

# The Church Part Five: Wilderness Pilgrims Under Testing

Psalm 106 (excerpts); 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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Dear Congregation of Christ: In 1985, when we lived in Alaska, I bought a not-so-cheap backpack made by a company called Wilderness Experience. This company started as a guide service for people like me who wanted to experience the wilderness and mountaineering. This backpack, which I still have, is a veteran of many wilderness trips and mountain climbs. All in all, it made our wilderness experiences more “authentic” and enjoyable.

Our study today is about the not-so-authentic and not-so-enjoyable wilderness experience of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. They did not have high-tech wilderness gear such as frameless backpacks, water bottles and travel mugs. For cold nights, they did not have insulated parkas, lightweight hiking boots, and cozy sleeping bags. For rainy days, they did not have breathable Goretex raincoats and rain pants, and rainproof tents. For cooking, they did not have tiny lightweight stoves. All of these mountaineering gear, plus clothes and food fit inside my Wilderness Experience backpack. Lastly, the Israelites did not have navigation aids such as compasses and Google maps.

The Israelites, in addition to not having any of the above equipment, were not prepared for a 40-year wilderness experience of hardship, hunger and thirst, heat and cold, and hundreds of miles of wilderness wanderings. They might have prepared for a year or so at the most, but not for 40 years. They also faced hostility from the peoples along their trek to Canaan. Many times, instead of separating themselves from the pagan cultures along the way, they actually mingled with them, accepting their idolatrous and immoral way of life. And whenever they did, God punished them with plagues and death. So, right from the very start, they started grumbling and mumbling against Moses.

Our text in Psalm 106 is a long laundry list of their sins against God in their wilderness pilgrimage. Even so, God was merciful and gracious to them, providing them with all their needs, even fighting for them against their enemies. In our reading in 1 Corinthians 10, we learn that our Lord Jesus Christ was with them throughout their wilderness wanderings. We also learn that their sins and God’s judgments against them serve as examples and instructions for us, that we must not be overtaken by temptations and then fall into sins against God’s word.

Therefore, our theme this Lord's Day is, **The Church Part Five: Wilderness Pilgrims on Trial**, under three headings: first, **They Had Christ the Spiritual Rock**; second, **Still, They Desired Evil**; and third, **Because They Were Overtaken by Temptation**.

## They Had Christ the Spiritual Rock

Most of us are familiar with the two water-from-the-rock episodes during the Israelites’ wilderness wanderings. The first was in Exodus 17:1-7, when God told Moses that he would stand

before him on the rock at Sinai before Moses strikes the rock. In the second event in Numbers 20:2-13, after the people again grumbled about lack of water, God told Moses to speak to the rock at Meribah and water will gush out of the rock. But instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck it with his staff.

Why did God stand before Moses and let Moses strike the rock, in effect striking God himself? It is because God himself, not Moses, will provide the life-giving water that flowed from the rock. It is this incident and Jesus' own words that he is the living water that Paul uses as the background in 1 Corinthians 10:4, *"they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ."* No, the rock in the wilderness did not follow them in their wilderness journeys. It was a spiritual Rock that followed them. God himself followed them because he is their Rock (Psa 18:2).

*The Rock that Moses struck twice was Christ himself!* In standing before Moses on the rock, God was putting Christ on trial, standing in the heavenly court. God the heavenly judged sentenced him to be *"stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted"* (Isa 53:4), not for his sins—because he had no sin—but for all our sins. In his last few hours of suffering, Jesus was *"stricken, smitten and afflicted"* by God in order that he may give us our eternal, spiritual drink. God is showing us that there is a Mediator better and more complete than Moses. Moses could not give the people living water. Only God could. And Moses could not accompany God's people into the Promised Land. Only Christ could, by his provision of his Living Water.

God did not allow Moses to give Israel rest in Canaan, so that the Exodus story might point us to Christ. Who finally gave Israel rest in the Promised Land? It was a faithful Israelite, *Joshua*, whose name is the same as our *Jesus*, the one who will save his people from their sins. Jesus takes us to our rest in the promised land, the heavenly city of glory. In that place, we will never thirst, because Christ himself will be *"a river whose streams make glad the city of God"* in Psalm 46:4; the water in Ezekiel 47:9 *"that goes [to] the sea [so it] may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes"*; and *"the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb"* in Revelation 22:1.

As Christians, we wonder how the Israelites grumbled and sinned against God when they had Christ the Rock himself who gave them water from the rock and manna and quails from heaven. How could they even desire evil rather than good from their gracious and merciful Lord?

