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The Story: Finding the Scarlet Thread
Wandering
Numbers & Deuteronomy

How many of you read Chapter 5 this week in The Story? Great! We'll have a short pop quiz today at the end of worship! Just kidding.

It is true isn't it that we have many tests in this life? Yes? How many of you agree with the statement that life on earth is a test? Have you ever heard that before? Words like trials, temptations, refining, and testing occur hundreds of times in Scripture. The Bible gives us many examples of people who both failed and passed life's tests. God tested Abraham by asking him to offer his son Isaac. God tested Jacob when he had to work extra years to earn Rachael as his wife.

When you understand that life is a test, you realize that nothing is insignificant in your life. Our character is both developed and revealed by tests. We are always being tested. God constantly watches our response to people, problems, success, failure, conflict, waiting, illness, disappointment and even the weather!

In The Story these past two weeks Pastor Mark has walked us through the Israelites exodus from Egypt on the way to the Promised Land, and explained the 10 Commandments God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

This week God tests Moses and the Israelites as they wander through the desert for 40 years. God tests them – WHY? To teach them to trust and obey. That's an important lesson to remember – that we are tested to learn to trust and obey. Just like the hymn says, "Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." We are tested to learn to trust and obey the Lord.

The Israelites were tested in the wilderness time and again, but quite honestly they were slow learners. Living by faith didn't come easily.

As a group the Israelites possessed the spiritual gift of complaining!

We read again and again during their 40-year desert excursion statements like this: "Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord..."
Numbers 11

One of the lessons God wanted to teach the Israelites was thankfulness and gratitude. They complained about a lot was their desert cuisine. Food was a constant topic of griping and complaining just as it is for many of us! The Israelites got tired of “manna” all the time: the wonderful bread God provided from heaven. And so they groused and wailed –

“If only we had meat to eat! They remembered the fish that they ate in Egypt, and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.

The Book of Numbers says:

“...every family wailed at the entrance to their tents.”

Not only were they complaining at the dinner table, but they were also complaining outside their tents so everyone around them could hear! And you know what happens when a few people start complaining about something, right??.... everyone starts complaining! Even Moses caught the complaining bug!

He cried out to the Lord,

“...Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth?...Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’please go ahead and kill me – if I have found favor in your eyes – and do not let me face my own ruin.”

Complaining is contagious! And even leaders are not immune from catching the toxic germ!

Pastor Mark knows this! That’s why he has an important sign over the doorway in his office. Those of you who have taken a trip to Israel with him know this sign. It’s one of the 5 commandments of traveling with Mark! What is it? Thou shall not ... whine! It’s not one of the 10 commandments in the Bible but it should be!! Because complaining is terribly contagious and it can make life miserable for those around you.

Provisionally as I was preparing the message this week I received an email from a person I was on a mission trip with back in college. I had not heard from this person for years and they wanted to know if I was interested in reading their journal about our time serving at an orphanage in Mexico. Crazy right? Does God have something He wants to say to me... to say to you??!!

One of the experiences we all remembered vividly was our diet. We ate oatmeal for breakfast and rice and beans for lunch and dinner every day. That’s it. That was our diet for 10 weeks... except on Saturdays. Saturday was our favorite day of the week as an American team. It was our day off from working with the kids. On

Saturdays we hopped into an old beat up van from the orphanage, drove to the beach where we swam and played all day and then gorged out on pizza and banana splits in the afternoon. We did this same routine every week.

Somewhere after the first month I got sick and tired of the rice and beans every day and I vaguely remember our team developing kind of a whiny attitude about our food. The journal I read this week jogged my memory about this.

I don't remember if it was before or after we started complaining together about the food but right around then I contracted an ameba and everything went through me like water. I couldn't stomach the rice and beans anymore. The only thing my stomach could take and I looked forward to each day was the oatmeal, and sometime in the middle of our mission the 13 year old Mexican girl who was in charge of preparing the oatmeal every day got mad. I don't know why she got bad or who she was mad at but she burned the oatmeal every day from that point on! The oatmeal looked normal but it tasted like charcoal. Was God trying to teach me a lesson here or what?

The other kids in the orphanage didn't seem to care eating burned oatmeal. It was all they had to eat. And it was all we had to eat as an American youth staff team as well. We ate what the orphans ate. Well, my stomach couldn't handle the rice and beans, and I couldn't stand the taste of the burned oatmeal so I basically stopped eating, except for gorging myself on pizza and banana splits on Saturdays.

Thankfully for me my parents drove down toward the end of the summer and brought me a care package of non-perishable foods like saltine crackers and a few other items that saved me. I decided the Lord wasn't calling me to be an overseas missionary on this mission's trip. Too weak!

God used that food "test" at the orphanage to teach me to be thankful for the food I took for granted in the United States and to have compassion for those in the 2/3 world that have no choice but to live on rice or beans every day because that was all they had.

The horrible problem with complaining and grumbling is it's very difficult to see what the Lord is doing in your life when you're complaining. It's also impossible to be grateful and to complain at the same time. The two cannot co-exist. Just as Jesus said that you cannot worship God and money, you cannot be grateful to God and complain at the same time. That's why the apostle Paul is constantly reminding people to focus on that which is praiseworthy: "What is good, what is noble, whatever is excellent, whatever is praiseworthy, dwell on these things."

