

In our sermon series we have been focused on death and the future that follows it. The great danger that all of us face is to try to make this life heaven in the wrong way. While we all should do everything we can to make this life as good as possible, we should never confuse it with heaven, where we will be face to face with God. There is, as in the time of Israel's exodus, a danger that we will become content with the wilderness, and through lack of faith, fail to enter the promised land. This week we will look at how to practice gratitude in the midst of the wilderness, making the most of this life, while not becoming content without heaven.

Day 1

Remember Heaven

In this life we face two potential pitfalls, that of becoming content without God, and that of becoming bitter without God. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, they stopped trusting God and found themselves separated from Him because of it. There could be no other outcome to the loss of faith. We now must live a life separated from Him, and although His spirit lives within us, we are not face to face with Him as we will be in heaven. God has left His mediators, and although this is a significant grace, it doesn't reverse the loss of His presence. In light of His lost presence, we might start to get enamored of the mediators, which is idolatry. Any time something becomes a replacement for God, we have fallen into the sin of idolatry, and God's jealousy will be aroused. We must expect that God will not allow us to live in peace with our idol, and that suffering is sure to follow. A God who loves us will do no less. The other temptation we face is to become so disillusioned with the absence of God that bitterness causes us to turn away. We may want God to make our time without Him more pleasant, but the fact that His mediators can so easily become replacements for Him shows us that He cannot make His absence more pleasant, we must expect that being separated from Him has consequences. When we face either of these problems, that of being content without Him or bitter without Him, we must remember and meditate on heaven, the time and place where we will be with Him. Nothing shows the limitations of His mediators more than contemplating His presence, and nothing revives the bitter soul more than remembering that this absence lasts only for a season. Make meditation on heaven a regular part of your spiritual life, and you will avoid these pitfalls.

Verses: Philippians 3:20-21, Matthew 6:19-20, Hebrews 11:16, 2 Corinthians 5:1

Prayer Topics: Love, Meeting in Person, Paradise

Day 2

Thank God

If we are to make our time in the wilderness of this world useful, we must develop the ability to thank God for our circumstances. When times are good and we are tempted to forget about God, we must remember that the good times are not to be had apart from God. He has made himself known to us in the mediation of His blessings through the good things that he has created and provided for us, and we cannot long live in blessing if we forget that He is the author. When we face difficulty and trial, when we are in the midst of suffering and are tempted to lose faith in his love, mercy, and goodness toward us, we must give thanks to Him. We must thank Him that he will not allow us to be content without Him, and that he shows His love in allowing us to experience a life separated from Him. It is a true grace and mercy to be allowed to get the smallest taste of what life is like without Him, for how else can we know the exceeding goodness of His character and nature, and be assured of His glory and love for us? When my son leaves for work, his toddler daughter will often talk to inanimate objects as if they are him in his absence, and will be overjoyed when he returns. She is much less enamored of her mother, not because

she does less or shows her love for her daughter less than my son, but because her mother doesn't leave. My granddaughter loves her mother as much as her father, but due to lack of absence does not know this truth. We should be grateful to God for showing us the glory of His presence by sometimes allowing us to experience His absence, and we should make this gratitude known.

Verses: 1 Thessalonians 5:18, James 1:17, Colossians 3:15

Prayer Topics: Missing, Hope, Gratitude

Day 3

Make a Public Profession

As I have said before, there was a saying at my bible college that, "Impression without expression leads to depression." While at the time I thought this was a silly little saying, I now know that it is true. God has made us with a desire to share our knowledge and express the glory of who he is, and when we are prevented from doing this, we miss out on the greatest joy of life. As we go through the wilderness of our lives on this earth, looking forward to the promised land, we will face many challenges. Throughout the challenging times we must learn to give thanks to God, and we must learn to do this publicly. Why is this so? Because without making our gratitude public we do not get to share it with others, and this is nothing less than a disaster. While the first part of the last sentence is obvious, the second is not. When we fail to share our gratitude publicly, it does not get reflected back to us, and so does not get magnified. There is something profound in sharing your experiences with a group for both you and the group. You get the magnification of the group, and the group gets a spark or an opportunity to be inspired by something new. The group needs the new information to avoid stagnation, and you need the amplification of the group to experience the fullness of joy. What things are you thankful for? What things are you thankful for that you have never shared publicly, and how can you begin to do that?

Verses: Matthew 24:14, Isaiah 61:1, 1 Peter 2:9

Prayer Topics: Light, Transparency, Confess

Day 4

Work on Change

We can learn to discern good from evil in two ways, one is by experiencing good. I have heard that they train bank tellers to discern counterfeit bills by having them handle real ones so often that the difference of the counterfeit is immediately obvious. I don't know whether or not it's true, but I can't imagine the training being done any other way. The problem for us is that Adam and Eve opted out of that plan in the garden, by losing faith in what is good, namely God. The next option is to discern good from evil by experiencing evil, and that is now the path that we are on. It should not surprise us, therefore, that there is a fair amount of evil around. In fact, what should surprise us, is that God gives us so much grace through his mediators. When we experience the evil of this life, what should we do? Learn! We should not waste the lesson that God has given us, but should put it to work to bring us to a greater knowledge of Him and His glory. When my boys were young, I really didn't like having to discipline them, but I knew that it was necessary. My greatest hope was that they would put the lessons of discipline into practice to have the greatest future possible. In the same way, God allows us to experience the truth of evil, and we should not let the lesson go to waste but should instead embrace the good, so that when we get to heaven, we are fully transformed into those who love and diligently seek what is right, true, and good. Don't let the lessons of the wilderness go to waste.

Verses: Isaiah 5:20, Romans 12:21, Psalm 23:4

Prayer Topics: Wisdom, Transformation, Victory

Day 5

Live in Grace

While we wait for the promised land, we must live in grace. It is grace that allows us to get through the wilderness. It is grace that provides the mana, the blessings that we share in every day even though we don't deserve them. It is grace that leads us with a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night, that we might learn the lessons and be transformed and find our way to the promised land. It is grace that allows us to make our mistakes, and yet still live in the community of God's people, in the presence of the Tabernacle where He dwells. It is grace that brings us to springs of water, and allows us to be refreshed and renewed to continue the journey. We live always in grace, let us be thankful.

Verses: Hebrews 4:16, Romans 6:14, 1 Corinthians 15:10

Prayer Topics: Mercy, Blessing, Unity