### **Still, They Desired Evil**

Our reading in Psalm 106 is a long list of these evil deeds that the Israelites did before God. From verses 7-12, the psalmist describes how they *"rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea,"* telling Moses that they had it good when they were in Egypt, and not they're facing death from the Egyptian army. Yet God saved them by drowning the Egyptians. Then verses 13-15 tell us that they had a *"wanton craving in the wilderness"* for meat rather than the heavenly manna. So God sent *"a wasting disease among them... a very great plague"* (Num 11:31-33).

The next sin by the people was against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Some were jealous that Moses and Aaron were appointed by God as leaders, and not them. God then opened up the

ground under their tents and they were swallowed up by the earth. The Lord also sent a fire to destroy them (Num 16). The next great sin on the psalmist's mind was the worship of the golden calf at Mount Sinai (verses 19-23; Exo 32). They "*exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass,*" quickly forgetting the great things God has done for them in Egypt and in the Red Sea. If not for Moses' intervention, God would have destroyed these idolaters right then and there.

Moving on, in verses 24-27, when they reached the gates of the Promised Land, Moses sent twelve men to spy the land, but ten of them brought back a bad report: they were like grasshoppers compared to the giants in the land. The people believed this bad report, again saying that they would rather die in Egypt than be killed by these giants, together with their wives and children. God wanted to destroy them, but again, Moses pleaded for them. God did not destroy them, but judged them by preventing none of that generation who escaped Egypt from entering the Promised Land, including Moses. So they were all "*overthrown in the wilderness*" (1 Cor 10:5).

In verses 28-31 and 34-39, they committed idolatry, worshiping and sacrificing to pagan gods. In verses 32-33, they again grumbled against Moses because of lack of water at Meribah. For all of these unbelief and evil deeds, God judged them by giving them to their enemies who oppressed them as slaves (40-43). But even with the people's continuous rebellion and unfaithfulness, God had pity and mercy on them, because he remembered his covenant promises to their forefathers (44-46). All of these ancient events were not merely to satisfy our curious minds or for history's sake. What is the purpose of these Spirit-breathed words of God? They are "*examples*" for us so that "*we might not desire evil like they did*" (6, 11). They are warnings for us that God punishes the unrepentant, if not in this life, in the life to come.

And in 1 Corinthians 10, verses 7-8, we are commanded against sexual immorality, not just adultery, but all kinds of sexual perversion that are being advocated in our present culture. In these two verses, we must note the relationship between sexual immorality and idolatry. Verse 7 describes what the people did in their idolatry, "*Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.'*" Paul is quoting word for word what the Israelites did in Exodus 32:6 when they worshiped the golden calf at Mount Sinai.

How is this verse connected with sexual immorality? The words "rose up to play" is hardly children's play. These are really sexual in nature—sexual dancing and singing, and sexual intimacy—such as what the Egyptians and other pagans did in their worship. Even the first-century Graeco-Roman world had temple prostitutes. An example of the use of the words "rose up to play" is in Genesis 26:8, where the Philistine king Abimelech saw Isaac "laughing" with his wife Rebekah. He knew then that Rebekah was Isaac's wife because "laughing" and "playing" are synonyms of sexual intimacy ("caressing" in KJV and NASB).

This is a serious warning of "clear and present danger" in sexual immorality. It leads to idolatry, just as the Israelite men who took pagan wives became idolaters. It happened also to King Solomon and many other kings of Israel. What happens in the case of professing Christians marrying unbelievers? The professing Christian, usually the husband, is seduced to becoming an unbeliever, and worse, an idolater. This is why Paul warns in 2 Corinthians 6:14—

16, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers... Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?” Again, he lumps all kinds of sin as idolatry, “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming” (Col 3:5-6). God’s wrath came down on 23,000 Israelites who worshiped Baal, the god of their pagan Moabite women. How many people in our time would God punish—if not in the here and now—on Judgment Day?

Next, in verses 9-10, the Israelites “put Christ to the test” when they were impatient with God on their way to the Promised Land. They couldn’t wait for food and drink and the pleasures of the Promised Land. If he is really Almighty God, why doesn’t he just take us there without any of this hardship and danger? They never stopped grumbling and mumbling like little children pouting. So, God destroyed them by sending serpents and the same Angel of Death who destroyed the Egyptians.

All of these evil grumbling and desires were written so we might not copy them. Many pastors preach, “Be like Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, or David, or Paul.” But what Paul is preaching here is, “Don’t be like the Israelite pilgrims in the wilderness. They were evil in God’s sight, and God judged them.” We learn by mistakes, but the Israelites did not. We must learn from the errors and evil ways of the Israelites in the desert and of God’s people throughout the history of the church.

