

7. Israel's Legacy of Unfaithfulness

Yahweh had determined to renew His covenant with Israel – not because of their national repentance or commitment to reformation, but by virtue of His own goodness for the sake of upholding His promise to Abraham and His testimony in the world. God would continue forward in His relationship with Abraham's descendents because of His larger purpose in salvation history and Israel's role in that purpose.

The immediate goal of the covenant was Israel's inheritance of the land of Canaan. The possession of Canaan was central to the Abrahamic Covenant, and so a necessary outcome of Yahweh's covenant with Israel at Sinai. The reason is that the Sinai Covenant formally initiated the realization of what God had promised to Abraham regarding his descendents and legacy. It served to administer at the first (typological) level the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant with its core promises of land, seed, and blessing.

This understanding lay at the heart of Moses' unwillingness to proceed from Sinai without the Lord's presence with His people. The covenant had established Israel as Yahweh's *son*, and the destiny of the son was to dwell with his Father in His sanctuary-land. In what sense, then, could the covenant be continued in God's absence? Mere residence in Canaan wouldn't fulfill the promise; Israel's inheritance was Yahweh Himself – dwelling with Him in the place of His habitation (ref. again Exodus 15:17). If He refused to go with Israel, nothing else pertaining to the covenant had any meaning.

Moses pled these truths to the Lord – he appealed to Yahweh according to His own mind and purpose, and so prevailed with Him. God would continue in covenant with His son and lead him to His sanctuary-land. Thus the balance of Exodus records the construction of the sanctuary and the preparations for the ordination of Aaron and his sons. When the tabernacle was completed and the ark of Yahweh's throne installed in the Holy of Holies, the glory-cloud of His presence descended upon the sanctuary and took up residence between the wings of the cherubim over the mercy seat (40:20-35). Israel had journeyed from Egypt to Sinai to be joined to its covenant Father, and the tabernacle and priesthood were necessary to facilitate and mediate the relationship between Father and son (thus God provided the prescription for the Levitical system while Israel was still camped at Sinai). With the sanctuary and priesthood in place, Yahweh revealed Himself as formally present in the midst of His people; they were now ready to depart for Canaan. All that remained was for Him to instruct Israel in the logistical matters pertaining to its movement through the wilderness (Numbers 1-10:10).

But despite the recovery of the covenant and Yahweh's determination to continue with Israel, the text leaves no doubt that the relationship between Father and son had been forever altered. The joyous fellowship meal celebrating the covenant was becoming a fading memory eclipsed by the stark reality of Moses' veiled face. Israel's transgression showed that it couldn't perceive the glory of the covenant – either as it related to the nation's calling as Abraham's seed or as it contributed to God's outworking of His primal oath in Eden. By its faithless act Israel had exposed its inability to recognize its own identity and role; it had demonstrated its inability to be *Israel*.

And so, while Israel set out from Sinai with the glory-cloud of Yahweh's presence going before it (Numbers 10:11-29), the exultant expectation of the promised land was overshadowed by the ever-present cloud of unbelief. There seemed little doubt that the apostasy of Sinai would continue, and this is exactly what the record of Israel's journeys reveals. No sooner does the text record Moses' triumphal prayer of conquest and covenant realization than it turns to the unbelief of the covenant son (Numbers 10:33-11:1). This sets the stage for the balance of the book of Numbers (Hebrew name *BeMidbar* – "in the wilderness"), which recounts an unbroken chain of disbelief and defiance on the part of Yahweh's "son," – implicating Moses and Aaron as well as the people – juxtaposed with His own enduring faithfulness to His covenant.

- a. As the people departed from Sinai, the Lord led them first to the wilderness of Paran. Israel's presence there would prove fateful as the episode of the twelve spies marked the turning point for the nation. From Kadesh Moses dispatched representatives from the twelve tribes to spy out the land of Canaan and bring back a report (Numbers 13:1-20). The context indicates that God's intention in this investigation was two-fold: First, it would encourage the people and strengthen their resolve when the spies saw with their own eyes that this was indeed a good land, flowing with milk and honey – a land that was just as the Lord had told them where they would find all blessing in His presence. But it also was to be a test of Israel's faith: This region that Yahweh had pledged to them (ref. 13:2) was filled with strong nations and fortified cities; discovering that, would the nation trust their natural sensibilities or their God?

When the spies returned they brought with them a huge cluster of grapes suspended on the shoulders of two men. But they also reported what they had observed concerning the inhabitants of the land. At this word the hearts of the sons of Israel melted and, notwithstanding the exhortations of Joshua and Caleb, they conspired together to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt (14:1-5). In spite of all they had experienced – including the Lord's faithfulness in renewing the covenant and His continued promise to give them the land – Israel lamented that Yahweh was bringing them into Canaan only to perish with their wives and children at the hands of its powerful inhabitants.

The Lord's response was to consign that entire unbelieving generation to die outside the land while the children they claimed to fear for would go in and inherit the blessing they had renounced by their unbelief.

- Once again He spoke of dispossessing Israel and making a great nation from Moses, and again Moses interceded for the people by appealing to the covenant and Yahweh's faithfulness to it (14:11-19).
- And as before, the Lord turned from His stated intention to utterly forsake Israel while remaining resolute in His determination to punish the rebels among them. With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, the entire adult generation would die in the wilderness (14:20-38; cf. Hebrews 3:1-19).

