

“Not What I Signed Up For”

Exodus 16:2-15

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Put yourself in the shoes, or the sandals, of the people of Israel. For centuries, they had been slaves in Egypt, persecuted, tortured, murdered by their oppressors, and then out of nowhere Moses shows up and tells them that the God of their ancestors is going to set them free, he's going to lead them out of slavery back to the land that he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land filled with blessings, a land that will be theirs forever. It must've sounded too good to be true.

The idea that after all these years in slavery, a nobody like Moses is going to break the power of the great Egyptian empire and bring this huge crowd of people through the desert to a lush and fertile land waiting for them on the other side, it sounds too good to be true. So most of the people refused to believe it. They wouldn't listen to Moses, not when he confronted Pharaoh, not even when miraculous, terrifying plagues started striking the Egyptians, the people were still skeptical, still suspicious, and even when Pharaoh gave in to Moses' demands and set the people free, even then, the people didn't entirely trust Moses. So when they saw Pharaoh's army coming after them, trapping them on the shore of the Red Sea, ready to wipe them out, they were oh so quick to put all the blame for the impending catastrophe all on Moses. And there on the shores of the Red Sea, the people witnessed the greatest miracle thus far in human history – the sea itself was split in two, the people of Israel safely walked through the waters to

safety on the other side, and the sea closed in after them and destroyed their pursuers.

Moses promised them a new world, he promised them that God was going to deliver them from Egypt, set them free once and for all, and standing on the far side of the Red Sea, looking back at the devastated, defeated Egyptian army, for the first time, it seemed like it just might be true. The people decide to put their faith in Moses and in the God that Moses is following, they buy in to the message that Moses has been preaching all this time. For the first time, they accept that this crazy story that Moses has told them about a promised land is actually going to happen. After travelling through the Red Sea, how can you not believe that God can do anything? How can you not believe that God is going to lead you through every obstacle and deliver you safe and sound to the promised land? God leads the people through the Red Sea, and now they're expecting that he will lead them straight to a life of comfort and luxury and ease in this wonderful new land that God has promised to them.

But this newfound faith and confidence and expectation doesn't last. As soon as the people of Israel leave the shores of the Red Sea and head into the wilderness, the complaining starts. They have trouble finding water, and the people complain until Moses finds them water. And then after a month of walking the complaints start up again, this time over the food – the supplies they brought with them out of Egypt are starting to dry up, and there's no food to be found in the middle of the desert – not nearly enough to feed this massive crowd of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children. As their food starts to run low and they get hungrier and hungrier, the people think about the life they thought they were promised, the life they were expecting, a life in a lush and

fertile land flowing with milk and honey, and they look around at sand and rocks and sand and rocks, with no food and no hope for food anywhere in sight, and they are furious.

This isn't what we signed up for. This isn't what we were promised. Moses, you told us that we were going to have milk and honey, an easy journey to an easy life in a promised land, that's what we expected, and now here we are, about to starve to death in the middle of the desert. We'd be better off in Egypt. At least there we'd have food.

Now, Moses has every right to be a little upset at the people here. After all, he never promised them that this would be easy. He never told them that their journey to the promised land would be smooth sailing with no challenges or troubles along the way. He's leading almost a million people with all their livestock, all their earthly possessions, through a harsh wilderness, so of course there are going to be some logistical problems. There will be some setbacks, there will be some sacrifices needed, the people can't just lounge around expecting meat to just fall out of the sky, or bread to just magically appear on the ground around them.

Moses knew all along that this was going to be a difficult journey – it's one of the reasons he tried to turn down the job of leading these people when God first called him – and yet they have barely begun to travel and at the very first sign of trouble, at the very first sign that things aren't moving absolutely perfectly, the people turn on Moses and turn on God. And so you would expect Moses to be upset, and you would expect God to be upset. It's only been a few weeks since they walked through the bottom of the Red Sea, with water towering on either side, and they've already forgotten that miracle, they've already given up on this

journey, every obstacle they hit is just another reason to turn back to Egypt and stop heading for the promised Land.

