgment: drinking the smashed golden calf, death by the Levites' sword, and a plague (32:15-35)
 - Then Moses sees Yahweh's glory (33:1-34:8), and the covenant is made again (34:9-35)
 - The tabernacle is built and consecrated, and the glory of Yahweh fills it (35:1-40:38)

39

Rebellion in the Wilderness Narratives

- Much of the narrative from Sinai onwards is the story of repeated idolatry and immorality by God's people, and repeated forgiveness and faithfulness from Yahweh. **ENACT**
 - They worship the golden calf while Moses is up Mt Sinai receiving the law (Ex 32-34)
 - They grumble about the food, and are struck with a great plague (Num 11)
 - They journey from Sinai/Horeb to Kedesh Barnea, which takes eleven days, but fail to enter the land after the report of the spies (Num 14) → faith
 - Some Israelites go ahead and invade anyway, and are easily defeated (Num 14)
 - It takes them thirty-eight years to get from Kedesh Barnea to the brook Zered. The old generation gradually die out (Deut 2:14) → the people did not get lost, but followed the cloud
 - A whole bunch of rebels contest Moses and Aaron's right to lead the people -- "You have gone too far! For all in 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?" – and the ground swallows them alive (Num 16), before Aaron's staff buds as a vindication of his leadership (Num 17) → anointed leadership
 - The people demand water, and Moses fails to trust God, and is barred from the land (Num 20)
 - The people test God, and he sends fiery serpents amongst them (Num 21) → Christ
 - Eventually, they defeat Sihon, King of the Amorites, and Og, King of Bashan, and progress to Moab (Num 21) → God is still with them
 - Balak, King of the Moabites, hires the rent-a-prophet Balaam to curse Israel for him, but he ends up blessing them the whole time (Num 22-24) → Israel is blessed because of the covenant
 - But almost immediately, they commit sexual immorality with Moab, and they are judged with a plague. Phinehas stops the plague by spearing an Israelite and a Moabite while they're having sex (Num 25)

40

Balaam and Balak

- The story of Balaam and Balak, so often dominated by the famous talking donkey, is one of the most powerful reiterations of the Abrahamic promise anywhere in Scripture. **DRAMATISE** (God, Balaam, Balak, donkey, messengers, Israel, Moab)
 - The narrative of Balaam's journey (22:1-41) is hilarious, and very pantomime, illustrating the foolishness of opposing God (with a similar flavour to the first half of the story of Jonah)
 - Balaam then blesses Israel from three separate locations, to the growing exasperation of Balak
 - 23:7-10 – "How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?"
 - 23:18-24 – "Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them."
 - 24:3-9 – "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! ... Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you."
 - Finally, after Balak has left, Balaam delivers the knockout promise in 24:15-24 – "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly. And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!"
- This prophecy, which clearly takes up the seed / king / Messiah promise from Genesis 49, is one of the most direct and powerful Messianic prophecies in the entire Old Testament

41

GROUP MEETING:

Discussion Questions

Before getting into these specific questions, spend a few minutes discussing what struck you or stuck with you from the video. What were some of the main points? Did any of Andrew's comments or questions open up the Bible in a profound way to you? Also, ask if anything was confusing or needs clarification.

1. What about the character of God is revealed in the Wilderness Narrative? What do we learn about him?
2. How does God ensure that his promise will become a reality? What measures does he take and what does he have to overcome in order to maintain the covenant with his people?
3. So far, what is "special" about the people of God? What distinguishes them from other nations?
4. How does the Balaam and Balak story color our perception of "mission" in the Pentateuch?

Meditation on Scripture

Exodus 34:5-6

Numbers 23:19-23

Numbers 24:17

Putting This Session into Practice

Examine your life and the life of people in your church. What temptations are there for people to stop believing God and start looking for something else to provide, protect or direct them? Look for opportunities this week to call others to return to God, celebrate who he is (as revealed in the Wilderness Narrative), and trust him to provide, protect and direct their lives.

