

Numbers 33:50-56

The wandering of our hearts is resolved in worship.

I am a sucker. I mean I fall for more marketing ploys that I would like to admit. I just can't avoid always looking for the next thing that will solve all my problems. And because the clever video said this thing would do so, I run after it... Often silly things: wallets, bags/backpacks, and sinful things - putting trust in schemes, and elevation of self over others.

All of this reveals to me a heart yearning for satisfaction. For a sense of home that can be misdirected toward the wrong things.

As I studied our text for this week I was keenly aware, and frustrated, with the things that are barbs in my eyes and thorns in my side. Distractions that lure me away from the solution, from real satisfaction.

And I think the recounting of Israel's wandering, with a warning before taking possession of the promise, points us to the goal of Israel's story and the place satisfaction is found.

Wandering, warning, worship.

Wandering

Some of the wilderness moments match the sense of life presented in Ecclesiastes. Wisdom literature where the "Teacher" essentially says enjoy life because it's a vapor... summed up in where humanity is meant to put our trust.

Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. [14] For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." (ESV)

The whole wilderness journey has been about learning this.

A people saved out of slavery, meant to dwell with and worship Yahweh along. He brought them out, illuminated the way, provided food, gives them instructions for life, but much of the story is a journey to Him. To faithfulness to him, trust in him, worshiping him.

“Yahweh demands exclusive covenant loyalty. As the one true God of heaven and earth, Yahweh cannot and will not tolerate the worship of any “other gods” (Ex. 22:20; 23:13, 24, 32)”

Every story, encounter, correction, revealing that God is to be worshiped alone.

Exodus 20:2–3 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. [3] “You shall have no other gods before me.” (ESV)

Our family has a bit of a vacation ritual. After we have been away someone will ask “what was your favorite part?” Then we recount the things we enjoyed, or the moments we think we will cherish. It is also an opportunity to bemoan the less glamorous parts of our journey. But the question spurs a retelling of our family story, at least in that stage of life.

And that is what chapter 33 is for Israel.

Numbers 33:1–2 “These are the stages of the people of Israel, when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. [2] Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the LORD, and these are their stages according to their starting places.” (ESV)

Recounting their 40 years of wandering. All of it on purpose - all of it meaningful. Some moments to be cherished, others and monuments to unfaithfulness. Reminding Israel of where they have been.

“The locations remind the Israelites of their faithlessness, the Lord’s justice, and the Lord’s mercy and faithfulness in bringing them to this point. The people of God must always remember who the Lord has shown himself to be in the past and then act in light of that in the present (cf. Deut 8:1–18; 9:7; Rom 12:1)”

Story of all of us, all of humanity in our wandering.

Paul in dialogue with the elites of Athens, to those who had found plenty of idols to worship, said this of all of us.

Acts 17:24–28 “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, [25] nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. [26] And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, [27] that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, [28] for

“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ (ESV)

Your wilderness is framed here, that you should seek God... feel your way toward him and find him.

Israel, meant to be a set-apart people showing life with God has to get to the place they can see, worship, and trust God alone.

Their story is never different. Searching, getting things twisted, most missing...

John 5:39–40 “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, [40] yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” (ESV)

Wandering is natural, for Israel, and for us. The goal though is worship, exclusive before God.

Don't despise the journey, but beware the obstacles.

Even on the verge of the promised land there is a warning against missing what we are made for.

From the recounting their wandering and the boundaries of their journey we arrive at the boundaries of the land to be allotted as an inheritance. And the central point of these two chapters is the LORD telling Israel what to do when they cross the Jordan into Canaan.

Warning.

When you possess the land, get rid of all the carved images and their metal idols, demolish all of the high places... everything and everywhere that would get in the way of “wholehearted” worship and trust in God should be destroyed.

It’s the reality of the land they were coming into. None of the nations there worshiped Yahweh. They looked to other gods for success, fruitful crops, victory in battle. And this idols or stone and ore often “required” of them sexualized and exploitative worship. At the expense of others... harmful. Made up!

All of it in opposition to the way of life God has called Israel. This is not a new warning for them either.

Exodus 23:31–33 “And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. [32] You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. [33] They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.” (ESV) “because worship of their gods will be a snare to you...”

If idolatry is not driven out of the land it will mean trouble.

Numbers 33:55–56 “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. [56] And I will do to you as I thought to do to them.” (ESV)

Idolatry leads to ruin.

We give a lot of attention to the land in this history, so much so that we miss that it is just part of God’s redemptive story. It’s not the land that’s in jeopardy, it's

their hearts. And every time the people are enticed away from trusting Yahweh exclusively, or worshiping him alone, they miss his provision, they step outside of his care, and trouble comes.