All churches have problems; there is no perfect church or perfect believers. As you start your difficult pilgrimage, brothers and sisters here in Ripon Reformed Fellowship, be mindful that all are sinners. So, there will always be evil deeds and grumbling in the church. When reading 2 Timothy 3, note that in these last days, there will be evildoers who are “*lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unboly, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God*” (2 Tim 3:2-4). Was Paul referring to those *outside* the church? No, he was talking about people *inside* the church, even professing Christians. As the Belgic Confession says about the marks of the true church, that the church will always have “the company of hypocrites who are mixed among the good in the church and who nonetheless are not part of it, even though they are physically there.”

We know that Paul here is warning about the same kind of people in the church in verse 5: “*having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.*” They appear to love God and say and do what godly Christians do, but in reality, they deny the power of the Spirit to change them, to give them true repentance, and to mature them in Christ. At times, they may even profess true repentance and faith, but their actions belie their words. Paul says, “*Avoid such people.*” If you believe that by your own power of persuasion and words of wisdom, they would be restored, be forewarned. The reason why Paul warns against these evildoers is that there are many in the church who—instead of persuading sinners to repent—had been persuaded to join them in their evil ways.

But the Scriptures were written down for our instruction on how to handle these problems. If not, many will be overtaken by the temptation of sin.

## Because They Were Overtaken by Temptation

And this is what happened to the Israelites. Even when they had God dwelling with them in the desert tabernacle, guiding their paths, teaching them his holy ways, they desired evil. When they did, they were overtaken by temptations to do evil. They were tempted to crave for the food and drink they had in Egypt. They were tempted by jealousy against Moses and Aaron, God's appointed prophet and priest and king. They were tempted by Egyptian idols and sexual immorality. They were tempted by the ten unfaithful spies to doubt God's unchanging promises to their forefathers.

Beware, because you might be thinking that your faith is stronger than the Israelites' faith. You might think, "I'm not craving for riches and its pleasures. I'm not jealous of my church's leadership. I'm not an idolater or sexually immoral. I have unwavering faith in God's promises in his word. Beware, because God's testing of your faith comes with afflictions, sufferings and other trials. Paul warns, "take heed, lest you fall." The great men and women of faith in the Bible also fell into sin. Noah's drunkenness led to sin. Abraham and Sarah doubted God's promise of a covenant son. Moses disobeyed God's command not to strike the rock. David committed adultery and murder. They were strong in their faith, but nonetheless sinned because they were overtaken by temptation.

Another solemn warning to us is in the first part of verse 13, "*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.*" When our sufferings are so great, we tend to think that no one else is suffering the pains and afflictions that we are dealing with. No one else understands our sufferings. But God says that all our sufferings are experienced by other people as well. All our physical, spiritual, emotional, and financial distress are also experienced by many other people. People try to justify their sins because they suffer so much, unlike the sufferings of others. If our sufferings are common to others, then our excuses for sinning disappear. If others overcome temptations and sufferings that are common to man, then why can't you?

The second part of verse 13 must also be noted, "*God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*" It is all too common for Christians to ground their faith in God with these words. But the way we often used this verse is not what Paul means. In reality, we could not endure many sufferings in our life, because they are too hard to bear. We read many psalms lamenting the psalmists' unbearable sufferings. David laments in Psalm 22:1, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" And in Psalm 13:1, he cries, "*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*"

No, God often sends us temptations and trials that we couldn't bear, and we fall into despair, even bitterness against God. Recently, we have heard of many of our children's friends who are in their 30s and 40s who professed faith until high school, but who have been overtaken by temptations and lost their faith. Why? Their sufferings were too hard to bear, so they blame their parents, siblings, and finally, God himself. Even Paul himself attests to these unbearable sufferings in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, "*For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.*" Paul and his missionary companions were in such dire straits that they wanted to die! The great prophet Elijah gave up hope in the midst of his sufferings that he wanted God to kill him.

So, do not say, “God will not give me trials and afflictions that I cannot bear.” Rather, we must say with Paul in verse 9b, that God sends us afflictions *“to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”* If we say we can overcome our sufferings, then it speaks of our unbelief in God, and our belief in our own strength. If God can do the impossible, such as raising the dead, how can he not deliver us from our afflictions? But if we rely on our own strength, temptation will overtake us. Therefore, our only hope in sufferings that we cannot bear is God’s deliverance (1 Cor 10:10). It is only through the power of the Spirit that he delivers us from our trials (Eph 3:16).

**D**ear friends: God has given us the Scripture so we may know his will for our lives. All of his words are for our instructions so we may not desire evil and fall into sin. His word *“is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.”* And if our temptations, trials and afflictions are too heavy for us to bear, God promises to deliver us through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul teaches us in Philippians 4:12–13, *“I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”*