

Jon High. 15th March 2009. Exodus 32:30-33:3

Waiting Well.

Intro

Last week - God our provider. Moses received the Ten Commandments, and the people told Aaron to make a statue for them to worship. Moses was angry and broke the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written.

30 The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." 31 So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. 32 But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." 33 But the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. 34 But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."

35 Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

33:1 The Lord said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' 2 I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 3 Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

Exodus 32 v 30 - 33 v 3

God makes three amazing declarations here:

- he will fulfil his covenant (keep his promises)
- he will continue to act on their behalf
- he's not going with them

Today's subject - what to do in the 'in between' times:

God promises - we appear to be left on our own - God delivers

1. It's ok to feel abandoned.

Because God is all powerful, and wants to see his kingdom come on earth - a kingdom that is without illness, poverty, war, pain, separation, we sometimes believe that the Christian's life should be in some way perfect, and without all of these things. I've heard people preach that because illness, for example, is a result of sin then when a Christian gets ill it must be a demonstration of God's judgement in their lives somehow.

The truth is though, that despite being a saved people, we still live in a fallen world, and still have to endure some of the consequences of our environment. The kingdom of God will one day be a living reality for all of us, and we will see glimpses of that reality here on earth, but we also have to endure some of the consequences for the sin in the world. The sad truth is that bad stuff happens to good people.

Memories of parents' separation - feeling alone and abandoned.

I have occasionally felt abandoned by God. People at these moments tried to encourage me with the truth that God will never leave or forsake [which just means abandon] us. At the time though it didn't really help.

It's ok to feel abandoned by God. David did:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far away?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Psalm 10 v 1

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

Psalm 13 v 1

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

*2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.*

Psalm 22 v 1 - 2

Jesus did, quoting Psalm 22 on the cross (Matt 27 v 46).

The songwriter Charles Wesley (author of 'And can it be', 'Hark the herald angels sing', 'O for a thousand tongues to sing') wrote in his diary:

Thursday, June 1st. I was troubled today that I could not pray, being utterly dead at the sacrament.

Friday June 2nd. I was still unable to pray; still dead in communicating full of a cowardly desire of death

Saturday June 3rd. My deadness continued, and the next day increased. I was exceeding heavy and averse to prayer; so that I almost resolved no to go to church... When I did go the prayers and sacrament were exceeding grievous to me; and I could not help asking myself "Where is the difference between what I am now, and what I was before believing"

Charles Wesley's journal

It's ok to feel abandoned by God. It's alright not to be able to see the plan in the rubbish circumstances you find yourself in sometimes. It's ok not to get it, it's ok not to have all the answers, and it's ok to ask God questions, and to tell him you don't understand. Sometimes things aren't going to make any sense at all, and if we

can't accept that then when something comes along that we can't make sense of we'll give up.

2. You're never alone

God's promise to the people of Israel was pretty clear - he would keep his covenant with them, but he wouldn't (or couldn't) go with them. 'A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship'¹ - it's a promise that God makes that explains how he will respond to people, that he will never break.

God doesn't alter the terms of the agreement he makes with his people. He doesn't go back on the things that he has said, and he is always true to his word. God promises, for instance:

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved

Joel 2 v 32 (also quoted in Romans 10 v 13)

This means...

Or consider this one:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor; [1]
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; [2]
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;*

¹ Wayne Grudem - Systematic Theology

Isaiah 61 v 1 - 2

Prophecy about Jesus - came to pass.

There is not a promise that God has made that will not happen. He does not lie to convince you to take a certain path and then not come good on the things he promises.

And he has made covenants with you too - one of which is to never abandon you (Dt 31 v 6, Heb 13 v 5).

So, it's ok to feel abandoned, but you never will be!

3. In the desert places

The story of the Exodus starts with people of God in slavery in Egypt and ends with them entering into the land that God has promised them. The middle bit includes the giving of the law, and then a very long period of time (a whole generation) spent wandering around in a desert.

Sometimes God does this to us - promise - desert time - fulfilment.

This was the pattern for David's life. His calling started when the most important prophet of the day prophesied that he was to become King of Israel, then he ends up the King's servant, a military leader, and then a man on the run until finally, some years later he is appointed King (after someone else gets the job, and he has to lead a smaller part of Israel first...)

The Psalms that we looked at earlier on were all written by David in the time between promise and fulfilment for him. His understanding of God grows and changes throughout this time, and later Psalms reflect his experience of God's activity in his life even when he didn't feel it...

