



A PEOPLE FREED: PREPARED FOR THE LAND

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One of the hardest parts about parenting is to know how to help your kids grow up and become independent. It's tricky to find that balance between meeting their needs and teaching them to take care of themselves. It's one of the areas of difference that my wife and I have noticed between us. My bias is toward independence. Hers is toward nurture. That has led to conflict between us. But it's also led to finding what I hope to be a good balance.

This morning we're going to be thinking about growing up. We're thinking about when you are ready to have new responsibility, to face new challenges. There's a movie scene that I'd like us to consider as we think along these lines. It's from the movie *Ray*, which is a biography of the famous blind musician Ray Charles. This scene is a flashback of a time in Ray's childhood of managing life as a young child without vision.

In this scene Ray is a young child. He has tripped and fallen and is calling for his mother. "Mama, help," he cries. And yet his mother stands there watching him. What is she doing? Doesn't she care? Why doesn't she come to help him? We're going to hold on to those questions and return to this scene at the end.

This morning is week 7 of our nine month series as a church called *EPIC: The astonishing story of God and the world*. We've been working our way through the whole story of the Bible. We started by seeing God's beautiful intention for his creation disrupted by sin. Then we saw God's plan to restore the world to what he originally wanted for it through the family and nation that would come from Abraham.

For the past two weeks, we've been in the era that we've labeled *A People Freed*. The first week we saw God's people released from slavery in Egypt. Last week we saw God give them a law that would teach them how to live in his presence. There is one more thing, they need to become a bona fide nation. They have a leader in Moses. They have a law to govern them, but they need a land. They need a place to call their own.

But they don't get their land this week. We're going to find out that they aren't ready for the land. They have to grow up first. We're going to watch God's people stumble

and learn and face challenges as part of their growing up into the nation that God wants them to be. By the time we get to next week, we'll see them enter the land as a completely different type of people.

As we listen to their story, we want to be thinking about how God matures us as well. How does he work through difficult circumstances to grow us up? To teach us to trust him? What wisdom are we learning? What is God preparing us for? What does it look like for us to grow up?

Expect God's Promises

Last week the people of God were camped at Mount Sinai. God met them there. God gave them his law. He taught them who they were supposed to be as a people. As we talked about last week, much of the law was focused on living out the presence of God. This was a formative time for these people.

Finally, they were ready to leave. God had told them that he would lead them by appearing as a cloud in front of them. When it stopped moving, they should stop and camp. When it left, they should pack up and follow it. So after almost a year at Mount Sinai, it was time to leave.

Numbers 10:11-13:

¹¹On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the Testimony. ¹²Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and traveled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran. ¹³They set out, this first time, at the LORD's command through Moses.

So God's people were on the move. This chapter goes on to describe how each family tribe was arranged as they marched. Remember that this was two million people traveling around camping wherever they stopped.

We usually have a little over a hundred people head up near Mt. Shasta in Northern California every August for our week-long camping trip, Camp PBC. Every night we

have a campfire, so when we're ready to start, we send the children through the camp yelling "Campfire! Campfire!" to try and mobilize people, but it's still a challenge to get everyone moving at the same time.

It's no easy task to mobilize two million people, but they did. It was a promising, exciting time for God's people. Listen to how the tone is described a few verses later.

Numbers 10:33-36:

³³So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest. ³⁴The cloud of the LORD was over them by day when they set out from the camp.

³⁵Whenever the ark set out, Moses said,

"Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you."

³⁶Whenever it came to rest, he said,

"Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel."

At this point in the story, they are eager, passionate, and excited. They can't wait to see what God has in store for them. They are pressing forward toward the Promised Land. It's been around 500 years since God promised Abraham that his descendants would live in the land. Our country, the United States of America, has only existed less than half that time. This has been a long time in coming. Now they are finally on the move. They are headed to the Promised Land.

So at the beginning of our story, we see God's people set out with eagerness. They have purpose and passion. We can learn something from their attitude. We can emulate their passion and their energy. We can expect God to do big things. We can expect him to fulfill his promises. Expect God's promises.

It's often common for people at the beginning of something to be excited and energetic. We often start new jobs or new projects or move to a new city with optimism and energy. We expect God to do big things in our lives. We have high hopes. That's how God's people started out.

I love the rhythm of life that is described in this passage. The Israelites were literally following God as he traveled before them in a cloud. Their journey from Mt. Sinai

started out alternating between two different modes: settling down and setting out. When the ark started to move, Moses declared "Rise up, O LORD." When the ark came to rest he cried out "Return, O LORD."

