

“Wandering in Wilderness” (Numbers 36:13)

There are thousands and millions of stories in the world, but there is a common pattern. Guess what? Rescuing a woman. Usually, she is young and beautiful, but she is in a difficult situation, and she can't do anything by herself. Maybe, she is locked up in the high tower. Maybe, she is sleeping because of magic. Then, a man, who is usually young, handsome, clever and brave, appears and rescues her. You can find many, many stories like this. For example, Star Wars. We know the outline, but we enjoy it so much. We love this kind of story.

Okay, then, what do you expect their lives to be like after that? A young, beautiful woman met with a young, handsome, clever, and brave man. He risks his life to rescue her. Now they are together. What kind of story would you give them for the next chapter? They get married, build a house, and make a happy family. They face challenges one after another, but, together, they overcome them one by one and their love for each other grows deeper. You'll be happy when you see they become a beautiful and mature couple. Right?

We're in the series of “The Tree of Life” studying the Pentateuch. Let's put the Pentateuch into the story framework. Episode 1, Genesis. God and man were together. But the Devil deceived man, and man left God. Finally, man drifted to Egypt. Episode 2, Exodus. God rescued man from Egypt. Episode 3, Leviticus. God and man started the new stage in their relationship. Episode 4, Numbers. It covers forty years of their life. Okay, what do you expect to see? What is supposed to happen in the story? If you were the author, what would you like to have here?

I'm sorry that you don't see what you'd like to see. Numbers is not a fairy tale story. It's not a Hollywood movie. It's a real story of real humans. It shows us wandering in the wilderness. Israel failed to trust God. They rejected God and refused to follow His word. They rebelled against God and complained to God.

They were just wandering in the wilderness. And there the reality of God was revealed. Throughout the story, His mercy and grace were vividly portrayed. It's so amazing!

Grace is the free and unmerited favor or the kindness of God. I like this definition of David Seamands best: "Grace is what God is and what God does when He meets the sinful and undeserving. Grace is a pure gift, free for the taking."¹ Yes, grace is a free gift. And moreover, it is the giver Himself. Grace is gracious God Himself who never stops loving sinners and the undeserving.

Today, we will learn about grace of God for our wandering lives in wilderness.

1. Man needs to be saved

In chapters 1 to 10 of Numbers, at Mt. Sinai, God instructed the people of Israel how to organize their community around the Tabernacle. Numbers 1:51, "Whenever the Tabernacle is moved, the Levites will take it down and set it up again. Anyone else who goes too near the Tabernacle will be executed. (NLT)" And God also talked about the sanctification of Israel. They had to understand the significance of following the Word of God. It was a matter of life or death.

Numbers shows wandering in the wilderness. Israelites began their journey from Mt. Sinai. They traveled for three days, following the cloud of the Lord.

Numbers 11:1-2 NLT

The people soon began to complain to the LORD about their hardships; and when the LORD heard them, his anger blazed against them. Fire from the LORD raged

¹ David. A. Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*, (Colorado Springs, CO, David C. Cook, 1981), 84.

among them and destroyed the outskirts of the camp. ² The people screamed to Moses for help; and when he prayed to the LORD, the fire stopped.

It was just by God's mercy and grace that they had been saved. They could have been totally destroyed.

Right after this, in v.4, you see, "they wept." They wept for what? Did they confess their wrong action and ask forgiveness in tears? Did they surrender to God and commit themselves to God? Was it the reason why were they weeping? Let's look at the Bible.

Numbers 11:4 NRSV

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat!"

The people of Israel just complained in tears, "Oh, for some meat! We remember all the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt."

If you were God, what would you do to them? They were just saved by your mercy and grace, then now complained to you about having no meat, fish, and veggies. Amazingly, God gave them meat.

Numbers 11:33 NLT

But while they were still eating the meat, the anger of the LORD blazed against the people, and he caused a severe plague to break out among them.

Here, God gave them another lesson. They had learned nothing from their previous experiences. They repeatedly complained against God. Actually, they deserved death according to their actions and attitude toward God. God gave them another lesson, but didn't totally destroy them.

We are not that different from them. The Bible declares that “There is no one righteous, not even one. (Rom 3:10 NIV)” According to the Bible, by birth, all human beings have a sinful nature. A man was born as a sinner, therefore he bears fruits of sin. He was the object of God's wrath. There is no exception. (Eph 2:1-3)

When we misunderstand our natural state and how we need to be saved, we also misunderstand salvation. All are the objects of God's wrath. All are going to be thrown into eternal death. Moreover, no-one can get out of the situation.

The simple fact we often forget is how hopeless and totally bankrupted we are without Christ. And there is no way by which we can make ourselves right with God by our own effort or work.

