

# **BIBLE STUDY NOTES**

## **based on Bible Studies for General Assembly 2018**

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In each of the following Bible Studies we'll be looking at stories about God's people choosing to move away from one place in order to go to a different place. In all of these stories, an underlying question for us is: 'What might we learn from this about Walking the Way?'

The idea of 'place' is used here in a metaphorical sense. For the purpose of our Bible Studies we're going to understand the journeys, their starting points and their destinations metaphorically as representing the spiritual place where God's people happen to be in their walk with God – so, not in terms of geography or politics but in terms of a way of life, a relationship with God and the world, to which the people of God are called. A map of the region does form the backdrop to these stories and helps us to make sense of what is going on within the logic of the narrative. However, the journey we really want to learn about isn't so much the physical one that forms the surface level of the narrative. The real significance of these stories for us lies in what they reveal to us about our own faith and our way of being church – our way of being a people of God in the world today. For the purposes of this analysis we'll need to project our own identity as followers of Christ onto the people of God as described in the texts.

### **SOME GENERAL QUESTIONS WE COULD ASK OF EACH STORY**

1. What does the narrator choose to tell us, and what is withheld?
2. What good (God's) reasons might there have been for making this journey? What was at stake?
3. Is there anything that might have made the people reluctant to undertake the journey?
4. What changed as a result of the journey? Has a theological development taken place?
5. What are the resonances for us today?
6. Has any course of action suggested itself as a result of our having spent time studying the text?

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### **SESSION 1: Walking the Half Way (Genesis 11:31 – 12.4)**

#### **SUGGESTED STARTER QUESTIONS:**

*Why would any of us choose to move away from a place where we've been staying, where we feel settled and where everything is familiar, in order to go and live for a while in a different place?*

*What has been our personal experience of this?*

*How easy was it to make the decision to go?*

### **i) A TEXT FILLED WITH MYSTERY AND PUZZLES (Genesis 11:31-32)**

On the theme of journeys undertaken by the people of God, one of the best known is the call of Abram as told in Genesis 12, where he hears God calling him to leave his home in Haran and go on a journey 'to the land that I will show you', and of course we know that Abram responds to the call of God and sets out on the journey as instructed. No protests. No questions asked. He simply goes 'as the LORD had told him' [NRSV].

What is rather more mystifying is the story of how Abram came to be living in Haran in the first place. We rarely pay much attention to the previous bit of the story – it isn't included in the three-year lectionary so the chances are it doesn't get read in church. In this session we're going to take a closer look at the part of the narrative that tells us about the real beginning of Abram's journey.

- ***What does the narrator choose not to tell us?***
- ***What do we think might have motivated the journey of Terah?***

The narrator doesn't tell us why Terah chose to leave home with some members of his family. Neither is it possible for us to work it out for ourselves from other clues in the narrative. Usually, the reason people in the Bible have for choosing to leave their home to go and live somewhere else is either to escape from some life threatening situation, such as a famine or war, or because they feel called by God to do so as in the case of Abram in chapter 12. But exactly what motivated Abram's father Terah to set out on *his* journey with the idea of going all the way to Canaan, we're not told.

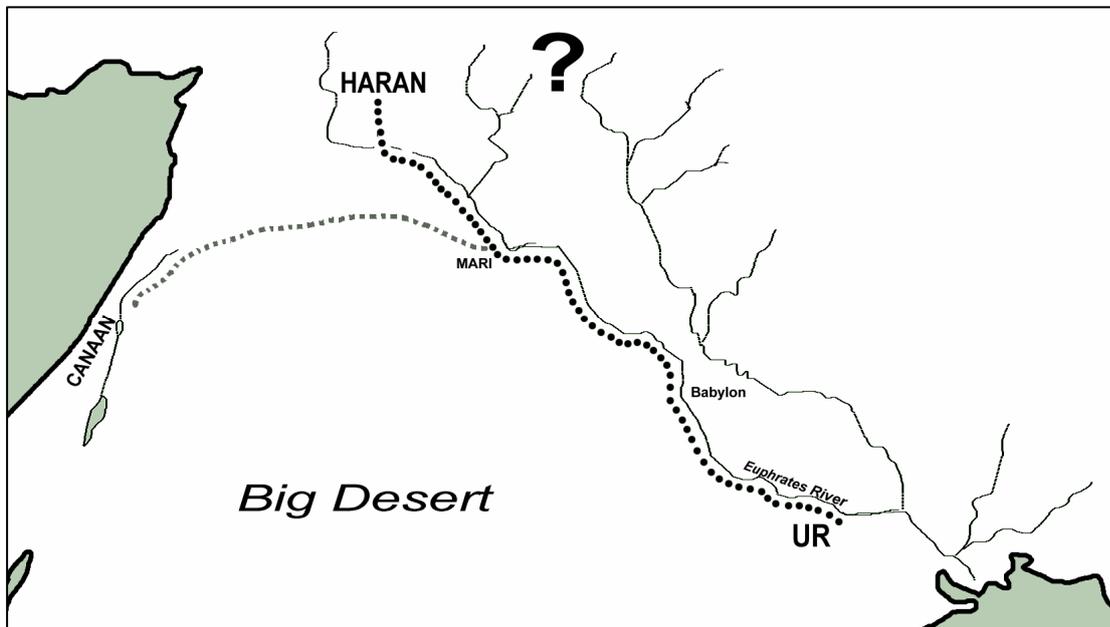
Why does he then decide not to bother going to Canaan after all but to settle in Haran instead? Because it answered all his needs? We're not told this either. There seems to have been no particular reason for any of the things that Terah did. He doesn't even take all his family. Terah had three sons. (Genesis 11:26-29). The youngest of them, Haran, had died but not before giving Terah at least three grandchildren. Only one of these grandchildren, Lot, accompanies Terah on his journey. Terah's middle son, Nahor, simply stays behind. Why? We're not told.