This strikes me as a great model for the rhythm of the life of faith. First, we rest in God's presence. God returns to us. His presence settles down and we settle down with it. These are times of rest, times of worship, times of prayer, and times of reflection. Last week we talked about growing in this: learning to rest in God's presence.

But there are other times when we rise up. We move forward with God's presence going before us. We face enemies. We engage the world. We set out with purpose to proclaim truth, to fight for justice, to bring about healing, or to bring mercy to those who suffer. We ask God to rise up before us so that he gives us victory. We act with the power of God.

This is the rhythm of a life that follows God; resting, acting, and expecting God to fulfill his promises.

As God's people leave Mt. Sinai, they are in a good place. They are eager to follow God's presence and they have a healthy rhythm. They are headed toward the Promised Land where they expect to see the fulfillment of God's promises to their ancestors. We can learn from their expectation. We can learn from their rhythm. But unfortunately, things don't keep going as well as they started.

Face Challenges With God

As soon as they set out from Mt. Sinai, they start having problems. My favorite part is when they complain about not having any meat, so God gives them quail to eat. In fact he gives them so much that he says, quote:

Numbers 11:20:

²⁰. . . until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it.

The trip between Sinai and the Promised Land was filled with complaining, challenges to authority, and misbehavior.

But then they arrive at the border of the land that God had promised them. God tells Moses to pick a representative from each tribe to go scout everything out. So twelve men leave the camp and spend forty days walking around the land to see what it is like.

Then they come back to the camp and they give a report on what they found.

Numbers 13:26-33:

²⁶They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. ²⁸But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. ²⁹The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.”

³⁰Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”

³¹But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” ³²And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. ³³We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

These are the facts. The land was incredible. It does really flow with milk and honey. Its fruit is huge. The people who live there are powerful and their cities are well defended. There are even some uniquely developed people there who are particularly strong. Those are the facts. All twelve men agreed on those details.

But then comes the disagreement. Caleb was one of the representatives who went to spy out the land. His conclusion is that God has fulfilled his promise. The land is incredible and God is giving it to them. Later he says, “if the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land” (Numbers 14:8). Caleb has faith that God will do something incredible.

But most of the other spies disagree. They see the huge people. They see how great the land is and they think it’s too good to be true. “We can’t attack those people,” they

concluded. Their conclusion was that all hope was lost. The land was good, but there was no way they were going to be able to get it. End of story.

We’re at a turning point in the story now. God’s people have a choice before them. We’ve seen several of these pivotal moments before. Eve deciding whether to eat the fruit. Abraham deciding whether to sacrifice Isaac. Joseph figuring out whether to accept his brothers. Throughout this story there have been significant events that have the potential to completely change the course of the story. What is going to happen here? What are God’s people going to do?

How do you tend to react when you face pivotal moments like these? There are all sorts of turning points in our lives. Sometimes they are the big decisions: jobs, children, marriage, etc. But sometimes our pivotal moments don’t seem that way until we’re past them. How will we respond to this person at work in a moment of crisis? How will we work through an academic challenge that our child is facing? What will we do when we are faced with compromising our values for the sake of advancement: socially, professionally, or emotionally?

Unfortunately, God’s people don’t respond well. They choose fear over faith. They choose to be timid rather than to trust. They don’t allow God to lead them into the Promised Land. In fact, they try to stone Caleb and Joshua for even suggesting that they should. God’s people turn back and refuse to accept the fulfillment of his promises to them.

So God gets angry. And once again, Moses steps in. He pleads for forgiveness. God grants it, but there are still consequences to their disbelief. This is the end of the conversation between Moses and God.

Numbers 14:20-25:

²⁰The LORD replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked. ²¹Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, ²²not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—²³not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. ²⁴But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it. ²⁵Since the Amalekites and Canaanites are

living in the valleys, turn back tomorrow and set out toward the desert along the route to the Red Sea.”

They chose not to trust God, so he tells them to turn back. Head back toward the Red Sea. In the verses that follow, God explains that he will make his people wander in the desert for forty years. Everyone who is twenty years old and older will die before he lets them cross the border into the Promised Land. Those who are children now will be adults by then and they will be the ones to experience the entry into the land.

God wants to teach them faith. They didn't have faith that he could lead them in victory over their enemies. So he needs to help them grow up. It's not punishment—he is clear to say at the beginning that he has forgiven them. This is training. They have demonstrated that they aren't ready to enter the land. They don't have the faith necessary. So God is going to teach them faith. He is going to help them as a people grow up.

