

Title: The Land Between (Part One)
Text: Various
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(The Message draws its title and some of its content from the book by Jeff Manion 'The Land Between – Finding God in Difficult Transitions.')

For more than two hundred years the people of Israel had lived in the fertile Nile delta of Egypt, led there by Jacob when seeking to survive a terrible worldwide famine. The Israelites hadn't just survived, in many ways they had thrived with their numbers increasing exponentially, so much so that the Egyptians were fearful of the potential power they had. The Egyptian Pharaoh's forced them into awful slavery, making bricks for Pharaoh's many building projects. Eventually the Israelites cried out and their cry was heard by the God they barely knew or remembered.

Through a burning bush God called a man called Moses to lead his people out of slavery. God made this promise:

(I will) bring them up **out of** that land and **into** a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.
(Exodus 3:8)

And so begins one of the most amazing stories in the whole bible – the story of the Exodus, where God liberates a group of illiterate slaves from the bondage of the superpower of the ancient world. Miracle after miracle frees and then sustains them. Ten plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven and water from a rock.

God leads Israel OUT OF Egypt and INTO the Promised Land.

Between the 'out of' and 'in to' is the Land Between. It is in the Land Between that perhaps the most important part of the story is found.

For Israel the Land Between was a physical location. It was the Sinai Peninsula. It was then and is now a desolate place of limited vegetation and even less fresh water. It was a wilderness. It is a desert. And it would be their home for forty years.

As the Israelites journey OUT FROM the lush fertile home of their past IN TO the lush fertile home of their future, they pass through the wilderness, a desert, the Land Between.

For Israel, the Land Between was also more than a physical location. It was also the place of uncertainty, of testing, of desperation. It was the place where faith was discovered and lost.

Through forty years of wilderness wanderings the Israelites discovered that the Land Between is the place where faith can thrive, but also the place where faith can dry up and die.

I want to test a thesis out of mine. I need to you be totally honest. My question is very simple. Last week, did you stay up to see the New Year in, or did you go to bed before midnight. There is no right or wrong answer to this. No one will judge you whether you stayed up or not.

So, if you saw the New Year in, please raise your hand now....

And of you were in bed before midnight on New Year's Eve, raise your hand...

Thank you. That was very instructive.

Here is my thesis. The older a person becomes the earlier they go to bed. I say this from experience.

Sue and I were in bed long before midnight on New Year's Eve. I was up before 6 to get ready for church. As I came downstairs, I heard a voice say, 'Morning Dad!' It scared the living daylights out of me. It was Joel, our 18 year old son, who had just got home from his New Year's Eve celebrations. He was as bright and I was bleary eyed. I felt so old.

Over the last year Sue and I reached a tipping point where we find ourselves going to bed before our kids. As they remind us again and again, we are getting old. We are undeniably middle-aged.

Youth is when you're allowed to stay up late on New Year's Eve. Middle age is when you're forced to.
(Bill Vaughn)

Middle age is that in between time. That time in between the energy of youth and the wisdom of senior years. It is a time of transition. In middle age you are confronted with the brutal reality that you are getting old. Middle age is one of many examples of a time in between.

Another in between time that many of us have experienced is when we move from one place for another. Most of us who live on the Gold Coast are from somewhere else – even another country. We have experienced the disruption of leaving family, culture, financial security to embrace the possibility of a new future in a new place. We have lived in, or perhaps are still in the land between the certainty of the yesterday and the hope of tomorrow.

Other 'Land Between' times can be far more disruptive. We can find ourselves in the land between suddenly - without any warning.

We come into work one day and our boss says, 'I'm so sorry, but we have to make you redundant.'

We come home one day and our partner shocks us with the words, 'I'm sorry, but I don't love you anymore.'

We sit in the doctor's surgery and she says to us, 'I'm afraid I have bad news. The tumor is malignant.'

We get a phone call at 3am in the morning and as we clutch the phone we hear the words, 'Mum, I'm at the police station. I need your help.'

The Land Between is the place where everything that is normal is interrupted.

In the Land Between we experience acute uncertainty and disruption; where life is not as it once was and where the future is in question. It is a hard place, a dry place a desert place.

But the Land Between – that space where we feel lost or lonely or deeply hurt – is fertile ground for our spiritual transformation and for God's grace to be revealed in magnificent ways.

For Israel, the Land Between became a place of complaint, provision, discipline and growth.

Complaint

Have you ever had an experience of customer service that was so bad that you were compelled to write a complaint letter? I am going to read part of a letter that has been acknowledged as perhaps one of the best complaint ever written. It was written by a frustrated traveler who flew with Virgin from London to Mumbai:

Dear Mr. Branson

I love the Virgin brand; I really do which is why I continue to use it despite a series of unfortunate incidents over the last few years. This latest incident takes the biscuit.