It seems that our narrator isn't much interested in the reasons why some members of Terah's family didn't want to join him on his journey but is primarily interested in the eldest son, Abram, who did go with Terah.

- ***What might be the significance for the reader of the story of Terah's journey, with all its unanswered questions and narrative silence?***

We're told his journey began in a place called Ur, which the narrator informs us was a Chaldean (i.e. neo-Babylonian) town. You'll find it in most biblical atlases as being located in

the southern part of the Chaldean empire (present day Iraq), while Haran is right up near the Syrian-Turkish border. What doesn't make much sense at all is when we're told that as Terah's party travelled together they simply 'came to Haran' as if it were on their way, and settled there. The question is, what on earth were they doing all the way up there if they were travelling from way down in the south?



To get to Canaan from Ur (if Ur is where people seem to think it is) you would have to travel north along the Euphrates River for a while. It isn't possible to go as the crow flies because that would involve crossing a great, inhospitable desert. It's safer and more sensible to follow the course of the Euphrates – but there does come a point, at Mari, where you could leave the river behind and journey west along what was an established caravan route, skirting round the northern edge of the desert region. Going all the way up to Haran would have been a major detour. The traditional location of Ur leaves us with the story of a journey that makes little geographical sense. Perhaps Ur was really somewhere else; somewhere to the East of Haran, maybe? This would put Haran on the route they would follow to get to Canaan.

However, a version of the story that locates Ur so far away from Babylon would be a lot less inspiring for Jewish exiles being held captive in Babylon. For them, the idea that they were in a place where Abr(ah)am had once dwelt would suggest that when they eventually returned to their homeland they would be walking in the footsteps of their revered ancestor. In other words their journey home would be a fresh beginning, a chance to go back to Square One as the new children of Abraham.

So to recap, we don't know why Terah set out on his journey in the first place; we don't know why only half of his family decided to go with him; we don't know exactly where the journey began, and we don't know how they ended up in Haran or why they decided not to

journey any further when they got there. Our narrator has left us with a lot of unanswered questions! All we're really told is that Terah set out to go to the land of Canaan and never got there.

## **ii) A TEXT FILLED WITH EXPECTATION (Genesis 12:1-4)**

- ***What strikes us immediately as we move into chapter 12 is how differently the story of Abram's journey to Canaan is told. What significant differences do we notice?***

This time we know exactly what motivated the journey: it was the call of God. In addition to the call to continue a journey that began years previously in Ur of the Chaldees, there is also the promise of great blessing. So this time the journey is one filled with hope and expectation. Clearly, good things are going to come about as a result of this journey, not only for Abram himself but for many other people too in years to come.

We notice that when God calls Abram to journey he doesn't say 'Go to Canaan' but 'to the land that I will show you'. The precise destination is less important than the fact that the journey is to be guided by God. Whereas Terah seemed to have had it in his own mind that he was going to Canaan but ended up going no further than Haran, Abram's primary destination is a promise.

The transition in the narrative from chapter 11 to chapter 12 implies that the death of Terah was also part of what motivated Abram to continue the journey begun by his father. Any obligations Abram might have had to remain in Haran with his father would now have ceased. A change in circumstances often can provide us with a sense that it's time to move on, to try something new.

- ***In what ways have we experienced something like this in our own lives and in church life, when a change in circumstances has encouraged or forced us to have a rethink? What was the outcome?***

If we read on in the story of Abram/Abraham we see that he did arrive and settle in the land of Canaan, though he still had other journeys to make. However, he would never return to either of his two hometowns. The family of Abraham had moved on; there was to be no backtracking.

- ***As we look at the narrative that tells of the journeys of Terah and Abram, does any of it resonate with our experience of being part of God's Church in the world today?***
- ***Does the story provide any hints for what it might mean for us to be a people who are Walking the Way?***

