

Editorial

Forty Years in the Desert!

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On 10 October 2010 I shall have been a Baptist minister for 40 years. Forty years in ministry these days is a long time, for, unlike many ministers today, I have had no other 'career' - my life has been ministry. And unlike many of my peers of yesterday, I have survived, and indeed thrived in ministry. For this I am very thankful.

Forty years in ministry. Does the Bible have anything to say about this period of time? As I searched through my concordance, the only significant period of forty years I found was the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness. Those were years of punishment imposed on Israel for her failure to trust God. At first sight the parallel between forty years of ministry and forty years in the wilderness is not the most apt!

Yet, on reflection, perhaps there are some parallels which can be drawn. For in ministry we never 'arrive' at our destination - we are always marching toward the 'promised land'. There are times when our congregations can seem recalcitrant - when they murmur and grumble, just like the children of Israel murmured and grumbled at Moses. Certainly there have been times in my ministry when life has been tough; periods when ministry has been pretty barren. But God in his goodness has brought me through, and as I look back on this lifetime of ministry, there is so much for which I am grateful.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I read again the words of Deuteronomy 8.2: "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness". The forty years were years of "humbling" and of "testing", but they were also years of learning and of experiencing God's gracious provision.

At this point I consulted a commentary and read there these words of Peter Craigie:

"The wilderness tested and disciplined the people in various ways. On the one hand, the desolation of the wilderness removed the natural props and supports which many by nature depend on; it cast the people back on God, who alone could provide the strength to survive the wilderness. On the other hand, the severity of the wilderness period undermined the shallow bases of confidence of those who were not truly rooted and grounded in God. The wilderness makes or breaks a man; it provides strength of will and character. The strength

provided by the wilderness, however, was not the strength of self-sufficiency, but the strength that comes from a knowledge of the living God” (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Deuteronomy, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1976, 185).

As I reflected on these words within the context of ministry, they seemed incredibly appropriate. Ministry is a testing experience. There are times when we ministers are tempted to the very limit of our beings - if not beyond. However gifted we may be, we discover that our natural resources are no longer sufficient - we can no longer cope in our own strength. But thankfully, as we cast ourselves upon God, we also discover that his resources are more than sufficient - his grace is all that we need. Sadly, ministry can break people, but it can also make people. Indeed, precisely as a result of the ups and downs of ministry, God can refine us and shape us more into the image of his Son.

“Remember the long way the Lord has led you”, says the Deuteronomist. Yes, as I look back, it has been a “long way”. There has been a lot of testing, and a lot of learning too, but through all that period, God has been there, providing (see Deuteronomy 7.8). So, God willing, when I come to celebrate that 40th anniversary, like Samuel after the battle of Mizpah, I will be able to mark the occasion and say “Thus far the Lord has helped us” (2 Samuel 7.12).