So yes, you would expect Moses and God to be angry with the people for their complete lack of faith. You would expect God to respond to these demands with anger and judgment and punishment, you would expect God to call these delinquent, unfaithful, ungrateful complainers to the carpet and let them have it. But God doesn't get angry with his people. God hears their complaints, and he answers those complaints with grace. He answers their complaints by giving them exactly what they demanded, in far greater abundance than they could possibly have imagined. The people asked for meat and bread, and that night the camp is covered by an enormous flock of quail, enough meat for every man, woman and child in this million strong caravan to eat their fill and then some.

And the next morning, the ground is covered in bread, this sticky sweet frost of flaky honey-flavoured something or other that the people of Israel have never encountered before. Instead of judgment, instead of punishment, God gives the people grace, he gives them far more than they asked for, far more than what they imagined was possible, God provides them with everything they need to see their journey through and keep moving on towards the promised land. God never promised them an easy journey – there was always going to be trouble, challenges, obstacles on that journey through the wilderness, but God promises his people that all throughout that journey, again and again they would encounter his grace in the most unexpected places, in the most unexpected ways.

That's the thing about grace – it's always something unexpected, something undeserved. If you go through life expecting everything to be easy,

expecting God to give you everything you want, everything you ask for, expecting no challenges, no obstacles, no troubles on your personal road to the promised land, you will inevitably end up disappointed, grumbling in the wilderness, you'll end up unsatisfied, you will miss the amazing grace that God is trying to offer you, that's standing right there in front of you. But when you know that following Jesus will mean struggle, when you know that the journey to God's new world, the kingdom of heaven, the promised land, when you know that journey will be filled with challenges and obstacles and trouble of one kind or another, then you'll be able to see God's grace at work, bringing you through one challenge after another, giving a path through the sea and food for the hungry and the bread of heaven for all those in need.

On the journey from Egypt to the promised land, from our broken world to the kingdom of heaven, there will be work – we will need to roll up our sleeves and pitch in, we will need to get into the vineyard and start harvesting, head out in the morning and gather the bread God has provided. On the journey from Egypt to the promised land, from our broken world to the kingdom of heaven, there will be wilderness – we will travel through dry places, empty places, we will experience hunger and fear and doubt, we will feel like our enemies are closing in around us and there's nowhere else for us to turn. And on the journey from Egypt to the promised land, from our broken world to the kingdom of heaven, there will be grace. There will be grace, abundant, incredible grace, incredible signs of God's favour and love, an outpouring of his providence descending on us when we need it most like manna from heaven, like the rush of thousands of wings.

God's grace makes our journey possible, God's grace leads us through the wilderness, through every challenge, every kind of trouble, God's grace is revealed when we stop expecting things to be easy and start expecting to meet God in the wilderness, expecting him to provide for us in unexpected ways, expecting him to come through to rescue his people when we need him most.

And as God's people today, we know we need that rescue now, here in the wilderness that we travel through today. All around us, there are so many challenges, so many troubles, and it can be so hard to see the path forward, it can be so hard to see how we can ever get us out of the messes we find ourselves in. The world isn't what we expected it to be, the church isn't what we expected it to be, and it is easy to give in to doubt and despair and wonder why God has led us out into this wild and lonely place, to ask how all this trouble can possibly be part of God's path leading us to the kingdom of heaven. But we are not alone on this journey. We are not alone in the wilderness. And in the midst of our trouble, when we open our eyes and look around, we will see the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We will see signs of his presence, signs of his providence, signs of his kingdom coming into this broken world, reminding us to expect the unexpected, reminding us to rely on his amazing grace. We follow a God who keeps his promises, and God has promised us that he will lead us through the wilderness to the promised land, and he will give us everything we need to guide us and protect us and provide for us at every moment until that journey is done.

So keep your eyes open. Keep your feet moving. And expect the unexpected grace of Jesus Christ to carry you through the wilderness and into the Kingdom of God. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!