### iii) IDENTIFYING SOME THEMES

- **MOTIVATION.** This story emphasises that being aware of the reasons we have for making any kind of a journey makes it more likely that we won't give up half way there. If our reasons aren't strong enough, when we encounter an inviting landing stage along the way we might well not bother going any further but remain where we are in a place where we're comfortable, telling ourselves that we've finally arrived.
- **EXPECTATION.** The way we feel about any kind of journey is naturally going to be affected by what we expect is going to happen when we arrive or on the journey itself. When we journey in response to God's call, our expectation is that something good will come of it even if we're not sure where the journey will take us. God's promise to us is a promise that fills us with hope and confident expectation because we trust God's purposes are good.
- **CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES.** A change in our circumstances can often be an opportunity – or a spur – to consider making some even bigger changes. At the very least, it encourages us to ask questions about what we're doing, and why.
- **THEOLOGICAL CLARITY.** We can speculate on whether or not the journeys of Terah and Abram represent a theological journey. The narrator withholds information about the faith of Terah, whereas right at the start of chapter 12, YHWH speaks directly to Abram. Might the the clarity of Abram's journey as compared with the haphazardness of Terah's be a theological commentary? For us too, being clear in our minds about our theological reasons for doing what we do must make a difference to our sense of commitment. Of course our theology might change over time, but if we're vague in what we believe right now the chances are we'll be equally vague about the purpose of our journey with God.
- **ADVENTURE.** If we read on in the story of Abram who became Abraham, we discover that even after reaching Canaan he still had other journeys to make – e.g. to Egypt to escape famine, and to the land of Moriah where he thought he was going to have to sacrifice his son Isaac. Staying permanently in one place or in one situation doesn't seem to be what God has in mind for his people. Maybe that's because in order to grow we need adventures!

### TO SUM UP:

Motivation matters

We can expect God's purposes to be for the good

Changed circumstances encourage fresh thinking

Theological clarity helps us to see where we're going

Fresh adventures and experiences are good for growth!

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## **SESSION 2: Walking the Way through Deep Waters (Exodus 14:8-16)**

SUGGESTED STARTER QUESTIONS:

*As a society, or as communities, are we facing any particular dangers? What are they? What possible solutions might there be and what are the problems with them?*

Remember we're interpreting the geographical places in the narrative metaphorically – so, not in terms of geography or politics but in terms of a way of life, a relationship with God and the world, to which the people of God are called.

### **i) A TEXT ABOUT DANGER (Exodus 14:8-12)**

You might think that the way the people had been treated as slaves in Egypt would have made them desperate to leave. Yet from the way the story is told, we can see that the Israelites were hardly motivated at all to leave the place they had come to regard as home, despite the fact that they were oppressed and enslaved there. Even Moses isn't that keen on getting involved.

- ***What might be the reason for this apparent lack of motivation?***
- ***Are there any ways in which a similar dynamic might be affecting the life of the church?***

From the scene at the burning bush onwards, we're left in no doubt that the prime motivator for everything that happened wasn't Moses – and it certainly wasn't the people themselves. They were oppressed, worn down, scared – completely unmotivated to set out on a journey into the unknown. No one had the will, or the courage, to believe there might be a way out. Might our narrator have carefully crafted the story this way in order to make a connection with readers who were stuck in a similar state of mind?

Throughout the book of Exodus we're given the impression that the Israelites were never exactly thrilled to have left Egypt behind. Life in Egypt had at least been predictable; life on the road was going to be filled with unknown difficulties and danger. However, it seems that when they initially set out on their long-delayed journey home, they were starting to feel that maybe this was going to be a good thing after all. The NRSV tells us the Israelites were 'going out boldly'. Literally, they went out 'with a high hand' – with their hands raised high, perhaps in defiance or perhaps in rejoicing.

Unfortunately, that mood of positivity evaporates at the first hurdle they face after their escape from slavery. Several times in chapters 4 to 14 in the book of Exodus, we're told that God 'hardened' Pharaoh's heart. So on the one hand God has worked hard to persuade Moses to persuade the people to come out of Egypt, yet on the other hand the same God is hardening Pharaoh's heart to make sure he keeps refusing to let them go.

We might wonder why God didn't *soften* Pharaoh's heart, to make him sympathetic to what Moses and Aaron were asking of him; to make him say, 'Oh, all right then, you can go.' Wouldn't that have been easier? It seems as if God is determined to get the Israelites to leave Egypt yet is equally determined to make it as difficult as possible for them to do so.

- ***What do you make of this apparent contradiction in the narrative? Why would God 'harden' Pharaoh's heart?***
- ***What do you make of the idea that God would intentionally harden or soften an individual's heart in order to make them behave in a certain way? Do you think this happens?***

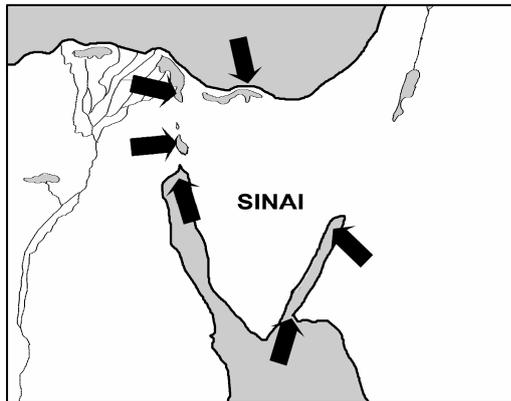
Two main points being made by our narrator are clear. Firstly, with every refusal by Pharaoh to let the Israelites go comes an awesome display of God's power demonstrating the extent to which the people can safely place their destiny into God's hands. Secondly, compared with the faithfulness of God, foreign rulers are unreliable and potentially hostile. Egypt with its impressive monuments, its multiplicity of gods and its godlike Pharaohs is not a good place for God's people to be in for a long period of time. It's okay for a visit in times of trouble, but it's not where God's people are supposed to settle long term. It was altogether too seductive and oppressive for their spiritual wellbeing. The longer they stayed, the harder it would be for them to get away.

