



TRANSITIONS: TRUSTING GOD IN TIMES OF CHANGE WILDERNESS DISILLUSIONMENT

Numbers 11

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Introduction

George Bernanos's novel *The Diary of a Country Priest* is an honest and gripping depiction a young priest's first experience in parish ministry. Set in the rural village of Ambricourt, France, in the 1930's, the reader is introduced to someone who, despite daily interaction with members of his parish, is nevertheless friendless. In fact, the vast majority of his relationships are fraught with misunderstanding and suspicion, condescension and meanness. Even the children of his parish, whose affection he admits he longs to receive, scorn him by playing tricks on him. After one particularly nasty prank, he laments: "Children are children—but, oh, why should these little girls be so full of enmity?"¹

On another occasion, he receives an unsigned note in his letterbox that reads: "A well-wisher advises you to apply for a change of parish. And the sooner the better. When at last you open your eyes to what everyone else can see so plain, you'll sweat blood! Sorry for you but we say again: 'Get out!'"²

Relationally speaking, then, the young priest of Ambricourt finds himself in the midst of what we might call a relational wilderness. As he confesses: "My solitude is complete and hateful."³ His parish is his Garden of Gethsemane; indeed, his entire transition into ministry is a wilderness wandering of sorts; so much so that it doesn't take long before he finds himself in the throes of disillusionment.

Disillusionment is, of course, a fact of life, not just in the life of ministers. No, it touches all of us in one way or another. Disillusionment is a deep sense of disappointment that affects the way in which you see things. It is more than disappointment, not only in intensity, but also in nature. For, you see, disappointment is a matter of the heart. Disillusionment, however, affects the mind, our ability to see straight and perceive rightly. Disillusionment is when the disappointment of the heart negatively impacts the head.

Disillusionment comes about when the picture in your mind of what something should be like does not match what you actually experience. As a result, you are literally 'freed' from the illusion, the image, the picture, you had in your head of what things would be like. You become *disillusioned*.

Everyone experiences disillusionment in some way and at some point along the way: in our marriage, in our friendships, at our work, with our children, with our church, even sometimes with God himself. And we're especially vulnerable to disillusionment during times of transition, times of change.

¹ Diary, p. 28.

² Diary, p. 102.

³ Diary, pp. 105-106.

Today's passage touches on what happens when we encounter continued difficulties along the way of our time of transition. And what this passage says is that it can create disillusionment. This is, then, a passage that addresses the issue of disillusionment, what we might call wilderness disillusionment.

Israel's Wilderness Disillusionment (11:1-9)

This passage opens with something both *familiar* and *foreboding*. Israel is at it again. They find themselves on the other side of Sinai and the giving of the Law. Yet, ironically and tragically, they don't seem to find themselves on the other side of their old familiar habit: grumbling.

And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. ² Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. ³ So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them.

What is unique about this passage, however, is the mention in verse 4 of the so-called "rabble," whose precise identity is somewhat obscure, but whose presence evidently stirred the proverbial pot, bringing Israel's grumbling to a boil (11:4-6):

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

Now, that is what you call wilderness disillusionment! Notice, though, how their disillusionment expresses itself. First, they recognize their transition has not turned out as they would have liked; that they do not have what they feel they need: in this case, meat to eat. (v. 4). Thus it creates disappointment. But this in turn creates the sense of disillusionment that overtakes the mind, the memory. So, they begin to reflect fondly on how good they used to have it in Egypt (v. 5). But it doesn't stop there. No, their nostalgia for the provisions of Egypt causes them to *overlook* the provision underneath their very noses (v. 6).

It is truly remarkable how blind we can be to God's good and gracious provision in our lives today when we're pining for past provision. And it's equally remarkable how our memory can become the servant of our craving! You see, memory is not an objective hard-drive that merely collects and stores data, unfiltered or unprocessed. No, we have the ability to call to mind not necessarily how things in fact were but how we wished they were in light of where we presently are.

The singer and song writer, Sara Groves, describes this as "painting pictures of Egypt" in her song by that title. Here's the chorus:

I've been painting pictures of Egypt
Leaving out what it lacked.
The future seems so hard
And I want to go back.

Here we see the Israelites painting pictures of Egypt in their mind's eye. And they paint a pretty picture indeed. Does it reflect the reality of their situation? No, absolutely not. Far from

it. Needless to say, they weren't spending many Sunday afternoons at the Olive Garden with family and friends!