We need this as well. We need to learn to face challenges in our life. We need to learn how to walk through difficult things. We start off strong, but it's too easy to let challenges overwhelm us. We need God to teach us and train us. We need to learn, slowly, how to be God's people. A lot of that happens as we face challenges. Face challenges with God.

Those forty years that God's people wandered in the desert was actually a very relevant season in the story for us. God's people had been freed from Egypt. They were no longer slaves of Pharaoh. They were independent. God had told them how to live. He'd given them a law that helped them to experience the presence of God every day in powerful ways. Only one thing remained to complete God's promises—entering into the Promised Land. They thought it was going to happen quickly, but they weren't ready. So God had them wait. But it's not just waiting. It's growing up until they are ready to receive the final promise of God.

That's a good summary of where we are as well. If you believe in Jesus, then you have been set free. You are no longer a slave to sin. You have freedom. And you have the presence of God. Jesus left us with his Spirit who lives within us, among us, and who makes God present with us all the time. We are free and we have the presence of God. But we also know that we haven't received everything yet.

In John 14:3, Jesus said, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” We, too, are waiting to enter the Promised Land. We, too, are waiting for that

final installment of God's promises.

Those forty years for God's people was the time in between the first installment and the final installment of God's promises. That's where we live too. So could it be that God is doing the same kind of thing now that he was then?

Sometimes you'll hear Christians say that the only purpose in life is to make more Christians. First, you become a Christian and then your sole purpose is to convert others. Preaching the gospel is definitely a part of God's purpose for us in this season, but it's only part of the answer.

Could it be that God is preparing us to enter the Promised Land? Could it be that we, as God's people, aren't ready yet? Maybe God is training us. Not us as individuals, but us as his people. Maybe the kingdom of God is growing up. That happens as more people are welcomed into the kingdom, but it also happens as the kingdom faces challenges and learns to trust God.

This is a hard thing for us to grasp because we think so much as individuals. The only history I'm really familiar with is the history of my life. I don't tend to be very aware of what is happening in history in large movements. I mostly know what is happening to me.

Most of the adults who failed to enter the Promised Land the first time, died before they got a second chance. God wasn't growing them up as individuals. He was growing them up as a community. When they get back to the border, forty years later, Moses speaks to them with a strong sense of continuity with those who had died. They are the people of God, grown up. We don't just grow, mature, and develop as individuals. We grow, mature, and develop as a community.

So we can ask two questions. First, what is God doing in my life? How am I facing challenges in the world? How am I growing and maturing? How am I learning how to be with God? How is God using the circumstances that I'm facing to prepare me for something else that he wants for me? We can ask all of these questions on an individual basis and they are really worthwhile.

But we can also ask these questions with a larger view of things. What is God doing in history? What has God been teaching the church—not PBC, but the assembled congregation of believers who have existed for almost 2000 years before PBC? This is what made church history fascinating to me in seminary. To see how God is still working and to see the lessons that the church as a whole is learning. And some of the ways we still need to grow up together.

During their time in the desert, God's people faced all sorts of challenges. Eventually even Moses and Aaron had a crisis of faith. Their consequence was the same as for the other people: they wouldn't get to enter the Promised Land. But eventually, those forty years had passed and the people were on their way back to the border of the Promised Land. That's where our story this morning concludes.

Choose Life

The story of the forty years in the wilderness concludes at the end of the Book of Numbers. The last sentence places them camped on the banks of the Jordan River across from Jericho. But Moses has a few things to say before he leaves them and they go into the land. The book of Deuteronomy records those last words. It's basically a collection of at least three sermons that Moses delivered to the people to finalize their preparation to receive the Promised Land. He summarizes their adventure so far, summarizes the law that God gave them, and gives them a final pep talk. That's the section we want to take a look at as we end.

I'm going to read a few verses of the concluding remarks from Moses.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20:

¹⁵See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

God's people set out from Mt. Sinai with eagerness and energy. They were excited to see where the presence of God was going to lead them. But everything was more difficult than they thought it was going to be. They couldn't sustain their energy. They questioned their circumstances. They questioned their leaders and their faith in God to provide wavered and failed.

But through all those things God had been teaching them. They were growing up. They are different people now than they were forty years ago. So Moses sets before them a choice. Life or death? Prosperity or destruction? Moses is hoping that they have learned wisdom. Moses is hoping that they have faced challenges and come out the other side with a better appreciation of what it means to trust God in the midst of challenges.