Back to the narrative: Pharaoh's army has been sent after them in pursuit and has come upon the place where the Israelites have made their camp, which we're told is 'by the sea'. So in front of them is a large body of water, and behind them the army of Pharaoh is closing in. They are sandwiched, trapped between two unappealing options: to drown or to be captured. It looks as if the only chance they have of survival is to throw themselves on the mercy of the Egyptian army and hope they'll be taken back into slavery rather than killed on the spot for having had the audacity to escape.

It's easy for them to find someone to blame for their predicament. It was Moses who had got them into this mess! The truth was, if anyone had been at fault it was their forebears who for so many years had found it more convenient to stay in Egypt than to leave. If we look at the back story in Genesis, we find that it was actually their ancestor Joseph who had created the statute that gave Pharaoh the right to enslave anyone he wanted to in Egypt (Genesis 47:20-21).

- ***If we are aware of any problems or difficulties in the church, how long ago were the seeds of this sown? Was an opportunity for a timely response allowed to pass by?***

## ii) A TEXT ABOUT MIRACLES! (Exodus 14:13-16 ff.)



Scholars have a lot of theories about exactly where and what this 'sea' was that had got the Israelites trapped. Possible identifications include the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Suez, a salt marsh, a reedy swamp, the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, and the point where the Gulf of Aqaba meets the Red Sea. It has also been suggested that this wasn't a real sea at all, but a mythical sea. In some texts this body of water is just called 'the sea', while in other

passages it is named '*yam sup*', meaning 'sea of reeds', which the Septuagint interprets as referring to the Red Sea. Scholars have also come up with a number of theories to explain how the water parting miracle might have occurred – ideas ranging from a tsunami, a temporary lava bridge, a sand bank, to 'it was just a muddy swamp', or 'it never happened at all.'

- ***How important is it to you to know exactly what happened, where and how?***
- ***Why do you think the biblical authors might have left it so vague?***

If the Hebrew authors had wanted us to know exactly where it was, they could have given us a bit more help. Perhaps the whole point is that the sea is wherever we are when we're really 'up against it'. The sea is everywhere but nowhere specific. Exactly where this sea might be located on a map is less important for the meaning of the story than the dynamic imagery of a great ocean being commanded to divide, thus creating a highway of dry land.

We notice that God told Moses to tell the Israelites to go forward and only *then* to lift up his staff so the waters of the sea would be parted and they could continue their journey. In fact, God even told Moses off for instructing the Israelites to 'stand firm' when the danger was fast approaching from behind. The way the story is told, it looks as if the people had to move forward towards the sea before they knew what was going to happen. What had looked to them like an impassable barrier would become their way into freedom. The only way to journey out of Egypt was to take the risk that God would somehow make the deep water safe for them to pass through.

- ***What might be the equivalent of 'Egypt' for us – a situation from which we really need to break free but perhaps it's hard to find the courage or motivation to do so?***
- ***What might be our equivalent of the Big Sea – the thing we believe is preventing us from moving forward, that keeps us rooted to the spot even when we can see trouble looming from behind?***

### iii) IDENTIFYING SOME THEMES

- **HABITUALITY.** People can get used to adverse conditions and learn to accept them as normal or inevitable. They perhaps hope that things will somehow get better all by themselves one day. The story of the exodus discourages mute acceptance of our lot if we know we're in an unsatisfactory place. There's a well known saying: 'Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know' which, with its pessimistic view of the unknown, seems to fit the plight of the Israelites in our passage. They knew that their lives as slaves in Egypt were miserable but at least they knew what to expect, so their instinct was to go back to that familiar misery rather than risk moving forward into something that might be even worse.
- **SHAKENNESS.** In our passage, the approach of disaster in the shape of Pharaoh's army provided the impetus that got the people moving in the direction of the sea. Perhaps if we find ourselves feeling anxious about the future of the church, this could be what God is doing to stir things up and provide us with the impetus to try something that we might otherwise never have dared.
- **PERSEVERENCE.** The closing of the waters behind them prevented the Israelites from giving up and trying to go back to Egypt when they were faced with further difficulties on their journey. This was fortunate because they frequently complained and wished they'd never left Egypt. Our walk with God might not always be easy but it's usually better to keep going in faith rather than giving up and trying to go back to how things used to be, especially if they weren't that great even back then.
- **LEADERSHIP.** Moses didn't volunteer to be the one who would lead the people out of slavery but he was promised that God wouldn't expect him to accomplish the task without considerable help. Churches often say they need leadership in order to move forward, and as churches we have Jesus as our strong leader but we also need people to step up in response to God's call.
- **TOGETHERNESS.** Good leadership is important, but so is working together as a community. Without the leadership of Moses, the exodus wouldn't have happened, yet he encountered a lot of resistance from the people themselves. They were quick to blame him when they encountered difficulties and the biblical text is clearly critical of them for that.
- **RE-CREATION.** The parting of the waters reminds us of the story of creation. The Israelite slaves didn't merely escape from oppression and danger; they were made a new creation – as in a kind of baptism they died to their old life of slavery and were born afresh as a

nation of God's people. Sometimes it is necessary to die to the past in order to be reborn as the people of God for today.

