

Reflecting on the Lord's Leading of His People

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[0 : 00] Well, now the text we're looking at that covers really what the passage is saying to us is verse 2.

And you shall remember, and you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these 40 years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.

I just want to spend a wee while with you under God's blessing, reflecting on the Lord's leading of his people. And this, of course, is suitable, as the sermons we had yesterday too were suitable for anticipating the new year.

And the verse, of course, helps us to look back and to learn and to look forward. And in a way, this is exactly what the word that we're looking at here is saying.

They were to remember. And it's interesting how often the word remember comes up in these passages. And the truth is, we need to keep remembering because we can forget.

[1 : 26] We may not think we forget, but in practical terms, we don't really dwell enough on the things of the Lord to enable us to make progress.

And this is really what is being said in the passage here by the servant of God. And it is doubtless difficult at times to do the things that we are asked to do by the Lord, because often the Lord leads us in paths we would never choose ourselves.

And I was interested in Nate's sermon about what I would call control freakery and who's in control.

And of course, this is the problem for us. And it was a problem for the Israelites. In Moses' day, they wanted a bit of their own way and a bit more of their own way and a bit more of their own way.

And yet, the fact of the matter is, the Lord is the controller. He is sovereign. He is the one who controls. He knows what he is doing.

[3 : 00] And what is before us here flags up to us all the ways the Lord our God led us hitherto.

And for some of us, it will not be 40. For others, it will be more than 40 years. The point is, all the ways the Lord your God led you these years, and you can pop in there what years he led you through since you came to faith.

This is the point of it. And you remember in Psalm 77, towards the end of it, when the psalmist had earlier said, Lord, have you forgotten to be gracious?

Has your mercy clean gone from us? Then he said, this is my infirmity. I will remember the days of the right hand of the Most High. But at the end of it, he says, your way is in the deep.

Your path in the many waters. In other words, pretty hard to discover. Yet you led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

[4 : 20] And this is really what is being brought to, as a challenge to the people, and hopefully as a challenge to ourselves as we move forward into the new year.

God's purpose is sure. And what is flagged up here for us is very much the reality of divine leading.

He says here, you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you. That's the first thing to notice.

It's the way he has led them. And of course, this is, I think, and it's important to say this, first and foremostly, we're looking at staff here.

That's what the young ones say, isn't it? It's all about staff. And then you've got to define what staff is. But the staff that's in here is history. Not myths and fables and conjectures.

[5 : 28] Like the liberal scholars of centuries ago, these hypotheses that took a bit here as history, and the rest, well, fabrication.

No, no, no, no. This is history. This is history proper. I once listened to a Dutch historian, and he said pretty close to the beginning of his introduction, history is his story.

And I just thought then, you've got it bang on there. That's what it's about. His story. His story. It's about God's story. And this is what is being said.

You shall remember the whole way the Lord your God has led you. The narrative. The narrative. And whatever there is historical narrative, it is true history.

It happened in time. Not in the ether or some conjecture of human minds. And the context, of course, in this is interesting and helpful, too, because as we mentioned there, the 40 years of wandering had pretty much come to an end.

[7 : 00] And Joshua, the son of Nun, he had been trained up for the next stage to take over when Israel would go across into the promised land.

But here they have to look back at all the ways. And all the ways here is interesting because you shall remember the whole way the Lord your God led you.

And remember, he's talking to Israel. And that takes you back to the roots. It takes you back to Jacob in the land of Canaan and his sons and Joseph in Egypt and all the preparation that was made for the 72 of Jacob's lot to go down into Egypt, to be there in Egypt, to be hundreds of years in Egypt, all being prepared for the next stage.

And what we find in it is they're being reminded of their roots. So that by the time of the exodus, you've got two million people coming out of Egypt.

I'm saying two million because something like 600,000 were what they called the mixed multitude that had committed to the Lord and went with the Israelites and were accepted.

[8 : 36] So you've got this huge mass of people to move and God undertook to lead them out.

You know the story of the ten plagues and you know that by the time the firstborn in Egypt from the king's son, when all that calamity, catastrophe occurred, Egypt was glad to get rid of them.

Ayam had acted for his people. And then all through the 40 years in the wilderness itself, they were disciplined.

Evan had this in the sermon last night on the place of discipline and the Lord chastens and punishes his people for that error.

And it's helpful to remind ourselves here, you see, that so many of them were idolaters. They had bought into the worship of the Egyptians.

[9 : 47] You only need to read Acts 7 where Stephen gives his apologia and he pulls the history in. And he said, you weren't worshipping the Lord these years in the desert.