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, [\[3\]](#)
I will fear no evil,*

*for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

Psalm 23 v 4

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.*

Psalm 40 v 1

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
3 Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
4 So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.*

Psalm 63 v 1 - 4

We can see how David's "Where are you God" cries changed to acknowledgements of God's existence, care, interest in him, and God's answer.

Consider also the 12 disciples after Jesus' death. They knew what they were supposed to do, and yet there's no record of their preaching - Acts 2 says they 'devoted themselves to prayer' (v. 14). It wasn't for another 50 days later that God's power came and they started doing the things they had spent 3 years training to do.

The Israelites spent years wandering around in the desert. The problem with deserts is that it's really difficult to find your bearings. There aren't any street signs.

One mountain or hill or plain can look pretty much like any other. You don't know whether you're going forward or backward, closer to or further from your goal.

This can happen to us spiritually too - we can feel like we're going nowhere, that we're not making any progress, that we're no closer to seeing the things that God has promised than we ever were.

What's going on in these times? How do we cope when we out in the desert places?

Every day God provided food (in the form of manna) for the people while they were in the desert. If the Israelites were anything like people I know, there would have been a group of them complaining that the food was better in Egypt, and they'd all be better off in slavery than out in the desert places. I work with people for whom life was better in the old days a few years ago. My bet is that a few years ago they were probably complaining that things were better a few years ago... We often look in fondness to times past; because we can remember the good stuff and forget the bad. One of the best lies that we hear is that we can go back to how things were, and then everything will be fine. It rarely is. We can block growth, and development by pining for the past, and it's damaging to us individually and as a church (c.f. friends reunited, facebook)

So how should we live in the desert? What were the future leaders doing? I reckon they were out collecting the manna. God was distant from them at this point, only accessible to Moses and his assistant. But every day this bread came as a sign of grace, a sign of God's care for them. It was one of the few ways to encounter the divine. Furthermore, it served the people.

When God appears far away, we can learn how to love other people by serving. The best way to loose your pride? serve. Love people. Guess what? That's what Martin had to do years ago, and now he serves people more than he ever has. Before he was leading a church, he was serving people, loving people. Learning in the desert.

Leading children's worship on army camp!

Some people think that praying a lot is the key to the gift of prophecy. I disagree. Prayer is important, but there is a really easy way to hear God's voice - hear the very words that God has spoken to us. Read the bible. This might seem a bit simplistic, but think about it: what better way to recognise the voice of God than to have read the book? Read the book and you'll know how he thinks, how he communicates, his loves his hates his favourite metaphors.

Occasionally people say to me that they find it hard to worship because they don't feel like God is near. Let me be honest with you - it's not me you should be telling. It's ok to feel like God is far away, but like David, tell him. We get so trained in how we ought to behave and talk to God in a spiritual way, that we forget that we're supposed to be real with him - even if it's raw and painful. If I only came to God when I felt like it, or when everything was going well, I wouldn't do it very often.

Awake, come to meet me, and see!

5 You, Lord God of hosts, are God of Israel.

Rouse yourself to punish all the nations;

spare none of those who treacherously plot evil

Psalm 59 v 4 - 5

When God isn't close, we have a choice - we can lie and pretend everything is ok, we can get on with something else, or we can be real with God about how we're feeling. In the desert, we learn to do the last one.

What else should we do in the desert? Learn:

make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, [\[5\]](#) and virtue with knowledge

1 Peter 1 v 5

Don't stop growing, learning, working out how the gospel works in your family, your workplace, your school, with your friends.

Sometimes God's preparation and training doesn't look like training and preparation.

Pop Idol - vocal lessons

Preaching - kidswork?!

David the Shepherd (learnt to use a sling, got fit, and led stupid sheep)

I'd rather God worked on my character than my gifting. I'd rather have a firm foundation than be incredibly effective ministry. I don't care if I never preach to, or sing to thousands as long as I'm growing in my love of God, loving the poor, and being salt and light to my colleagues, my family and my friends. As long as I'm working out how to love God, and love other people as I love myself, everything else is a bonus.

Conclusion

We already know the end of the story of the people of Israel, but they didn't when they had to live it. Moses pleaded with God on behalf of the people, and God led them and spoke to Moses in the desert. Before this, however, he says something amazing:

"Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

Exodus 34 v 10

That'd be enough to get me through the desert. I'd have that one sentence laminated on a card in my pocket (which I think makes me a bit odd...)

When it doesn't appear like much is happening, that's often when the real work is going on. God's interest in you doesn't stop after a few months. He's constantly

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working in you, moulding you, shaping you, teaching you. Those times in the desert when it appears like nothing is happening, those are the times we grow, we train, we prepare, we get ready.

Application for individuals and for the church.