- **LIBERATION.** The story of the escape from slavery in Egypt has served as an inspiration for diverse groups of people who have found themselves in need of liberation, because the story illustrates the power of God to bring hope in seemingly impossible situations of injustice and oppression. As such it calls on people like us to care about victims of oppression too.

#### **TO SUM UP:**

We can lose the desire to change what we've come to accept as normal  
God may give us a shake if we get stuck in a rut  
Good leadership empowers supportive communities  
Supportive communities empower good leadership  
God can always create something new  
We are called to stand beside victims of injustice and oppression

#### **IDEA FOR FURTHER STUDY:**

- *The story of the exodus water parting is told in different ways in various parts of the Bible. Compare Exodus 14:21-31 with Exodus 15:1-21 and Psalm 77:11-20. What is the impact of these different ways in which the story is told? Does the essential meaning stay the same?*

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### **SESSION 3: Walking the Way of the Wilderness (Deuteronomy 8)**

#### **SUGGESTED STARTER QUESTIONS:**

*From our own experience, what sort of situations can help us deepen our relationship with God/Christ?*

*Which of the Old Testament commandments and instructions still govern our lives as Christians today? Do the rest of them serve any purpose for us?*

#### **i) A TEXT OF INSTRUCTION**

The narrative setting for the whole of the book of Deuteronomy is the Plains of Moab on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, just before you get to the fertile lands around the River Jordan. In other words, we are at a liminal place between two journeys: behind the people of God is their forty year journey through the wilderness; ahead of them is the crossing of the River Jordan – which will be another journey through parted waters (Joshua 3:14-17) – and their entry into a way of life that will be as far from the hardships of the desert as it would be possible to get. Deuteronomy 8:7-10 describes a land that offers God's people everything necessary for a life of *shalom*.

- ***What do you think is necessary for a life of SHALOM today?***

The book assumes that we already know the story of the exodus from Egypt and what happened to the Israelites on their subsequent travels. After wandering in the wilderness for so long with no apparent sense of direction, the people are finally poised to cross the river into Canaan, the land of the promise, and Moses is giving them a final pep talk reminding them of everything that has happened on the journey and of the lessons they've learnt. They've had to learn to trust in God in a place where nothing was certain, where water and food for themselves and for their flocks were scarce. They've also had to learn about the consequences of endless complaining and rebellion, that physical and spiritual wellbeing could be damaged by their lack of faith in God.

The purpose of the book of Deuteronomy is to reinforce the importance of honouring God's covenant with Israel by their keeping the commandments. As such the book provides an interpretative principle through which the entire story of Israel, from Abraham to the fall of Jerusalem, could be judged by later biblical authors and by the prophets. It presents a stark choice between blessings and curse – an idea that might seem over-simplistic to us today as we know from experience that living a godly life doesn't always bring material blessings. Above all, Deuteronomy emphasises the need for the people to stay loyal and true to their God and to have nothing to do with the worship of other gods.

- ***If we were to use the Beatitudes, or any other text from the gospels, as an interpretative lens through which to tell some aspect of the story of the church (either locally, nationally or globally) what would be the highlights and the lowlights?***
- ***What lessons could we learn?***

Looking at the story of Israel's journeys through the lens of Deuteronomy, we see that the great danger facing God's people when they stayed for a long time in a foreign land or they had prolonged contact with non-Israelites was the risk that they might be tempted to worship the gods of these other nations. We see this concern expressed in verse 19: 'If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.'

Does this seem a little harsh? Yet such warnings only exist to serve as a corrective to something that has already been happening. Much of the Hebrew Bible's antipathy towards foreigners can be put down to a determination to preserve the faith of Israel from corruption due to outside influences.

- ***While we today might not feel tempted to worship foreign gods as such, might we be vulnerable to other forms of idolatry that could compromise our walk with God?***

- ***How do we in our churches maintain a good balance between being like other people in the community around us (and therefore being relevant and accessible), and yet being distinctive as disciples of Jesus?***

## **ii) AN INSTRUCTION TO ‘REMEMBER’**

In order to appreciate fully the blessings of the land they are about to enter, God’s people first need to remember everything they’ve been through in order to get there. The word ‘remember’ occurs frequently in Deuteronomy: remember where you’ve come from; remember what God has done for you; remember how long it took to get to this point. Remember the past so you won’t take the present for granted, or puff yourselves up by telling yourselves you achieved anything without God’s help.

Another frequently recurring word in the book is ‘today’. It occurs more than 60 times in Deuteronomy. The point being made is that this is not a book of instruction for a bygone age. Regular recitals of the text would ensure that generation after generation would know that these words were directed not only at the contemporaries of Moses but also at the reader or hearer this very day.

The wilderness wanderings were regarded as a training period that was to be remembered by future generations in perpetuity. One way of doing this was in the annual Festival of Booths, or Succoth (Leviticus 23:41-43). This festival ensured that the wilderness years were not merely remembered but relived, re-experienced in a symbolic way. To celebrate the Festival of Booths the people would live for one week in temporary shelters as if they themselves were in the wilderness with Moses utterly dependent on God for everything rather than settled and having the illusion of security and permanence. In remembrance, the story of the wilderness journey is all about God’s presence, protection and provision – reminding us how dependent we are on God at all times because we are always vulnerable, even if we are no longer lost in the wilderness.