The people mourned when Moses reported God's decision to them, but amazingly responded in unbelief again by attempting what they had just previously refused to do. Despite God's continual assurance of their success in taking the land, the sons of Israel had the day before sought to return to Egypt, convinced they would perish if they entered Canaan. Now, with His oath that they would die in the wilderness, they rallied themselves for an assault on the land (14:39-45). Whether in blessing or cursing, the son was turned against his Father so that he would not listen or obey; as it was on Moses' face, the veil remained over their hearts.

The wilderness of Paran represented the turning point for Israel. What had been the promise of immediate inheritance of Canaan became a forty-year period of punishment and winnowing; Israel wouldn't enter Yahweh's sanctuary-land until all those who had disbelieved and despised Him were purged from the nation.

- b. Deuteronomy records the last days of Israel's wilderness sojourn before crossing into Canaan. The nation was camped on the plains of Moab just east of the Jordan River; after forty years of wandering and death the covenant son was finally poised to enter into its promised inheritance. Deuteronomy consists of a series of sermons delivered by Moses as his final words to the nation he had led for four decades. *Together they recounted to Israel its history under the covenant for the purpose of informing and directing its future conduct in the land.* Moses' final task as Israel's prophet and mediator was to remind them of where they had been and what they had endured over the previous forty years. The sons of Israel were to consider those realities in the light of who they were as Abraham's descendents, where they were going, and the profound import of their calling and inheritance. Deuteronomy's primary role in the development of the biblical storyline is to conjoin and make coherent the relationship and covenantal significance of the four great features of Israel's existence: the Exodus, the wilderness period, the impending Canaanite theocracy, and the later monarchy.

As Moses' sermons in Deuteronomy focus on the matter of *remembrance*, so the heart of their collective exhortation is a repeated warning against *future forgetfulness*. Israel was to recall and accurately perceive its past in order to properly enter into and execute its future with Yahweh in His sanctuary land. Israel's future well-being under the covenant depended on its self-understanding and faithfulness to its identity and calling.

- c. Deuteronomy finds Israel standing at the threshold of its inheritance, while the book of Joshua records the period of Canaan's conquest and settlement. It's a book of triumph and exultation, but it also continues the pessimistic and foreboding tone that runs through all of Israel's history. Thus Joshua's final exhortations to Israel closely paralleled Moses': Like his predecessor, Joshua reminded the people of Yahweh's great acts of faithfulness as their covenant Father-God and he called them to commit themselves fully to Him. As Moses before him, Joshua exhorted them to live into their sonship while warning them that wrath lay ahead (cf. Joshua 23:1-24:27 with Deuteronomy 29:1-31:21).

- d. The triumph of Israel's inheritance of Canaan and its restated commitment to covenant fidelity were immediately followed by a prolonged period of decline. This tragic period, recorded in the book of Judges, continued up until the emergence of the monarchy in Israel and the Scripture characterizes it as a time in which "*every man did what was right in his own eyes*" (17:6, 21:25). There was no human king in Israel, but more importantly, Yahweh Himself was not regarded as King by His subjects. Rather than realizing the kingdom promised to Abraham, the Israelite kingdom was one in which every man was his own king.

The book substantiates and develops this thematic proclamation along several lines, all of which are framed by the general cyclical pattern of rest, complacency, rebellion, subjugation, repentance, deliverance and restoration. These cycles replicated the pattern initiated at Sinai, thereby showing that Israel's fundamental estrangement had not been remediated either by the renewed covenant or its inheritance of Canaan. Though physically present in Yahweh's sanctuary-land, the relationship between Father and son remained distant and dysfunctional. Again, the text demonstrates this by tracing out various aspects of Israel's decline.

The first is the progressive isolation and disunity of the twelve tribes. The nation was collectively Yahweh's "son," so that fidelity to the covenant implied solidarity and harmony among Israel's tribes. Israel's calling was to be a priestly kingdom (ref. Exodus 19:3-6), and a kingdom divided against itself can neither thrive nor endure. The nation's increasing fragmentation finally culminated in intertribal warfare (19:1-20:48) – a phenomenon that would later be repeated in national conflicts between the two Israelite sub-kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

The second evidence of estrangement was Israel's increasing interaction with the nations around them (ref. 3:5-7). Despite Yahweh's stern warnings through Moses and Joshua, His people compromised their devotion to Him by joining themselves to Canaan's residents and gods. In this way Israel effectively converted its communion with its Father in His holy habitation into life within an idol temple.

In turn, this independent, idolatrous spirit found expression in Israel's worship of God and practical morality (3:7, 6:25-30, 8:27, 33). Before long Yahweh's son became indistinguishable from the world around it, its estrangement from Him bearing all the fruit characteristic of fallen humanity. They embraced self-serving idolatrous practices (17:1-18:31) and gave themselves over to their basest desires (19:1-30). Dwelling in Yahweh's sanctuary-land, the covenant son had become Sodom (cf. Isaiah 1:9-15, 3:8-9; Jeremiah 23:9-14; etc.), openly despising its Abrahamic mandate to mediate the knowledge of God to the world of men.

Thus the period of the Judges saw the fulfillment of the very things Moses and Joshua had warned Israel about; though taken by Yahweh to be His son by covenant, Israel yet bore the likeness of fallen Adam. And bearing Adam's likeness, Israel could not fulfill its calling as the "son of God." As such, *the Israelite theocracy could not fulfill the promise of the recovery of sacred space.*