So Moses gives them a choice to be wise. He tells them that they know what it's like to not be obedient. That's the path that leads to destruction. But they also know a taste of what it means to be faithful. That's the path that leads to life. Once again they have a choice before them, not just now but every day of their life in the Promised Land. This time, choose life. This time, choose to "love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him."

We live under different circumstances than the Israelites did. When we obey God, he doesn't always provide material blessings. But these words still ring true to us. We have known failure. We have known success. God is growing us up, making us wise. With that wisdom that we have learned, we have the chance to choose life just as the Israelites did. Choose life.

I love this phrase because I think this is the road we walk every day. We face decisions before us all the time that give us the opportunity to love God, to walk in his ways, and we experience his blessing when we do those things. But we also face distractions. Opportunities for our heart to turn away. Chances to follow our own path. To be swayed by others. To value things above people. To allow our fears to dictate our decisions. To grumble instead of give thanks.

Moses urges these people to choose life so that they and their children can live. These are decisions that impact those around us. They carry forward. In fact, life carries forward into eternity. The wise choices we make today—to love God and love other people—will have consequences for generations to come, even into eternity.

I remember talking to a friend of mine who had just finished medical school and residency and a fellowship. After all those years of training, he said "I don't think I would have done it if I knew what it was going to be like.

But I'm glad I did because now I'm on the other side."

My experience is that life is always harder than people expect it to be. There are always surprising challenges. Our energy and enthusiasm always wanes. But as we face those challenges, we are learning how to navigate our world. We are learning how to live in God's presence, even when things don't make sense. Life is harder than we expect, but it can also be better than we hoped.

Remember little Ray Charles? A blind little boy who had fallen down and was calling for his mother? What choices did he make and what happened with his mom.

As we continue this scene, Ray is laying down on the ground and when he eventually realizes that his mother is not going help him. She quietly watches him from a distance, removed from his needs. He hears noise from outside and the kettle boiling. His mother is expectant of what he will do next. He picks himself up and with his arms outstretched, he walks around a hot fire, listens to a horse and buggy, and then hears a cricket by his feet. He kneels down to catch the cricket, picks it up and with a smile on his face listens to it's chirping. He then let's his mother know that he can hear her too. She embraces him with tears.

Ray chooses life. He learns, before our very eyes, to understand the world around him on his own. He faces challenges and they prepare him for something else. All the while his mother is there. He must wonder why she doesn't come to him. He doesn't understand at first how she could stand there and ignore his cries for help. But at the end, he says, "I hear you too, mama. You're right there." And she replies, "Yes, I am." She is right there. She has been right there all along. And now, Ray has learned some things about what it means to be on his own, so she embraces him. She receives him.

This is the path that God's people are on. They must learn how to be God's people before they can live in God's land. Little Ray Charles had to learn how to be on his own before his mother could receive him.

This is what our lives are like. We face all sorts of things that we never thought we would encounter. But we find God in them and he guides us through. We're learning to be wise; to recognize life and death and to choose life; to act on the faith that we have; to trust the God that we know; and to grow through our mistakes along the way.

Conclusion

God is growing us up. Sometimes it feels like he is with us. Sometimes it feels like he is absent. But he is there all the time. He is with us even when things look hopeless. Through all of these things, God is preparing us. Just as the Israelites in the desert were being prepared for the Promised Land, our lives are not just about this life; we are about eternity. God is preparing us to be in his presence for eternity. We have a lot to learn.

And so the family of Abraham becomes the nation of Israel. God gives his people a leader in Moses who frees them from slavery. He gives his people a law that helps them to remain in the presence of their God. And finally, he prepares them to enter the land—the Promised Land—and receive the fulfillment of his promise.

After Moses's lengthy sermons, God's people finally enter the land. They are as ready as they are going to be and Joshua leads them across the Jordan. That's what we'll see next week as we move into our fourth era, *A Home Given*. We'll discover that it was great, but it wasn't Eden. It wasn't the final completion of God's plan. More was coming.

That's where our story is always heading. We're constantly seeing God at work. We've been seeing him fulfill his promises. But everything in the story up until now is headed for the grand fulfillment of his promise in the person of Jesus Christ. The whole story leads up to him. And for us, who live after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the whole story leads to his return. Everything we experience is preparing us for eternity. Everything is preparing us to enter the Promised Land of the new heavens and the new earth.

May we trust God as he prepares us. May we choose life along the way. May we enter the new creation and live in the presence of God for eternity.