- ***How important is it to our own faith to recall stories of the past? Which stories do we routinely recall? How do we recall them? What do we learn from them?***
- ***Are there aspects of the history of the church that we might benefit from remembering more often than we do? What might we learn?***

In the book of Nehemiah (8:14-17) we read about the Festival of Booths being reinstated by a people who had learnt that, just because you might live in a house in a city or town, it didn’t mean that you were secure. The Jewish exiles in Babylon had been in a situation of captivity similar to that of the Israelite slaves. In retrospect they now recognized that God’s people had lost their way. Ironically, it wasn’t when they were wandering about in the

wilderness, going round in circles with no clear sense of direction that they had gone so far astray. It had happened during all those years in which they had stayed in one place, acquired territory and possessions, built cities and appointed kings, let some grow rich while others grew poor, forgetting that they were all equally the children of the Israelite slaves who had once depended on God for everything. The Festival of Booths was a reminder of the past that encouraged humility, thankfulness and rejoicing in the gift of Torah, the divine instruction that revealed the kind of people they were meant to be.

In its use of the motif of temporary dwellings to recall the forty years of wandering in the desert, the postexilic Festival of Booths *remembers* the Israelites' wilderness wanderings but it also *celebrates* the restoration of a relationship with God that had been damaged by Israel's failure to honour the covenant.

In the passage from Deuteronomy, Moses is warning the people that the more secure, settled and predictable their lifestyle became, the more they would be tempted to forget the commandments and the way they were supposed to be living as God's people. Right from the early chapters of Genesis (4:1-16) we see a possible hint that the wandering lifestyle of those who kept flocks that needed to be moved on to find fresh pasture was a spiritually healthier way of life than that of staying put in one place, staking one's claim to a piece of land and growing crops on it. However there is a tension between this idealisation of the nomadic lifestyle and the ideal of *shalom* in which a person can sit under the shade of their own vine and fig tree (Zechariah 3:10). This was the kind of life that the land of Canaan represented. So on the one hand security and prosperity are highly desirable and regarded as blessings; on the other hand they can lead to a sense of self sufficiency and even arrogance.

- ***Our passage contrasts the harsh desert environment the people have come from with the abundant fertility of Canaan. What might these contrasting 'places' represent in our world and in our churches today?***
- ***Does the tension between the benefits and the dangers of living in relative peace and security play any part in your life?***
- ***Does the passage in Deuteronomy within its narrative setting contain any hints for what it might mean for us to be a people who are Walking the Way?***
- ***Some Christians in the world today continue to celebrate the Festival of Booths. Would this be a good thing for us to do? What might it involve for us? What might we learn? What reasons might we have for not choosing to observe this Old Testament festival?***

### iii) IDENTIFYING SOME THEMES

- **REMEMBERING.** The story emphasises the importance of remembering the journey that preceded our becoming who we are as God's people today. How did we get here? What did we get right and where did we go wrong? The past can be a great teacher as we look ahead to the future. Recalling what God has done for us in the past also helps us to avoid pride and arrogance when things are going well for us.
- **TAKING STOCK.** The narrative setting in Deuteronomy upholds the value of pausing to take stock, to give thanks, to identify priorities and key values before we embark on a new venture.
- **VULNERABILITY.** The story of the wilderness wanderings reminds us of our vulnerability and our dependence on God, even when we are feeling safe and secure in our houses or churches. Remembering the story of how God provided for the needs of the Israelites during their years of wandering in the wilderness, encourages us to feel a similar concern for vulnerable people in our world today, such as those who are homeless, or who feel they are all alone in the world, or who have no easy access to food and water.
- **FORMALISING THE FAITH.** Theologically, compared with the narratives about the previous two journeys we've looked at, this scene on the Plains of Moab illustrates the transition from a tribal faith based on oral tradition to a much more regulated, formal religion with a sealed covenant at its heart and a set of commandments to be obeyed. Much of the Hebrew Bible regards this as a very good thing, though the prophets and Jesus were critical of a formulaic faith based on superficial obedience to a set of rules.

#### **TO SUM UP:**

We are called to remember what has gone before

Whatever we accomplish we should be humble and take nothing for granted

Sometimes our journey with God involves staying still for a while

We shouldn't forget that we are always vulnerable and dependent on God

The regularisation of faith is a good thing provided it doesn't lead to superficiality

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## **SESSION 4: Walking the Desert Highway (Isaiah 35:1-10)**

### **SUGGESTED STARTER QUESTIONS:**

*How beautiful is the area around where you live?*

*How well does it meet the needs of local residents?*

*Does anything spoil it?*

*What could be done to make it better?*

## **i) A TEXT OF PROPHECY**

This session might be a little more challenging as we're moving away from prose narrative to consider the poetry of prophecy. To a certain extent, the narrative context for our passage is something that the reader has to provide. This is because prophecies are often worded in a tantalizingly non-specific way. We might wish we had more precise information about exactly which situation the prophet was addressing, but if we tie the prophecy too rigidly to one specific event in history then we risk becoming less ready to see and feel its relevance in later situations. Specific historical details are often withheld by the prophets so we can re-apply their words to new situations as they occur.