But such is the nature of wilderness disillusionment.

Moses' Wilderness Disillusionment (11:10-15)

Now, when we begin painting pictures of Egypt in our minds, we usually want to cry. This, at least, was what Israel did. And Moses, their faithful leader, heard it, as we see in the next paragraph (11:10a).

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent.

One of the unique contributions of this passage is that we see what wilderness disillusionment looks like not only in Israel, but also in Moses; thus we see how disillusionment expresses itself not only among people who are in a time of transition, but also among a leader who is in the midst of a time of transition.

For, you see, sometimes in the life of a leader, he reaches the breaking point. The responsibility is too much, the task too overwhelming, the people one's leading are too fatiguing or frustrating. Sometimes leaders reach the point of disillusionment. This is where Moses finds himself. For as the second part of verse 10 tells us: "And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly," but the Lord was not the only person fatigued and frustrated with the Israelites. Moses was also: "and Moses was displeased."

Yet instead of chastising the Israelites, *Moses challenges the Lord*. And here he expresses his own sense of wilderness disillusionment with the way things are. His disillusionment is not quite the same as the Israelites: he doesn't, in the words of Sara Groves, paint pictures of Egypt. Instead, in the words of Aretha Franklin, he simply asks for a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Moses' wilderness disillusionment begins perhaps where all disillusionment tends to begin: *with doubting God's generosity* (11:11).

Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me?"

Here is an honest leader speaking honestly. Why, Lord, have you not been fair with me? Why have you not be more generous toward me? Why lay on me this undue burden? Moses is so distraught with his whole situation and what it implies about God's failure to provide that he himself reaches a crescendo in verse 15:

If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.

Moses' disillusionment begins with doubting God's generosity, but it doesn't end there. Part of his disillusionment springs from a second factor: *Moses acknowledges his own insufficiency for the task at hand*. This is never a very easy place for a leader to come to. No one, not least leaders, likes to come to the end of their resources, to the outer limit of what they're able to handle, much less to have to acknowledge it. But that's precisely where Moses found himself: confronting his own insufficiency for the task at hand (11:13-14):

Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me.

Moses recognizes that he can neither adequately provide nor adequately sustain the people of Israel. "I can't feed them," Moses acknowledges to the Lord. Nor, frankly, Moses tells the Lord, can I handle all their issues, all their problems. For the burden is simply too heavy for me.

No leader likes to come to this point. It's a humbling thing to have to admit, to have to say: "I alone simply cannot do the task at hand, the task to which I've been called." That is a humbling thing to say. Often, we avoid getting to that painfully humbling point by doing what we humans are so good at doing: passing the blame. "Yes, okay, fine; I'm at the end of my resources, but it's not ultimately my problem, it's not my responsibility," we will sometimes say. And this is exactly what we find Moses saying. His disillusionment begins with doubting God's generosity. It also involves acknowledging his own insufficiency for the task at hand. But as part of this Moses also *questions his responsibility* (11:12):

Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers?

You know a leader's in the throes of disillusionment when he begins questioning whether he in fact has responsibility for those he's supposed to be leading. This is what we see Moses doing here. "God, you called them, not me. You gave them birth, as it were, not me. And you promised to take them to the Promised Land, not me. So, then, why am I stuck with the burden of carrying them this whole way through the wilderness?!" Moses is here reminding the Lord that he's just the nurse, not the mother or father. And, as a nurse (or babysitter) is prone to do when a child is particularly difficult or unruly or inconsolable, Moses wants to pass the child back to the parent.

That's the voice of a leader in the throes of wilderness disillusionment. It's a reality that confronts every leader at every level at some point or other. Pastors can certainly go through seasons of wilderness disillusionment, for theirs is a job all about leading people on transition through the wilderness of this world. And transitions are difficult, thus the slide into wilderness disillusionment is never far off for the pastor.

Parents, did you know you too can go through seasons of wilderness disillusionment as well. What parent, in raising children, has not wrestled with feelings of insufficiency for the task at hand. What parent has not been tempted along the way to doubt God's generosity toward them? What parent has not, in his or her darker moments, wanted to pass off the responsibility for the children: "Whose kids are these, anyways? Not mine! God, they must be yours!" we're sometimes tempted to say.

Wilderness disillusionment is a reality we all must wrestle with.