2. To be saved by grace through faith

Numbers shows wandering in the wilderness. The Israelites were traveling in the wilderness. In chapter 21, The Canaanite king of Arad heard that the Israelites were approaching his territory. So, he attacked the Israelites and took some of them as prisoners. The Israelites cried out to the Lord for help. The Lord heard their request and gave them victory over the Canaanites.

The people of Israel experienced another amazing powerful rescue of the Lord. Then, what happened next?

Numbers 21:4-5 NLT

Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient along the way,⁵ and they began to murmur against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us

out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?” they complained. “There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this wretched manna!”

They just experienced the mighty victory of God. They could have been killed by Canaanites. But God saved them. Now they complained about why God brought them out of the slavery of Egypt and grumbled about manna. Do you remember that they were traveling in the wilderness? They have nothing to eat, but manna God provided for them. So, here God gave them another lesson.

Numbers 21:6-9 NLT

So the LORD sent poisonous snakes among them, and many of them were bitten and died. ⁷ Then the people came to Moses and cried out, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take away the snakes.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ Then the LORD told him, “Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to the top of a pole. Those who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!” ⁹ So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to the top of a pole. Whenever those who were bitten looked at the bronze snake, they recovered!

They deserved to die. There was no reason for God to save them. But out of mercy and love, God gave them a chance to live. But, this required their obedience, action by faith. Those who believed the Word of God through Moses and put their faith into action looked at the bronze snake, and they were healed.

Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

The Bible clearly says “By grace you have been saved.” The wonderful news is sinners can be saved! It is only by grace. Jesus came to save us, you and me. And his salvation is perfect. There is nothing we have to add for our salvation. We just believe Jesus.

How do you know you have faith in Jesus? Your action tells either you trust him or not. “Faith apart from work is dead (James 2:26 ESV).”

3. Standing in grace

Numbers shows wandering in the wilderness. In cp 14, twelve leaders were sent to explore the land of Canaan. And they reported to the people, “The land we explored is a great place, but the people who live there are powerful and stronger than us. If we enter the land, they will destroy us.”

But Joshua and Caleb were different from them. They said, “If the Lord is pleased with us, he’ll lead us into that land. He’ll give it to us. (Num 14:8 NIRV)”

Then, our important question is how we can please the Lord. Okay, let’s continue to look at the Bible.

Numbers 14:9 NIRV

“But don’t refuse to obey him. And don’t be afraid of the people of the land. We will swallow them up. The LORD is with us. So nothing can save them. Don’t be afraid of them.”

When is God pleased with us? He is pleased when we trust him and obey him, when we listen to him and put his word into action.

When Joshua and Caleb considered God stronger than the people in Canaan, God delighted in them. When they trusted God was faithful to his promise and had the power to accomplish it, he was delighted with them.

Dallas Willard says that grace is “God acting in your life to accomplish what you can’t accomplish on your own.”²

The whole forty-year journey in the wilderness is the learning process of living in God’s grace. Through experiences, Israelites got to know that God is acting in their life to accomplish what they couldn’t accomplish on their own. They can’t have food, but God can provide for them. They can’t be acceptable to God, but God can make them acceptable. They can’t make them holy, but God can. They can’t cross the Red Sea, but God can make a way for them. They can’t win the battles, but God can give victory to them.

But, we must realize that none of these things would just happen automatically. It requires Israel to take actions by faith, believing God to be powerfully working in their life to accomplish what they can’t accomplish on their own. That is the life standing in grace.

It’s the same for the Christian life in holiness. It’s the powerful work of God. And, it requires our obedience, actions by faith, believing in God who is powerfully working in our life to accomplish what we can’t accomplish on our own.

We, Christians knew we were saved only by grace through faith, and not by any of our work. But, as for victorious Christian life, somehow we feel it all depends on our hard work: my discipline, my prayer, Bible reading, witnessing and serving, helping others, and giving offerings. In other words, we forget that the Christian life depends on God. So, you work hard because you think it depends on you, but, you never ever feel you’ve done enough. So, you always

² Alan Andrews, eds., *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2010), 48.

try to find an excuse for yourself. And, because you have a guilty feeling before God, you don't want to come to God.

God has good news for you and me. It's not just good, but great, wonderful and marvelous news for you and me.

Romans 5:1-2 NIV

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

We can stand in grace. Or, more precisely, we, you and I stand in grace now since we've believed in Jesus.

Grace is not just for the time when you and I were saved, the first time we received forgiveness of sin. But, the Christian life from the beginning to the end is living in God's grace, experiencing God's grace, believing God is powerfully working in our lives to accomplish what we can't accomplish on our own. Therefore, we'll never lose hope, continue to pursue what God promised such as living in holiness, being Christlikeness, being salt and light, and living worthily of the gospel.