Calvin who called the human heart a “factory of idols,” had nothing better to say of the mind. “Man's mind is like a store of idolatry and superstition; so much so that if a man believes his own mind it is certain that he will forsake God and forge some idol in his own brain.” John Calvin

Israel is meant for wholehearted, full-minded, untainted worship of God alone.

“The language of the curse was very foreboding. Allowing the peoples of the land who were the source of idolatry to remain in the land would eventually lead to an infectious disease that would gradually consume the nation like leprosy.

What lay ahead for the nation on this last stage of the journey on the victory march to the Promised Land was a challenge of faith.” R. Dennis Cole, Numbers, vol. 3B, The New American Commentary

Spoiler: they will be taken by idolatry and eventually sent out of the land, like our first parents sent out of the garden as they tried to gain God’s knowledge for themselves.

More than just a story and warning for Israel. It’s here that we would take notice and go to war against our own idolatry.

“This earnest admonition given to the Israelites in their peculiar circumstances conveys a salutary lesson to us to allow no lurking habits of sin to remain in us. That spiritual enemy must be eradicated from our nature; otherwise it will be ruinous to our present peace and future salvation.” Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible

Sin that will earn us what God planned for the wicked.

"Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry..." "...anything more important to you than God. Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God.

Anything you seek to give you what only God can give. Anything that is so central and essential to your life, that should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.” Tim Keller

This is the story of our wandering and the danger of it...

“The Reason for God” and the “particular kinds of brokenness and damage” caused by idolatry:

- “If you center your life and identity on your spouse or partner, you will be emotionally dependent, jealous, and controlling. The other person's problems will be overwhelming to you.
- If you center your life and identity on your family and children, you will try to live your life through your children until they resent you or have no self of their own. At worst, you may abuse them when they displease you.
- If you center your life and identity on your work and career, you will be a driven workaholic and a boring, shallow person. At worst you will lose family and friends and, if your career goes poorly, develop deep depression.
- If you center your life and identity on money and possessions, you'll be eaten up by worry or jealousy about money. You'll be willing to do unethical things to maintain your lifestyle, which will eventually blow up your life.
- If you center your life and identity on pleasure, gratification, and comfort, you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the “escape strategies” by which you avoid the hardness of life.
- If you center your life and identity on relationships and approval, you will be constantly overly hurt by criticism and thus always losing friends. You will fear confronting others and therefore will be a useless friend.
- If you center your life and identity on a “noble cause,” you will divide the world into “good” and “bad” and demonize your opponents. Ironically, you will be controlled by your enemies. Without them, you have no purpose.
- If you center your life and identity on religion and morality, you will, if you are living up to your moral standards, be proud, self-righteous, and cruel. If you don't live up to your moral standards, your guilt will be utterly devastating.”

These things, wrongly pursued keep us from what we were meant for. They rob us of peace, purpose, and the person we are supposed to find. The solution to our heart's longing... we find him in worship.

Worship

Israel needs, and will need, exactly what we and all of humanity needs. Someone to crush idolatry for us and to remake our hearts to find life in God alone.

From hearts wicked and deceitful, in Christ we are given new hearts that find him alone as our hope.

Hope isn't lost for Israel, if they will seek after God and find Jesus.

Ezekiel 36:25–28 “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. [26] And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. [28] You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (ESV)

This is exactly what Jesus does. He sees us in our idolatry and still gives of himself to solve our sin, and invites us to worship him, to see his glory. Raised with him in new life.

Israel is called to rid the land of idolatry in response to their rescue; We are empowered to put idolatry to death because our new hearts find satisfaction in Jesus.

And I can't come up with any strategy better for avoiding idolatry than stubbornly returning to Jesus in worship as we turn from our idols.

“Rid me of the impulse, help me seek and find you, that you alone would be my treasure.”

Relentless ridding our hearts of the things that try to take Jesus' place.

1 John 5:20–21 “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. [21] Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” (ESV)

Colossians 3:2–5 “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. [3] For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. [4] When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. [5] Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” (ESV)

1 Corinthians 10:14 “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. (ESV)

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Augustine, *Confessions*

It’s what Israel is invited into. It is the life Jesus gives us. Journeying with him to find him as our all. We worship on our way, staring at the glory of Christ until we see it.

The wandering of our hearts is resolved in worship.

Worship on your way out of idolatry. A new way of war, empowered by the Spirit, not with a sword but cultivating a greater love for Christ.

Remind each other along the way. The church, including every Christian within her, continues the record of God’s faithful providence, as he shepherds us by the hand of Christ to himself in eternal glory.

Oh the place you have been. And oh the places you will go.

May our lives declare that we’ve found the One in whom we live and move and have our being and we will worship nothing else.