Just come on, come clean. And the Lord suffered them, but the Lord disciplined them too.

And all these weary wilderness wanderings had a purpose. The Lord led them and the Lord fed them. I think it's useful to bring in at this point something which Moses knew very well and we mustn't forget.

And that is the pillar of fire by night and cloud by day. The pillar just was something special because the Lord was in the pillar.

And they could only move when he moved. He guarded them by night and in the morning when they woke up the pillar of cloud would see it.

[11 : 01] And they couldn't move till the pillar moved. And you remember in Acts 16 there's a reference to that in verse 6 but there's a better reference really in I think I said did I say Acts 6?

It's Acts 7.35. 1 Corinthians 10.9 is the best one because it tells us clearly Christ was in the cloud.

That is the pre-incarnate Christ. The Son of God was leading them as well as disciplining them all the way.

and they were not able to move till he moved. And that was part and parcel of leading them in a new direction and in a new way.

It was helping them to understand how the Lord did things and they were to get in line. Now it was the same in the New Testament.

[12 : 09] Paul wanted to go northeast to Bithynia you remember and the Lord effectively said no and he guided him west.

And you know the story in the book of Acts how the churches were founded and blossomed. But it was God's way. God led the apostle.

God didn't let the apostle have his fancy what he wanted no the spirit led him elsewhere. And this is important because the whole way the Lord your God has led you was an important thing.

They carried history with them into the exodus and they made history on the 40 years of exodus and all the while God was having his way.

he was in control. And that is a very important thing because we don't like to be controlled as we heard from Nate's sermon yesterday morning.

[13 : 23] Somebody's smiling. We don't like to be controlled. We like to be in control. Now I asked Nate's good lady because they'll not be watching this so I'm safe.

But I asked, I said to Erin, now tell me this, is he a control freak? no, she said, we both are.

And I think that was a very honest answer because what she meant was simply that women see things and do things better in certain areas than men.

And men are wise when they admit it. And the same is true with the men. They think differently on certain issues. And so there's really harmony. It's not to be controlled freakily by one.

And the Lord was teaching them that when all is said and done, he gives you the ability to do this or that, he is in control.

[14 : 37] Sometimes we speak about our plans and plans and plans. But the proverb says, man makes his plans, but the Lord directs his path.

And that's the important thing, that they were to learn there. They were to go through this time of difficulty in order to learn who's in control.

And the one who's in control works everything for the good of his people. Though it may not seem that way often, he kept them going, just like he keeps us going through trials aplenty, through disappointments and sadness as well as gladness.

What we might call many's and unanswered prayer, yet. But if we're wise, we have to say as yet. Maybe a family member, but it may be more than one family member that we prayed for for a decade.

It hasn't worked out in terms of answer, except not yet. because the Lord would have us learn who's in control and that what he does is good and true and right for us.

[16 : 10] Often he has led us, and we've seen this ourselves in our experience, he lays somebody in our heart and we know we need to pray and we know we need to look for an answer pretty quickly, because he just does it, and then we see it, we see an answer, and we thank him, and it encourages us to keep on going for people that we long to see answers to prayer for.

I need to say more on that. So, the reality of divine leading is everywhere present in this passage, and I hope it's everywhere present in our lives too.

But the second point, the final point, is the design and the end of divine leading. And it's there in the passage, it's in the verse, the Lord your God, and you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, that's the first thing, that he might humble you, to humble his own.

And the word in the original there means really to humble by distresses, and it's an old fashioned word in a way, privations, he deprives us of things.

Distresses and privations. things. But he has, you see, a design in it. He's dealing with his people.

[17 : 53] And it's not our business to be looking at the Israelites and trying to work out what percentage were really the Lord's. By definition, they were Israel, the Lord's people.

And he was dealing with them all in that context, to humble them. And during that period, in the mosaic period, in the wilderness wanderings, he made them feel their utter dependence upon God.

they, of course, had to learn this all the way through these weary wilderness wanderings. He inflicted hardship on them to humble their proud hearts.

He deprived them of the, you remember in Numbers, the book of Numbers, there's a bit when they're griping away at Moses and at Joshua, rather, about we remember and they remembered the food of Egypt that they enjoyed and now they hadn't got.

As if it was a lifesaver to them. But you see, God took away all the things they enjoyed in Egypt to make them depend upon himself.

[19 : 21] And we were reminded in the Evan sermon that discipline from the Lord is part and parcel of our life of faith. And sometimes it's very stingy. It hurts, but it's needed.