You and I have entered into grace. "Grace is a place where God lives."³ And, we are standing in grace.

4. Living in grace

³ Ibid., 62.

Israel was the community of living in grace. Numbers shows how they lived in grace during wandering in the wilderness. Chapters 28 and 29 talk about the Sabbath and a holy assembly of the people. They were not allowed to do regular work on these days. They offered a burnt offering to God. Every week, as a community, they remember that God provides all their needs. Every year, as a community, they remember that God is the only source of life, forgiveness, holiness, and the future. As a community, they experienced grace together.

Living in grace is not a license to keep sinning. It is a way to set us, you and me free from the bondage of sin. In the community, we learn to trust God's grace "as we learn to repent or forgive or as we together experience reconciliation."⁴

Do you want to know the secret of experiencing grace or making reconciliation? The secret is to confess your sin before God and ask forgiveness of God and people.

First, you admit what you did wrong. Confess your sin concretely and clearly. It is to honestly confess before God the sins hidden deep down in your heart, which you don't want to think about, which you are still feeling guilty about, powerless against, and despaired of.

Then, ask God for forgiveness. And, declare forgiveness by the cross, based on God's Word, for example, 1 John 1:7, John 8:11. Then, imagine how much you are loved by Jesus. In many cases, it is much more effective if you can have a mature Christian to do the declaration with you, rather than do it alone.

Then, ask forgiveness of people to whom you did wrong. This is the most tangible moment you experience the grace of God.

⁴ Ibid., 74.

We must humbly acknowledge that we need each other to learn how to love, how to forgive, and how to ask forgiveness. We can live in grace only when we are in the community of faith. So, “Grace is a community you enter.”⁵

5. The incomparable riches of his grace

Numbers 36:13 NLT

These are the commands and regulations that the LORD gave to the people of Israel through Moses while they were camped on the plains of Moab beside the Jordan River, across from Jericho.

They were about to cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised land. They were going to do things which was impossible by their strength. It was impossible for them to take possession of the land, reject the gods of other inhabitants of the land, observe the Word of God, and live as God’s holy people by their own human strength, ability, and effort. Moreover, it is impossible for them to build a community that is worthy to have the Holy God live in the midst of. It is only possible by God’s grace.

We must understand that God’s grace is so much more than what we find in our conversion experience. It is not something only done in the past, but it also operates in the present and will continue throughout the future. Again, grace is not about forgiveness of sins.

Ephesians 2:6-7 NIV

⁵ Ibid., 62.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Not only were we made alive with Christ, but we were also exalted with Christ and seated with Him in the heavenly realms. It's only by grace. "There is no other basis for entrance into the kingdom of God – here on earth or in heaven."⁶

You may have already experienced God's kindness, mercy, and tremendous work of grace. But, there is still more for us to experience and discover about his grace. Grace will continue to show us its incomparable riches throughout eternity, as we live with Him in His glory eternally.

God loves us as we are, but he loves us so much that he can't allow us to stay as we are. God loves us and accepts us as we are, that's why he reached out to us while we were still sinners. But he also knows how wounded we are in this sinful world, how distorted our self-esteem is as we have been captivated by the devil for so long, and we still live in this broken world. Our life is wandering in the wilderness. God doesn't want to keep us in the sufferings by the pains of the past and despair with low self-esteem. God wants to repair our damaged emotions, heal our hang-ups into wholeness, and transform us into Christlikeness.

God wants to show the "incomparable riches of his grace" to us and through us. Now we, Christians have been identified with Christ in his resurrection and exaltation, so we have given the authority over the evil powers. That is grace. As we live in this world, we take our stand against the devil's schemes and wrestle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:11-12). We can do it because of the grace of God.

⁶ David A. Seamands, *Healing Grace*, (Scripture Press Foundation [UK] LTD: Herts, 1995), 216.

By grace alone, we can have the victorious life in Christ Jesus during our wandering in wilderness.

For Self-reflection

1. Have you ever felt that a victorious Christian life depends on your hard work?
 - What did you do? How was the result?
 - Why is this thought wrong?

2. On the Sabbath day, Israelites were not permitted to work, including collecting manna (Ex 20:8-11; 16:25, 29-30), but commented to give God offerings (Num 28:9-10). How does practicing the Sabbath teach living in grace to Israelites?
 - How would you practice the Sabbath?

3. Dallas Willard says that grace is “God acting in your life to accomplish what you can’t accomplish on your own.” How does this statement inspire you about living in grace? How would you describe a life standing in grace?

4. The secret of experiencing grace is confessing your sins before God and asking forgiveness of God and people. Pray God to show you if you need to forgive someone. And, take the steps by receiving the help of the Holy Spirit.