

Title: The Land Between (Part Two)
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.')

Last week we introduce this concept of the Land Between.

For more than two hundred years the people of Israel had lived in the fertile Nile delta of Egypt. There they thrived and grew, eventually so much that they became a threat to the Egyptians who subjected them to a terrible form of slavery. Eventually the Israelites cried out for deliverance and their cry was heard by the God they barely knew or remembered.

God then makes 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 God fulfills his promise. Through a series of miraculous events, including the parting of the Red Sea, God leads Israel OUT OF Egypt and forty years later INTO the Promised Land.

But between the 'out of' and 'in to' is the Land Between. For Israel, this is a wilderness place, a desert space. It is the Sinai Peninsula. It is a hard place. It is where faith goes to grow, or to shrivel up and die. It is in the Land Between that perhaps the most important part of the story is found.

Life is a journey between the past which has formed us and the future we seek to embrace and create.

Between the certainty of the past and the uncertainty of the future is the Land Between.

Middle age is the Land Between the energy of youth and the wisdom of senior years.

Moving from one town, one state or even one country to another can disrupt our life so that we are driven out in the Land Between the certainty of the place we knew, and future we hope to embrace.

The Land Between can happen to us in an instant....

Show Duck Clip

The Land Between is a place of uncertainty, disruption and questioning. In the Land Between we can experience pain, suffering and even grief. Whilst the Land Between can be a spiritually dry place, it can also be a fertile place where faith grows and flourishes.

The Land Between is a place of complaint, provision, discipline and growth.

In the Land Between, God Provides

The Psalmist says this:

The LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
(Psalm 34:18)

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. They would share the burden of leadership that was too heavy for Moses to carry alone.

God’s provision for desperate people is consistent with his merciful and gracious character. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and save those who are crushed in spirit.

Earlier on in the Exodus story, when God was calling Moses through a burning bush God says this:

I have indeed **seen** the misery of my people in Egypt. I have **heard** them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am **concerned** about their suffering.
(Exodus 3:7)

God is saying to the Israelites; ‘I have seen your misery. I have heard your cry of pain and despair. I am concerned about you.’

I see, I hear, I am concerned.

Some of us in the Land Between wonder if God really cares. Does God really see our pain, or hear our cry of despair?

It all sounds too good to be true. Certainly Moses thought so – he doubted God’s ability to provide in the wilderness. If you remember amongst the people’s long list of complaints was the lack of variety in their diet. They were sick of manna. They hungered for meat. God hears the complaint, and promises to provide meat. This is how Moses responds:

But Moses said, “Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!’ Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?”
(Number 11:21-22)

There are a million of us in a barren wasteland, and you say God you provide us with a month’s supply of meat. What the? Where from? God responds to Moses’ doubts with this rebuke”

The LORD answered Moses, “Is the LORD’s arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you.”
(Numbers 11:23)

The Sinai Peninsula happens to be close to a major migratory path for birds. And so we read that a wind arose from the North West blowing in millions of quail that fed the Israelites.

When we find ourselves in the Land Between we can easily give in to faith-less despair. Our situation can seem hopeless and God distant, even uncaring. But:

God the Father sees. God the Father cares. God the Father provides.

God asked Moses, and he asks us, 'Is my arm too short to provide for you?' There is only one right answer. The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

Too often I have lived long periods of troubled anxiety when I forget that God is the God who sees, the God who knows and the God who cares.

Before I came to Newlife I was the General Secretary of the Uniting Church in South Australia, which was essentially the CEO for the church in the state. It was a great job and I loved it. But it all got ugly eight and half years ago. With 300 other people I attended our National Assembly meeting in Melbourne. In the meeting a divisive debate raged about human sexuality, homosexuality in particular - what the Bible said and how the church should respond. Votes were taken and decisions made. At the end of it all the church was divided. In the days that followed turmoil broke out. Ministers and congregations threatened to leave the Uniting Church and some did. I found myself in the middle of a destructive, messy and acutely painful storm.

At the meeting in Melbourne were dozens of TV Cameras, photographers and journalists. When the divisive vote was taken, unbeknown to me, a photographer snapped me with my head in my hands while I cried. There's a surprise - I cried. The next day that photo was the feature on the front page of the Age and Sydney Morning Herald Newspapers. Reporters were chasing me down for interviews. Over the next few days I made hundreds of phone calls to ministers back in SA seeking to assure them. I was interviewed on TV and Radio. I felt buffeted on all sides. It seemed the church I loved was ripping itself apart. I was in the Land Between - a place of uncertainty, pain, disruption and confusion.

