

“Thank God for His Story in You”

Numbers 33

We have another list before this morning – a different kind of list. Not a genealogy or a census or how many sacrifices were brought to God. Instead we have a list of the places Israel camped at over the 40 years between when they left Egypt to when they arrived east of Jericho. While initially we might think it seems irrelevant to us, in actuality it's a journal of God's story for His people. Their salvation, and the record of their walk with God. If that's the case and since all God's Word is beneficial, we can use this as a guide to talk about the record of God's story in your life and mine.

Moses was commanded by God to record the stages of their journey, listing the many locations where they journeyed and camped, journeyed and camped or left and camped (depending on your translation). 41 times we read that phrase.

Moses begins in Egypt because the key to Israel's story is the key to our story, which is

The Key to Our Story is Our Salvation **(33:1-4)**

³ *The Israelites set out from Rameses on the fifteenth day of the first month, the day after the Passover. They marched out boldly in full view of all the Egyptians,* ⁴ *who were burying all their firstborn, whom the Lord had struck down among them; for the Lord had brought judgment on their gods.*

Moses briefly summarizes their testimony but says enough that makes them think about what God did:

How God saved them out of their old life (vv.1, 4)

Just in saying they ‘came out of Egypt’ reminds them why they had to get out of Egypt. They were slaves to the Egyptians. It wasn't always like that. God used Joseph's mistreatment by his own brothers – who sold him as a slave to Egypt, lying to Jacob their dad that Joseph died – who would rise to power and prominence to rescue his family in Egypt from a famine. But Ex. 1 one says when the Pharaoh of Joseph's day died, a new Pharaoh arose who didn't read history and was afraid that all these Israelites would overpower them someday. The history of fearing Israelites for no reason is a long one.

So he made them his slaves and their life was hard. But God used the miraculous saving of a Jewish baby boy who is rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter and she names him Moses, raises him in the courts of Egypt where he eventually rejects his upbringing and goes back to his roots to identify and, in God's power and timing rescue Israel from slavery.

How did God rescue them? By sending Moses and Aaron as His spokesmen and telling Pharaoh to let His people go or He will suffer God's judgments. It's not until the 10th judgment (the deaths of all the firstborns) that Pharaoh finally says, ‘Get out!’ and they leave. And so physical slavery becomes a word picture for slavery to sin, which we are all under. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Your story begins when you recognized you were a sinner, separated from God in need of being saved. Saved from the penalty of sin and its future payment; eternal separation from God and into the lake of fire forever. And then

How God changed your life forever (vv.2-3)

Their national salvation because they listened to and obeyed God's Word to celebrate the Passover by faith, believing that by sacrificing this lamb its blood was shed for you, and applying its blood to your doorposts that when the angel of death came, you would be spared from the judgment of God. And then we read about how this changed their life when they, *"marched out boldly in full view of all the Egyptians who were burying all their firstborn whom the Lord struck down among them for the Lord had brought judgment on all their gods (v.4)*

Jesus is our Passover Lamb, whom we must believe by faith shed His blood on the cross to pay for our sins and God's final judgment will pass over us. And faith in Christ gives us holy boldness because we have turned away from the false gods of self, good works success or wealth [all things we try to do on our own to achieve purpose and satisfaction, which never satisfy us] and understand our identity as God sees us; loved, adopted accepted for who we are. That gives us Holy Spirit boldness to stand before a world that doesn't know God to help them understand who God is.

God's story for Israel started with the shed blood of the Passover Lamb, a prefigure for Jesus our Passover Lamb would die to rescue us from the slavery of sin and now has given us eternal life. Not just the guarantee of eternity with God but the assurance that the eternal God dwells with us now and forever. And the next part of God's story for Israel from vv.5-49 again is the pattern for our story, which is

The Summary of Our Story is Obedience (33:5-49)

God promised to dwell with His people Israel to get them to the Promised Land of Canaan. Now Moses records numerous places where Israel camped and left from until they got to where God was taking them. And while we think we're reading a travelogue full of many places no one actually knows where they were, the geographical locations are spiritual markers of Israel's obedience to God. Some of these places tell us about

When Israel listened to God and followed Him

Most of this thrilling list of places where it says they left and camped (41 times) reminds us that most of God's story for us is the record of our consistent obedience. Remember this from Ch. 9?

¹⁵ On the day the tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony, 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. ²⁰ Sometimes the cloud was over the tabernacle only a few days; at the Lord's command they would encamp, and then at his command they would set out. ²¹ Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out. Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out. ²² Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. ²³ At the Lord's command they encamped, and at the Lord's command they set out. They obeyed the Lord's order, in accordance with his command through Moses.

So every time we read here “they left and they camped” it’s a record of their obedience. We have no record of Israel ever refusing to not journey or refusing to stop when God did His thing with the fire and cloud. Why? Because they believed by faith God was with Him taking them to the next step on their journey which will lead them to their final destination.

Isn’t that why we keep trusting God every day? Because we know He’s with us and is taking us on a journey of making us more like Jesus until we finally get to Him? Your story and my story is rooted in believing that God is with us everyday and fulfilling His purposes in our life until we arrive at our final destination. Don’t underestimate the dailiness of walking by faith. Your testimony is also a record of your obedience

When we didn’t obey

A lot of these place names conjure up negative memories when Israel disobeyed God. Let’s look at some of them. V. 14 they were reminded that at Rephidim there was no water. How did they respond to that? The quarreled and grumbled against Moses and put the Lord to the test (Ex. 17).