The Lord's Revealing Response to Wilderness Disillusionment (11:16-35)

So far, then, we've seen what wilderness disillusionment looks like in the people and in their leader, Moses. Now, thirdly and finally, we should turn our attention to *the Lord's revealing response* to this wilderness disillusionment of both leader and people.

The Lord had heard the complaints of Moses and the Israelites; he'd heard the groaning of Moses and the grumbling of Israel. How does he respond?

First, the Lord responds to Moses' complaint about a lack of help by providing him with more Spirit-led leadership (11:16-17):

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. ¹⁷ And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.

Moses, then, in turn, as we read in 11:24, went out and told the people of Israel what was going to happen, and he gathered the seventy elders of the people and had them stand around the tent of meeting, where they received the Spirit that was on Moses. "And," as we read at the end of 11:25, "as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied." But, notice something very significant in the very next sentence: "But they did not *continue* doing it." This was Spirit-led leadership for a short season, for a time, not forever.

Interestingly, two men who remained in the camp, one named Eldad, the other, Medad, had the Spirit of the Lord come upon them as well, and they too began to prophesy as the seventy elders had done. Yet Joshua, Moses' faithful assistant, found this problematic and thought Moses should shut this down: "My lord Moses, stop them" (11:28). "Are you jealous for my sake?" came the response from Moses. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets," that is to say, "that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" (11:29).

You see, Moses recognizes not only the problem in himself; he also recognizes the problem with the people: *they are without the Spirit!* Thus, the Lord's response to the Israelites' grumbling for more meat becomes very revealing indeed of their real need (11:31-34):

Then a wind from the LORD sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground. ³² And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. ³³ While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague. ³⁴ Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving.

Do you see what's going on here? The Lord's response of provision in turn reveals something profound and problematic about the people. They're not changed. They're not renewed. They're not regenerated. How do you know? Because they still have that unruly and insatiable and ultimately idolatrous *craving*. So, the Lord's provision is turned into an opportunity for covetousness, for gluttony, for self-indulgence. The Lord's blessing becomes in effect a curse.

What, then, does the Lord's response to wilderness disillusionment reveal? First, his response to Moses reveals the need for *new leadership*. Moses, the great leader and hero of Israel, nevertheless himself recognizes in his own words: "I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me." An honest confession for a leader to make, isn't it? And

yet how true of all earthly leadership: unable to carry all this people alone, a burden too heavy for me. I suspect President Obama finds himself saying this from time to time. You may wonder if I find myself saying this about you from time to time.

You see, this text reminds us all of the inadequacy of all earthly leadership. And it causes us all to ask: Is there anyone who *can* carry all this people alone? Is there anyone who *can* bear the burden of humanity?

There is One who can (Isa. 53:2-6):

For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
5 But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

And he—the Lord Jesus Christ—bore it all the way to the Cross, and there dealt decisively and definitely with your greatest burden and mine, the burden of sin.

But in addition to the need for new leadership, the Lord's response to the people in the provision of quail reveals the need for a *new people*; that is, the need for a renewed people, a changed people, a Spirit-endowed and Spirit-transformed people. And not just seventy, but the whole lot of them! Throughout her history, Israel's prophets of course recognized this as *the problem* with Israel as a people. And they never tired of pointing it out. But they also at times pointed the way to a new day, sometime in the future, when the Lord would do a new work to create a new people. Listen to the vision of the prophet Ezekiel (36:22-28):

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³ And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴ I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new

spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

New hearts, new affections, new obedience—the ultimate cure not only to wilderness disillusionment, but also wilderness rebellion. So the Lord’s provision points us forward to Christ and the Cross; and to the Spirit whom he pours out upon all who call upon him in faith.

Conclusion

Perhaps you find yourself right now in the midst of a wilderness transition. The process has been a long and difficult one. The future is uncertain; you’re not sure what it holds. As a result, you’re tempted to go back. You’re tempted to paint for yourself wonderful pictures of where you were. Are you tempted to paint for yourself pictures of Egypt? Or perhaps the burden of leadership that you carry is too much for you. It’s too much for you and you thus find yourself not only fatigued, but frustrated.

Remember, and beware, disillusionment can do funny things to the mind, to the memory. Remember, more importantly, that Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the Sheep, who daily bears all your burdens; more than that: who has borne your greatest burden upon the Cross—the burden of sin. And remember Jesus’ Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who has been poured out in these last days upon everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord by faith.

God the Son, God the Spirit—they can sustain you, they can carry you, through your time of wilderness transition. Amen!