The precise starting point for our journey today is never named – which is clever, because it means that wherever we happen to be as readers, that can be the starting point for us.

However, as we move through the text we'll find there are clues about a possible starting point and before we get to the end of our passage we are going to see that the intended destination of the journey is the city of Zion. Exactly what that might mean for us we'll discuss a bit later on.

As this is quite a long text we'll look at it in three separate chunks, focusing on aspects of the text that tell us something about the journey that God's people are going to make.

### **READ ISAIAH 35:1-2, 6b-7**

(A bit has been missed out in the middle because the verses have been grouped together that address the same sort of theme.)

- ***What can we learn about the journey from our first bit of text?***
- ***What is the significance of these environmental images?***

These verses all talk about the terrain through which the journey will take place, and what's interesting is that the landscape seems to be affected by the fact of its being the way through which God's people are going to travel. It's as if the land and the people are inextricably linked – that what is going to happen to the people is going to happen to the land also.

There is something intriguing about the biblical notion that the physical environment reflects something of the spirit of the people who spend time there, though in practice it most probably reflects the affluence of the people who own and control the land. However, the idea that people of good spirit can have a positive impact on how their physical surroundings are perceived and nurtured does have some appeal. Having said that, it is

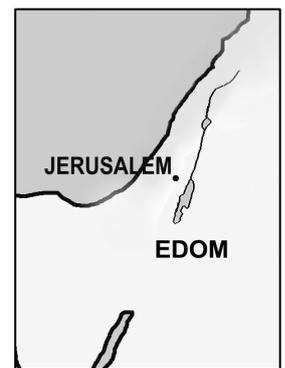
primarily the Judeans in exile, not the Arabian Desert itself, whose transformation is being described.

## ii) THE LITERARY CONTEXT

- ***Take a look at chapter 34 and notice which of the environmental details are reversed in our passage from chapter 35.***

God's condemnation of Edom is expressed in terms of environmental degeneration. So in chapter 35, the blossoming flowers in the desert (verses 1-2) contrast with the thorns and thistles that will choke the land of Edom (34:13); the life giving streams flowing through the desert (35:6-7) contrast with the polluted water sources in Edom (34:9); the safety of traveling along the desert highway (35:8-10) is contrasted with the danger posed by the wild creatures and demons lurking in Edom (34:14).

'Edom' stands for the ultimate bad place. However, remember that for the purposes of our Bible Study we're interpreting the concept of 'place' as a metaphoric representation of our relationship with God. The Edomites themselves were regarded as the epitome of an enemy of Israel because they had colluded with Babylon over the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 (Obadiah 11-14, Ezekiel 35:1-15). In other words, 'Edom' and its people were the very antithesis of what was good for the people of God. To make matters worse, Edom was right next-door – a little too close for comfort.



We can understand 'Edom' as representing worldly forces that are actively hostile to the kingdom and people of God. 'Edom' wants us to fall, wants us to fail, and won't mind playing a role in our downfall.

This series of contrasting images gives us a hint that our passage is talking about the fate of two diametrically opposed groups of people: those who choose to journey into a restored relationship with God, and those who are hostile to God.

## iii) TRANSFORMATIONS

- ***What kind of a desert is this that is being transformed?***

Jerusalem is located at the edge of the Judean wilderness and is surrounded by deserts to the south and east. This meant that the image of a desert was a very familiar one – more familiar to the average Judean than to most of us today. That said, it can often be difficult in poetic passages like this to work out whether we're meant to understand the images at their face value or whether we're meant to understand them in a more symbolic sense – or perhaps both aspects of meaning are being conveyed.

People sometimes think of the desert as representing spiritual dryness or deadness, but the Bible regards the desert as a spiritual place. The desert is where we lean less on material convenience and so are enabled to draw closer to God. It's where we learn to let go of stuff we thought was essential, in order to recognize what truly *is* essential in our walk with God. But the letting-go is hard, and that creates the distance between where we are spiritually and where we'd like to be.

### **NOW READ ISAIAH 35:3-6a**

In the verses we looked at earlier, we were given a picture of a dry desert being brought back to life so it would sing and rejoice. Here in these verses the people themselves are being healed with the same result – they will sing for joy. So what we're seeing is a close parallel between images depicting the restoration of the environment and those depicting the restoration of God's people as they journey.

The theology that excluded certain people from having access to the temple has here been circumvented – sadly, not through full acceptance of physical differences, but through their removal – so, for example, blind people can see; the deaf can hear. Still, the underlying vision is that all people can be granted the privilege of access to God in worship.

Fundamentally, this whole poem in Isaiah 35 speaks about the removal of fear and shame, and any other difficulties that prevent us from journeying on the way that God has set before us. All the impediments referred to in these verses can be understood as metaphors for things that weaken our faith, that distance us from God, that provide us with excuses for staying exactly where we are. Cast those things aside, says Isaiah, because God has made it possible for you to do so.

- ***What sort of things create distance between us and God (and or our calling) today?***

### **iv) WHAT KIND OF A JOURNEY IS THIS?**

#### **READ ISAIAH 35:8-10**

Here, at last, we find out exactly who is being called to make this journey: the redeemed, the ransomed of 'the LORD'. Elsewhere in Isaiah, the 'redeemed' are those in exile in Babylon who are being called to return to Zion. (E.g. Isa. 48:20).