Ironically, by the end of the flight I would have gladly paid over a thousand rupees for a single biscuit following the culinary journey of hell I was subjected to at the hands of your corporation.

Look at this Richard. Just look at it...

I imagine the same questions are racing through your brilliant mind as were racing through mine on that fateful day. What is this? Why have I been given it? What have I done to deserve this? And, which one is the starter, which one is the desert?

You don't get to a position like yours Richard with anything less than a generous sprinkling of observational power so I KNOW you will have spotted the tomato next to the two yellow shafts of sponge on the left. Yes, it's next to the sponge shaft without the green paste. That's got to be the clue hasn't it. No sane person would serve a desert with a tomato would they? Well answer me this Richard, what sort of animal would serve a desert with peas in...

I know it looks like a baaji but it's in custard Richard, custard. It must be the pudding. Well you'll be fascinated to hear that it wasn't custard. It was a sour gel with clear oil on top. Its only redeeming feature was that it managed to be so alien to my palette that it took away the taste of the curry emanating from our miscellaneous central cuboid of beige matter. Perhaps the meal on the left might be the desert after all.

Anyway, this is all irrelevant at the moment. I was raised strictly but neatly by my parents and if they knew I had started desert before the main course, a sponge shaft would be the least of my worries. So lets peel back the tin-foil on the main dish and see what's on offer.

I'll try and explain how this felt. Imagine being a twelve year old boy Richard. Now imagine it's Christmas morning and you're sitting there with your final present to open. It's a big one, and you know what it is. It's that stereo you picked out the catalogue and wrote to Santa about.

Only you open the present and it's not in there. It's your hamster Richard. It's your hamster in the box and it's not breathing. That's how I felt when I peeled back the foil and saw this...

Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking it's more of that Baaji custard. I admit I thought the same too, but no. It's mustard Richard. MUSTARD. More mustard than any man could consume in a month. On the left we have a piece of broccoli and some peppers in brown glue-like oil and on the right the chef had prepared some mashed potato. The potato masher had obviously broken and so it was decided the next best thing would be to pass the potatoes through the digestive tract of a bird.

Once it was regurgitated it was clearly then blended and mixed with a bit of mustard. Everybody likes a bit of mustard Richard.

By now I was actually starting to feel a little hypoglycemic. I needed a sugar hit. Luckily there was a small cookie provided. It had caught my eye earlier due to its baffling presentation....

It appears to be in an evidence bag from the scene of a crime. A CRIME AGAINST COOKING. Either that or some sort of back-street underground cookie, purchased off a gun-toting maniac high on his own supply of yeast. You certainly wouldn't want to be caught carrying one of these through customs. Imagine biting into a piece of brass Richard. That would be softer on the teeth than the specimen above.

I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was relax but obviously I had to sit with that mess in front of me for half an hour. I swear the sponge shafts moved at one point.

...As I said at the start I love your brand, I really do. It's just a shame such a simple thing could bring it crashing to it's knees and begging for sustenance.

Yours Sincerely

No sooner had the Israelites left slavery and bondage of Egypt for the Land Between they began to complain. They didn't write letters, but they did make their feelings very plain.

They complained about the lack of water. They complained about a lack of food. Then they complained about the lack of variety of food:

If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!
(Numbers 11:4-6)

They complained about Moses and to Moses. They complained about the God they barely knew.

In the Land Between the Israelites were world champion whiners.

In the Land Between we will experience disappointment or hurt or pain or grief or despair or hopelessness, or a combination of some or all of these.

We always respond when we experience deep disappointment. The only question is how we will respond.

There are two equally dangerous and destructive ways we can respond in the Land Between. We can run away to denial or we can drown in despair.

In denial we play pretend. We pretend that things aren't as bad as they seem. We suppress our feelings. We put in a brave face. We close our mind and hearts to reality.

In despair everything becomes a hopeless catastrophe. There is no way out of the pit we find ourselves in. Tomorrow will be worse than today.

In the Land Between the Israelites whined and complained. They gave in to faith-less despair. They did not complain to God. They complained about God. The Bible calls this sort of faith-less complaint 'murmuring'. Murmuring is faith-less complaining about God. And God rebukes the Israelites for this form of faith-less despair. There are times in the Land Between when I have murmured. Perhaps you have as well?

By contrast, there is another form of complaint in the Bible that God seems to affirm. It is called Lament.

If murmuring is faith-less complaining about God, lament is faith-filled complaining to God.

Murmuring is gossiping about God; lament is a prayer of desperation to God.

Murmuring is a hopeless cry of despair. Lament is a despairing prayer of hope.