We may not think it. You'll remember the person who said, I'm not going to develop it, but it was a lady who had a shocking accident and she said, God, that's not faith.

faith. But often enough in our own experience, we may never say it to other people, we may think it in our hearts, that's not faith. But part and parcel of his discipline of us is learning that he does all things well, however stingy it may be to our hearts.

And we need to, as it were, as we look forward into the new year, we need to think about learning from the past of the Lord's dealing with us in order to go forward.

Within this second, the last point itself, I mentioned first of all, his designs to humble and to test, is the other thing, to test his own.

[20 : 49] And it says there, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. Now, we need to be careful here.

This is not, the Lord tested you that he might know what was in your hearts. That's not what's been said. He knows, you know, what's been said is that you will know what's in your hearts.

By testing you, the proof will be right there in front of you and you'll not be able to deny it. After an all, the way to know how a person will react, or some metal, it may be in the lab, the science lab, the way you can say things about it, you test it, and then certain things happen, and you can write them down and note it.

And in a sense, in a Christian life, it's like that. It's only when we're tested, the end result becomes clear. And sadly for too many of these Israelites, they failed their test seriously, and they died in the wilderness according to the word.

In 1 Peter, we have a similar line of thinking about testing because, and I'm just reminding you, this is all one, it's all the work of the Spirit of God, less noticed, but no less real.

[22 : 37] Peter gives us in chapter 1 that wonderful reference about the Lord's people being born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and he goes on to highlight to an inheritance incorruptible and defiled and fading, reserved in heaven for you who are kept by the power of God through faith into salvation, and then suddenly he switches, though if necessary you are grieved by many testings.

God's says, it's not an old first testament thing finished, gone. It's part and parcel of life, of the life of the Lord's people.

If necessary, and he knows what is necessary, and he applies these testings to us.

Abraham had a serious testing at Mount Moriah, absolutely mind-jamming to think that he's been asked to take his son and to slaughter him on a roughly made altar, the son of promise.

What's going on? And it's easy to say, well, but he said to the servants, we'll be back, we'll be back. But that doesn't mean he knew what was going to happen initially.

[24 : 19] It's only when he was prepared to lift that knife and ready to bring it down, the test was over. And he knew that even if he had to slay his son, his son would be resurrected.

Testing proves us, proves what's in us, and it improves us as well. Paul, the apostle, the amazing apostle, in his, what we call his valedictory in Timothy there, 2 Timothy 4, you remember, I am already being poured out as a drink offering, he said, the time of my departure is at hand.

He knows it, he's ready for it, he's been tested through and through. And no doubt, that'll come to us in God's will.

So, he humbled them, he tested them, and he did it with an end in view. And his end in view was to know in your hearts what it is to obey the Lord.

And we only know it when we're humbled, we only know it when we're tested, and then the proof of it comes to the surface. We know what's in our hearts.

[26 : 09] I'm just sorry, I needed to remind myself of the time there. So, what we can say about Israel in Moses' day, is that many of them persisted in their idolatry and their unbelief.

But by no means is that the whole story, because many of them were the better for what they passed through in the wilderness journey, in the discipline of the Lord.

God's own people were brought to know that love for God was about obeying his word. Aye, and I hear Jesus in the upper room saying, if you love me, you'll keep my commandments.

They'll matter to you. They're not consigned to history past. matter. They matter. They matter. And we can take a lesson from this, I think, a powerful lesson, that all that the Lord puts us through is to make us all the more committed to him, to love him, perhaps more deeply than we did before.

Our encouragement here is that not withstanding all our stumblings in the path of obedience, he's in control, and he keeps us going.

[27 : 49] And let us thank him for it today. He keeps us going. We want the Lord to be honored in our lives, and we're looking forward to demonstrating that both to ourselves and to him as we journey on.

And maybe we can say by faith that we will go forward in confidence. Suddenly remember something there, through faith we shall conquer, though often cast down.

He who is our Savior, our strength will renew. Look ever to Jesus, he will carry you through. And the incarnate Christ was there, don't forget, in control.

Fiery pillar, pillar of cloud. He was no control freak. He was looking after them.

He was shaping them, developing them to be more faithful followers. and it's true for us. Some of you know this sweet wee chorus I'm quoting from better than me.

[29 : 10] But I do not know what lies ahead. The way I cannot see. Yet one stands near to be my guide. He'll show the way to me.

He's in control. I know he holds the future and he holds me by the hand. With God, things don't just happen.

Everything by him is planned. So as I face the future with its problems great and small, I'll trust the God of miracles and leave with him my all.

May we do that. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.