- ***Is this text about a physical journey through a real desert?***
- ***What kind of a highway is this? Should we be thinking in terms of an actual road?***

Bearing in mind other texts in Isaiah that call on people to leave the lands where they have been scattered in order to make their way to Zion, it seems reasonable to assume that we should understand this text at one level as referring to a physical journey – but a physical journey that had a theological significance: that of realizing that God is offering his people a new beginning.

The image of a highway through the desert is a recurring metaphor for the redemption and restoration of God's people after they've suffered some sort of fracture in their relationship with God. It refers us back to the story of the exodus when a highway was created through the sea. It also refers us back to the desert wanderings when food and water were provided as and when they were needed. The difference here is that there'll be no need for forty years of wandering about. There'll be no anxiety either about where food and water can be found. This time, all the people need to do is to get on the highway and walk.

It is called a Holy Way because it's the road that leads to the place where the highest expression of worship known to our Hebrew author took place: Zion. The whole book of Isaiah is orientated towards Jerusalem. There can be little doubt that for the Isaianic school of prophecy, Jerusalem was an important place. As Christians today we might interpret the symbol of 'Zion' as referring to the circumstances under which we can experience the presence of God as a life-changing reality. For us, 'Zion' is wherever the light of God's presence is experienced as shining brightest; it's a high point at the very core of our faith and our shared identity, where we are filled with awe and joy, and we are inspired to glorify God together in worship.

The passage suggests more than one type of journey.

- ***What sorts of journey does the passage suggest to you?***
  - a) We can picture the return of Jewish exiles from captivity in Babylon and from any other place where they have been scattered;
  - b) We can also picture a religious procession of pilgrims making their way from wherever they have come to call 'home' to worship at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The mood of this kind of journey can be found in Psalm 126 which is one of the pilgrimage Songs of Ascent.
  - c) We can picture the URC walking on this highway, stepping out in confidence as disciples engaged in Christian mission. The desert that will be brought back to life could represent our own land, our church, and our lives.
  - d) We can picture ourselves as individuals, longing to grow closer to God, seeking to let God-in-Christ be the highway that will bridge the gap between ourselves as we are and who we were created to be.

## v) A TEXT OF PERSUASION?

- ***What might motivate someone who has been living in exile for a very long time to go to Zion?***

This is what the prophet is trying to do! The purpose of prophecy is to persuade people to change what they're thinking, feeling of doing and to inspire them to come into a closer alignment with what God is 'thinking', 'feeling' and doing. The prophet is trying to encourage people with hope, to motivate them to take the risk (or maybe just make the effort) of setting out on this journey. It's interesting that he doesn't try to persuade them by saying much about the destination itself. The emphasis is very much on the journey.

- ***If Moses had spoken words like these in our passage to the Israelite slaves in order to persuade them to leave Egypt, would he have been misleading them or offering them valid inspiration?***
- ***What kind of thing serves to inspire and motivate people in your context?***
- ***What do the images of desert and environmental restoration represent for you in your context? What about 'Edom' and 'Zion'?***

## vi) IDENTIFYING SOME THEMES

- **RESTORATION.** The image of a desert flowing with water and in full bloom is a visual expression of what God is doing to restore and forgive his people. We might like to think specifically about where revival is needed in the church and in our local communities.
- **ACCESS TO GOD.** God has created a way to bridge the distance between where we are and where God wants us to be. Whatever the 'big gap' might be for us that stands in the way of our being the people we are called to be, God is able to provide a highway that will enable us to get through it – and it won't be as hard as we fear! Furthermore, no one is excluded.

The image of a highway implies movement, travel; it isn't designed for sitting down on.

- **WORSHIP.** The destination of those who would journey along the desert highway is an experience of God's presence. God's people gathering together to worship and to glorify God is the high point of the journey, but the celebration begins on the journey itself.

- ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT. The image of a desert restored to life by God encourages us, as a people of God, to seek ways of protecting and preserving, perhaps even restoring natural environments, especially those that have been damaged by human activity – often by people who don't live where they've caused the damage.

At the level of human society, the sense I get from this passage is that in communities where the church is vibrant in response to the call of God, the entire social landscape will feel the benefits of that positive spiritual presence in the midst.

- INSPIRATION. The imagery and poetry of this prophecy were designed to inspire, to reassure and to motivate people to believe that renewal was not only possible but was being offered to them by God at that very moment. In many of our churches today people are waiting to hear good news like this but it will need to capture our imaginations as well as appealing to our faith and our intellect.

#### **TO SUM UP:**

God can create new life where there appears to be no life.

God can bridge the gap between who we are and who we're called to be.

God wants all people to have access to God.

Our journey prepares us to give glory to God in the highpoint of worship.

We are called to care for the natural world and the human environment.

People in our churches are looking for inspiration

#### **IDEAS FOR FURTHER STUDY:**

- *An additional passage for comparative study would be Isaiah 40:1-11. What does this passage have in common with chapter 35 and in what ways is it different?*
- *Another passage for comparison would be Ezekiel 47:1-12. Is any kind of journey being made in this passage?*

*(Kathy White, April 2018)*

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