Unfortunately for the Israelites their 40-year sojourn was marked by a focus on by complaining, fear, rebellion and unbelief.

At one point God commanded Moses to send out spies into the land of Canaan to scope out the land. 12 spies were sent out – one from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. At the end of their forty day mission they returned with a report to Moses, Aaron and the Israelites and said that the land was “flowing with milk and honey” and they even brought back a vine branch filled with juicy luscious grapes. But 10 of the 12 spies were afraid. They described the people occupying the land as giants, and they saw themselves as “grasshoppers”. Caleb and Joshua were the only two of the 12 that had a different attitude. Joshua cried out

“The land we passed through to spy it out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord and do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.” Num 14: 7-9

Did you catch Joshua’s optimism? Joshua trusts the Lord: “He will bring us into the land and give it to us!” Two important words that Joshua uses here – “rebel” and “fear”. Do not rebel and do not fear. As Israel wanders through the desert two competing mindsets emerge, two different attitudes are represented – one characterized by complaining, fear, rebellion and unbelief, and another characterized by gratitude, optimism and hope. One claiming the promises of God and trusting in the Lord and another focused on their circumstances and surroundings, believing only what they can see with their own eyes and can imagine accomplishing in their own strength.

Which camp do you find yourself in most of the time?

The Lord was so upset by the Israelites lack of faith that God decided that none of the people 20 years of age or older would enter the Promised Land, except for Joshua and Caleb. So God sentenced the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for forty years, one year for each day they spied out the land.

Later on in Numbers we see a bit of a breakthrough – not caused by better behavior on the part of the Israelites but because of God’s graciousness. The Israelites were traveling around the region of Edom (that’s where the descendants of Esau lived) and they grew impatient again about their physical conditions, what they ate and drank. They spoke against God and against Moses:

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” Num. 21:5

Obviously there was manna to eat and water to drink otherwise they would all have been dead. So, the Lord sent venomous snakes and they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned when we spoke against you and against the Lord. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. So Moses interceded for the people. The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a

snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived." Num. 21:6-9

A new pattern emerges: Israel sins, God judges; Israel repents, Moses intercedes, God forgives and then heals. In this case we see another example of the Scarlet Thread. Jesus made a comparison of the bronze snake that was lifted up as a means for healing and his own lifting up on the cross:

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." John 3:15

When the Israelites looked at the Bronze Snake on a pole they were healed from a snake bite. Everyone who looks upon the Son of Man who has been lifted up on a cross, crucified for your sins and mine, and believes in his resurrection will also live!

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. If the Son of Man is lifted up he will draw all men unto him." John 12

This is the one test that God says we all need to get right and that is to receive his Son, who was high and lifted up on a cross, to forgive men for their sins, so that they might receive eternal life.

Before Christ God said to the Israelites: "This is the way you enter the Promised Land... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many good years in the land he swore to give you your fathers. Deut 30:20

And so it is today. The Lord says "choose life." Abundant life is found in Jesus who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Today is there anything getting in the way of fully living the abundant life God has for you?

For the Israelites complaining, fear, rebellion and unbelief got in the way of experiencing the fullness of the Lord. Those same things can hamper us from experiencing the abundant life that Jesus promises.

- **Confession: Bad Attitude!** Maybe today is a day when you need to confess to the Lord that you've had a bad attitude – that you haven't been grateful and thankful for the blessings in your life.... Your faith, your family, your job, your home, your freedom, even the hard things that you have to deal with, the things that test your faith and character like a relationship that has gone side-ways, an

appreciative spouse, a “lost” child or a family member with a disability, an elderly parent with health issues.

• **God cares for you!** Maybe you’ve been doing a lot of things that appear right on the outside -- like working, coming to church, occasionally giving, doing things that appear right on the outside. But on the inside you are wracked by fear, not trusting the Lord for your future, or that he will provide. Maybe you’re having a hard time believing that He really cares for you.

Maybe today you need to claim 1 Peter 5: 7: “Cast your cares on the Lord for He cares for you.”

Maybe your struggle to hold on to your faith... belief. Maybe you were raised by a parent or parents who just didn’t believe in God, and they ridiculed Christianity.

Where are you today with the Lord? Are you experiencing the abundant life in Christ? Have you entered into the Promised land?

• **Healing/Wholeness Happens in Community.** More and more I am thoroughly convinced that people of faith cannot thrive in this secular world without a concerted effort at integrating our faith, not just making it a quick one hour fill up at the gas station once a week or once a month but being in meaningful relationship with people that you share your deepest life issues with.

That’s not going to happen for most people on Sunday morning alone. You need to be in a Life Group. We have over 100 Life Groups here at Chapel Hill. If you’re not in one you should be in one, so you are around people of faith who can encourage you. Maybe you need to be in a Step Study to work through former life hurts so that you your soul is not constantly anxious or fearful. There are men’s and women’s groups open now who want to help you work through issues of forgiveness. Lay Counselors are available to meet with you one on one. In the Renewal Department we know that healing and wholeness happen in community. Isolation leads to depression. Isolation shrinks your worldview and your world and is an enemy of faith.

Jesus said that when he is lifted up all men will be drawn to him. Turn your full attention toward Jesus, and ask him today what he wants you to do.