Let me give you a wonderful example of Lament. The Bible called the Israelites a rabble. The rabble was complaining about manna. There were only so many ways you could cook it. They were fed up. The Bible says God was exceedingly angry about the Israelites murmuring. And Moses was at the end of his rope:

(Moses) asked the LORD, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' I

cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin.”
(Numbers 11:11-15)

In their murmuring the Israelites are complaining about God.

In his lament Moses is praying to God. There is a huge distinction. Moses isn't disdainfully rejecting God, as the Israelites effectively are. In bringing his questions and complaints, Moses has turned towards God, not away from him.

Lament, or faith-filled complaint, is everywhere in the Bible.

Moses prayed, 'This burden is too heavy for me Lord.'

The prophet Elijah hears that Queen Jezebel is going to kill him. He flees to the desert and lies down exhausted:

He came to broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough Lord," he said, "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."
(1 Kings 19:4-5)

Elijah prayed, 'I've had enough Lord.'

Jeremiah prophesied Jerusalem's destruction. For being the bearer of bad news he was arrested, beaten and ridiculed. After being released, he pours out his lament to God:

Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed! Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?
(Jeremiah 20:14 and 20)

Jeremiah wonders aloud whether it was a good day when he was born.

Here is my question. Were the prayers of Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah expressions of faith in God or not? There is a view that we have to censor or sanitize our prayers for God. There is a tragically erroneous belief that our prayers should be tidy and safe. But life is not like that. Life is not tidy and often it isn't safe. Life in the Land Between is messy and dangerous and gut-wrenching. The Land Between is marked by blood, sweat and tears. Our prayers should be the same.

Desperate prayers in the Land Between, prayers of lament, indicate spiritual health, not spiritual deficiency. One person has called lament 'sanctified grumbling' – the sort of grumbling that turns to God, not away from him.

No one was better at this form of prayer than King David, who wrote many of our Psalms. 68 of the 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms are songs or prayers of lament, most of them written by David. In lament, David the poet and musician sings the blues:

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.
(Psalm 69:1-2)

This is the poetry of trust.

David sang and prayed, 'I'm drowning God!'

Moses cried out, 'This burden is too heavy for me.'

Elijah sobbed, 'I've had enough Lord.'

Jeremiah admitted, 'I wish I was never born.'

Have you ever said anything like this? If you have, you are in good company.

Sue and I are blessed with two beautiful children. But before Joel was born more than eighteen years ago we experienced what many couples go through – the uncertainty of conception and the pain of miscarriage. Pretty much as soon as we started trying Sue became pregnant. But then just shy of 12 weeks we miscarried. It was awful. But we picked ourselves up in the knowledge that this was an experience we shared with many others and that we would soon fall pregnant again. But one month turned into another, into another until eighteen months later we still weren't pregnant. We prayed and expected. And we were worried. Then one fateful night we went to the movies with our best friends Mark and Jude. As we dropped them off afterwards they shared with us their joy at discovering they were pregnant. Our emotions were mixed. We were thrilled for them. But we were despairing for us.

We drove home in silence and got ready for bed. But then I lost it. I fell to my knees and I sobbed and sobbed. I beat the bed with my fists. I yelled at God. Why? When? At one point remember literally shaking my fist at God. I had given up on safe, tidy, self-censored, sanitized prayer. Unknowingly I joined Elijah and Moses and David and Jeremiah in some raw, real, honest sanctified grumbling.

Something broke in me that night. I gave up on denying my pain and uncertainty, my sense of powerlessness. It was painful. But it was real. I was real. After months drifting slowly from God, in a strange a mysterious way I again felt close to the God I was shaking my fist at.

If there is a gold medal for sanctified grumbling, for lament, Jeremiah would win it every time. His life as a prophet was tough. His message wasn't popular. A book in our Bible is full of Jeremiah's prayer of complaint to God. It is called Lamentations. It is miserable from beginning to end – almost. Right in the middle of Lamentations, sandwiched between Jeremiah's grief and sorrow are these words:

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."
(Lamentations 3:19-24)

Right in the middle of his Land Between, in the depths of his wilderness, Jeremiah is able to testify that God has not abandoned him.

In lament, in sanctified grumbling, in the very act of voicing our trouble to God we begin a conversation in which we have opened ourselves up to his care, his mercy and his provision.

Remember how Moses poured out his heart to God? He was fed up – the burden of leading God's grumbling people was too heavy for him to carry. What happened after Moses prayed this way? Did God give up on Moses? Did God walk away? This is what we read:

The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone."
(Numbers 11:16-17)

The burden that was too heavy for Moses to carry would now be shared. God was so gracious to Moses he poured out his Spirit on some of the very same people who had been complaining about him, not to him. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is God's faithfulness.