Vv. 16-17 mentions Kibroth-hataavah which means the “graves of greediness”. Oh yeah, when they complained about manna and wanted meat. And God gave them so many quail that they ate them while the blood was still in them. Greedy. Many died there. Not a good memory. Moving on.

Let’s talk about Kadesh in vv.36-39. We’d rather not Israel says. Kadesh was the place where Moses sent out the 12 spies and they came back and 10 of the spies gave an “evil report” and the majority of Israel listened and refused to believe God would get them in the land. There God said all the men 20+ years old would die over the next 38 1/2 years And would not get into the Promised Land.

Kadesh was also the place where Moses’ sister Miriam died and the base of Mount Hor where Aaron died. Mentioning Kadesh meant recalling Aaron and Miriam’s names also reminded them of Aaron and Miriam’s complaints against Moses’ leadership. Aaron’s death gets a lot of space here, telling us this was a sad time in Israel’s history. People’s deaths are part of our own journey as well.

And then in v.49 when they arrive east of Jericho in Abel-shittim. Abel-shittim was where they camped when the Midianite women lured many men into sexual sin and idolatry.

So, places sometime remind us of sins and failures in our lives or where we experienced pain and hardship. This is part of God’s story for us. The trials of life that are meant to mold us into Christlikeness. The sins that we committed but we also sought forgiveness and God restored us. But this list of places also reminded them

When they experienced God’s blessings

Like the crossing of the Red Sea in v.8 and arriving at the oasis of 70 palm trees and 12 springs of water in v.9. Or when they complained at Rephidim in v.14, God miraculously provided water when Moses spoke to the rock. Or when they arrived at Mt. Sinai (v.15) and they heard and saw the power of God when they received the 10 commandments.

Or when they got to Jotbathah in v.33 – which nothing is said here, but in a parallel passage in Deut. 10:17 we’re told Jotbathah was a land of streams of water. Yeah if you lived in the desert for 40 years you would remember Jotbathah.

Then there's Arad mentioned in v.40 where God aided the Israelite army to defeat the Aradites after they kidnapped a bunch of Israelites. God gave them a resounding victory. And then in vv.47-49 at Abel-shittim it wasn't all negative. Later Joshua would lead Israel from Abel-shittim – the last stop before Canaan – and they would cross the Jordan and enter the land.

We have places in our life that we associate with God's blessings or God did something amazing in our life or He led us or met a need. Could be a place where you used to live. A church, your childhood home, a retreat, a camp, a conference, ... We remember where we were and when God did amazing things in our life. Or spared us from a calamity. This is what this list is doing as they reviewed it. God told Moses to record where you've come from, how I saved you and the places along the way that mark spiritual lows and highs. Where God met you and you obeyed him, where you didn't obey him and the consequences you received. Where God showed you He was with you. And He does all this to remind us that

The Goal of Our Story is Godliness **(33:50-56)**

In vv.50-54 God reminds Israel of the goal; Canaan and He is going with them because in Deuteronomy He keeps telling them over and over I'm going to show you a place where my name is going to dwell. Eventually they are going to build the temple in Jerusalem one day and enjoy God's presence. But that doesn't mean Israel didn't have work to do.

⁵⁰ On the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho the Lord said to Moses, ⁵¹ "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, ⁵² drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places. ⁵³ Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess. ⁵⁴ Distribute the land by lot, according to your clans. To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one. Whatever falls to them by lot will be theirs. Distribute it according to your ancestral tribes.

They would enter a world full of false narratives saying, this way will give you success and what you want. This god will meet your needs. But God says destroy them. They are lies. They will mislead you and will not satisfy. Like Paul says to us in Rom. 12:2

² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

If we want to be godly we have to think godly. We have to keep telling ourselves what is true according to God's Word and what does His word say about the world out there.

God's goal for us is to be godly, to be like Christ. Paul tells us in Romans 8:28-30

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

So the journal entries of Israel's travelogue was a reminder of all that God had done for them and to focus on His goal for them – godliness [same goal for us] – so that

They will experience God's promises (vv.50-54)

Obey God and watch what he'll do for you. To do that we must

Sin less and learn from the past (vv.55-56)

⁵⁵ “ *But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live.* ⁵⁶ *And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them.’ ”*

Sin must be rooted out of our lives if we're to experience God's blessings, promises and presence in our life. We can't ignore it; we must deal with it.

Each of us has a travelogue of places where God has worked in our lives. All of us can remember the hard things that God has seen us through and the good things that God has brought our way. Perhaps it would be a good exercise for you sometime this week to look at your life. Look at the places where God has taken you and note those spiritual highlights and lowlights those places remind you of. Have we learned from sinful or negative experiences? Do we remember the places where God met our needs or where we made a commitment to God to follow Him? How is that going by the way? Is there sin in our life that we have let slide? Are there damaged relation-ships that need to mend? Are there commitments we need to renew?

God's story in you and me is not over yet. He's still working on shaping us into His image. He's still showing up every day, wanting us to follow Him where He leads and camp where He's taken us. God's path for us is full of routine, daily obedience marked by spiritual highs and lows, but is always going forward to the ultimate goal of dwelling with Him in sinless perfection. Let's thank God for His hand on our life, learn from those seasons or moments of disobedience and go in faith knowing the blood of Jesus Christ washes away tomorrows sins too, until we are perfect and blameless in His sight.

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If you have any comments or questions please contact us at
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