I knew when I returned to South Australia it would be worse. I would have to deal with the fallout. After 10 days I arrived home. I was so thankful to be back with Sue and the kids. The kids were in bed when I got home. While I was away, Em, who was eight years old at the time had made me a book. When I read it, I knew that God has seen, God had heard, God was concerned. And God was going to provide.

Daddy's Book

Dear Dad. This is one of those things I hope you like. From Emily.

I have a great father and he is one of the most nice fathers in the whole wide world. He is handsome and spunky and a great person to have around. He plays golf and works for the Uniting Church and earns lots of the money for our family!!!

He has the best hair and it is curly and that makes it extra nice. One day he had to deal with something he had never dealt with before. The Uniting Church was falling to bits and it was dangerous to be in any more! Dad didn't know what to do. It was like a fire except he had more time than that.

He thought and thought for a couple of days because they didn't have any insurance so they were in real danger and they wouldn't be able to continue the Uniting Church. Then he thought of a good idea. He said there was to be a meeting about it!

So that night they had a meeting and they discussed the idea. They agreed that this must be done otherwise they didn't know what to do. So the next day they did the plan. 'Gather round', they said, 'Listen' they said. 'We are having a fixing contest and we are doing this contest on the church.'

So the church got fixed bit by bit and was finished soon!!!

When it was finished every one celebrated and danced they were so happy. Then they went out to paint it was white and they found out that the paint that they had got was light blue.

So they just went on with a light blue church.

God had seen. God had heard. God was concerned. And God would provide.

The next two years were incredibly painful, traumatic and difficult. The church lurched from one crisis to another, But right at the outset God clearly spoke to me through the prophetic voice of my eight year old daughter. I will provide!

The Land Between is fertile ground to experience God's timely, loving, miraculous provision.

In your Land Between God may provide through a word offered by a friend, or an encouraging thought that emerges from the confusion or an unusual peace in the midst of the storm. Know this. In your pain, God has seen, God has heard and God is concerned. And God's hand is not too short to save.

The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

Let's get back to Moses and the Israelites.

In the Land Between, Disciplines

Have you ever seen one of those motivational posters? They are often placed on workplace walls to inspire people to greater efforts. Typically they have an inspiring picture and some pithy, motivational quote. This is a typical one:

Perseverance: What lies behind us and what lies before us is small compared to what lies within us.

The evil twin of motivational posters like this is so-called de-motivational posters. You can actually buy this from an appropriately named website, despair.com. Here are a few examples:

Pessimism: Every cloud has a silver lining, but lightning kills hundreds of people every year who are trying to find it.

Problems: No matter how great and destructive your problems may seem now, remember, you've probably only seen the tip of them.

Ambition: The journey of a thousand miles sometimes ends very, very badly.

Challenges: I expected times like this – but I never expected them to be so bad, so long and so frequent.

Mistakes: It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others.

Here's the thing. The tragedy is not that we make mistakes. Everyone does. The tragedy is when we don't learn from them.

The heartache is not that we experience pain but that so much of our pain goes wasted when we don't receive its lessons.

We enter the Land Between, a difficult space, but our obstinacy can make the situation more difficult than it needs to be. The Land Between is difficult terrain. We make it exceedingly more difficult when we don't learn and apply the lessons that God may well be teaching us.

It's in the Land Between that God may choose to discipline us so that our time the Land Between is not wasted. This was the Israelites' experience.

The people complain about the lack of variety in their diet. This is what God promises to them through Moses:

The Lord will give you meat and you will eat it. (Numbers 11:18)

So far, so good. God is good. God provides. But we read on:

You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it.

(Numbers 11:18-20)

Yuk! So much quail it comes out of their nostrils. It is not a pretty picture. It is clear that God is allowing or even inflicting some pain on the Israelites. Why? It all seems a little vindictive – ‘You will eat your broccoli, and you will like it!’

Remember that the Israelites were serial whiners. Despite God’s miraculous provision the people complain to Moses about the lack of water, then the lack of food and now the variety of food. Their complaint was more than dissatisfaction with the menu. It was a rejection of the God who had rescued them. This is God’s judgement against the people:

You have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”

(Numbers 11:20)

In the Land Between, on the Sinai Peninsula, God literally dwelled or tabernacled with the Israelites. In the middle of the wilderness tent city would be the tabernacle where Moses would go and meet with God. The tabernacle represented the very presence of God in the midst of the Israelites. The twelve tribes of Israel would camp around each of the four sides of the tabernacle.

So when the people would whine again and again and again, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’ they were rejecting the Lord who was literally living among, or tabernacling with them.

In the Land Between it seems that God is very interested in the people we are becoming. And God was deeply concerned about the stubborn, faithless obstinacy of the Israelites. And so he disciplines them with quail that makes them sick to the stomach.

The Land Between is fertile ground for God’s discipline.

In his discipline, God was seeking to save and rescue Israel from obstinate sinfulness and so form them into a nation capable of shining his light.

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

(Hebrews 12:11-12)

Jeff Manion puts it this way:

Discipline is the activity of allowing pain for redemptive purposes, and it is something for which God is to be admired, appreciated and esteemed.

(Jeff Manion)

Pain can be used for a divine purpose – to help form Christ-like character in us.

Two years after Emily wrote this book I was sitting in my office at work. It had been two years of 70 hour weeks, long meetings and painful conversations. But by God’s grace we were finding a way through. A light blue church was being painted. But it had come at a cost. Over two years I had forgotten to lean into God for strength and had instead drawn

on my own. My prayer life had dried up. My bible was rarely opened, except for sermon preparation. And I was tired – bone weary tired. Sue had seen it coming. She had warned me I could not keep up the pace. And then in July 2005 I found myself in my office staring at my wall for two hours, unable to do anything. I felt numb – emotionally and spiritually numb. It terrified me. Was I having a breakdown? Had I lost the plot?

Eventually I did pick up the phone. I called my friend and mentor and I remember saying to him, ‘I can’t do this anymore!’ ‘This’ was, be strong, be the anchor, be the ‘go to’ guy. I was over it. I took four weeks off and I spent the next six months on a painful inward journey re-establishing my emotional and spiritual centre. Making Jesus the centre of it all again. This all happened six months before I took up ministry here at Newlife.

Here’s the thing. When I found myself staring at the wall, God could have provided me with supernatural strength and wisdom. He had before. He could do it again. But God didn’t. In that moment and in the months that followed God allowed me to experience the pain of my stubborn unwillingness to look to Him for my strength. God was disciplining me. It was painful, but it was necessary. God was interested in the man I was becoming, and the pastor I would need to be here at Newlife. I look back now and I think, ‘How gracious is our God!’

We don’t have the travel the route of repeated error like I did – like the Israelites did. In some ways, we get to choose the amount of discipline we receive in our willingness or otherwise to learn. More than that, we even don’t have to learn from our own mistakes.

We have the privilege of learning from the Israelite’s mistakes in the Land Between. This is what makes this such a powerful book. The Bible is manual of people’s mistakes and the lessons we can learn from them. How much better is it that we learn from the pain of others, rather than our own pain? That is why I can’t understand why so many of us refuse to read this regularly. What wisdom we are missing! What power we are failing to tap into!

In the Land Between God is very interested in the people we are becoming.

Growth

The Land Between was the place where over forty years, God transformed Israel from being a people of slavery into the people of God.

Here us the hard truth: The land we least desire may produce the fruit we most desire. Time of trouble, hardship, pain and suffering may well be the times when spiritual growth takes off in us.

In the Land Between we can respond in one of three ways. We can hide in denial. We can pretend that life isn’t as hard as it seems. We can put on a brave face. We can ignore the facts.

Or we can cave in to despair. Rather than ignore the facts, the facts overwhelm us. We look to the future with an acute sense of hopelessness.

Or we can turn to God. In the Land Between we can choose to put our roots down deep into him, and so experience the miracle of growth in a dry and desolate place.

The Tree of Ténéré was the world’s most isolated tree. This lone acacia grew in the Sahara desert in Niger, Africa. It was the only tree within more than 250 miles (400 km) around. The tree was the last surviving member of a group of acacias that grew when the desert wasn’t as dry. When scientists dug a hole near the tree, they found its roots went down as deep as 120 feet (36 m) below to the water table deep below the desert surface.

Apparently, being the only tree in that part of the wide-open desert wasn’t enough to stop a drunk Libyan truck driver from driving his truck into it, knocking it down and killing it – which is not the point of my story!

I love this image. A tree thriving in a dry and barren and seemingly lifeless place. This speaks to the gift of the Land Between. It is in the Land Between the best and most long-lasting growth can take place.

It is in the Land Between where we learn to pour out our heart in lament to God – where learn the art of real, honest, sanctified grumbling.

It is in the Land Between where we experience the merciful hand of the God who sees, hears, is concerned and who provides.

It is the Land Between where we learn to fight for faith – where we learn perseverance.

It is the Land Between where we put our roots down deep, deep, deep and deeper still into God and his word.

It is in the Land Between where God forms, shapes and refines us. It is where God grows us. It is in the Land Between where we learn the truth, as John Maxwell put it, that:

The important thing is not what happens to us, but in us.
(John Maxwell)

It is what happens in us, not to us that will last for eternity. Everything else will pass.