

# What If? Pt. 1

Pastor James Foley – Shared Sunday, November 28, 2021

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## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for joining us today! Whether you are here in person or watching via the livestream, you are most welcome. Please have a Bible at the ready and be prepared to take some notes. We have much to cover in a relatively short amount of time.

## SETTING THE STAGE

I trust that you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving with family and friends! This morning I want to introduce a two-part series entitled “WHAT IF?” that will serve as the bridge between the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays...

**NOTE 1** – Without much in the way of introduction, this opening installment will highlight key moments from the wilderness journey of the Hebrew people as they trekked from Egypt to the Promised Land in the days of Moses (i.e., as recorded in the Books of Exodus and Numbers). Herein the Lord mightily delivered His people from bondage under Pharaoh to bring them to the land promised them some four centuries prior in the days of Abram (cf. Gen. 12).

**NOTE 2** – This season of biblical history is rich with insights and applications for students of Scripture in any generation. However, it is also a disturbing and frustrating period to examine! Frankly, there are moments from this era that I wish I could rewrite—moments that could have gone so well for the people of God had they chosen to honor and serve the Lord. However, all-too-often they chose a very different spiritual path, costing them greatly. Thus said...

**KEY** – We will examine several accounts from Exodus and Numbers this morning. For each, we will dream of what could have been. Then we will explore what actually transpired per the biblical record. May we have ears to hear what God is saying in this hour!

LET US DELVE IN...

## #1 – RED SEA

Our first account occurs immediately after the release of the Israelites from Egypt...

### Exodus 14:1–10a (NIV)

1 . . . the Lord said to Moses, 2 “Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. 3 Pharaoh will think, ‘The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.’ 4 And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.” So the Israelites did this.

5 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, “What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!” 6 So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. 7 He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. 8 The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. 9 The Egyptians—all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

10 As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them . . .

### Q. What do we see herein (v. 10a)?

A. We see the children of Israel in a moment of CRISIS. They are hard-pressed between the chariots of Pharaoh and the Sea, with no discernible way of escape. In this moment of crisis and difficulty, I wish the subsequent text read in the following manner...

### Exodus 14 (\*PJV)

10 As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified yet trusted in the Lord. They said to Moses, “We have seen the hand of the Lord smite the Egyptians with plague, redeeming us from the power of mighty Pharaoh. Our God is greater, and though we perceive no way of earthly deliverance, He will yet glorify His Name according to His promise and deliver us!” Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” [SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE PARTING OF THE RED SEA].

**KEY 1** – However, this is not what transpires. Sadly, we see something quite different in the biblical record...

### Exodus 14:10–14 (NIV)

10 As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. 11 They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” 13 Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” [SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE PARTING OF THE RED SEA].

**Q1. What do we see herein?** Incredible faithlessness, doubt, and ingratitude!

**Q2. How could those who were so mightily delivered so doubt in this moment of crisis?**

**KEY 2** – Of course, newly delivered the Lord had mercy upon His people. He would go on to save them through power divine, without penalty or price for their faithlessness. As we shall see, this shall not always be the case! Let us continue with the second account of the morning. Consider the following...

## #2 – WATER

Our second account takes place in the days following the parting of the Red Sea...

### **Exodus 17:1**

1 The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. . . .

**Q. What do we see herein?**

**A.** We see the children of Israel in a season of PERCEIVED LACK. They are faced with and must AGAIN navigate some earthly deprivation. I say AGAIN because God had just provided them with manna and quail in the previous chapter, graciously meeting their complaint-laden request (cf. Exod. 16). In this moment of lack, I wish the subsequent text read in the following manner...

### **Exodus 17:1 (\*PJV)**

1 The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 There they remembered the past provision of God and called upon Moses to lead a time of prayer for the needs of the nation.

**KEY** – However, this is not what transpires. Sadly, we see something quite different in the biblical record...

### **Exodus 17:1–7 (NIV)**

1 The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 So they quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?”

3 But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”

4 Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

5 The Lord answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

**Q1. What do we see herein?**

**A.** We again see faithlessness, doubt, and ingratitude! We see a petulant people making demands of the Lord (i.e., as though He exists to service them). Moreover, we read of a people who cannot operate beyond the demands of their flesh. How utterly tragic...

**Q2. How could those who were so provided for so doubt the capacity and kindness of God?**

**KEY 2** – Once again, Lord showed grace to His people. He worked through Moses to provide for their needs, supplying water (not to mention the past provision of the manna and quail)! However, the Lord is slow to anger, but not impossible to anger. Let us continue with the third account of the morning...

**#3 – SINAI**

Our third account takes place in the context of the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai.

**FYI 1** – In Exodus 24 the Israelites commit to serving the Lord as His unique covenant people...

**Exodus 24:3–4**

3 When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do." 4 Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said.

**FYI 2** – Herein they commit themselves to keeping the Ten Commandments (cf. Exod. 20) and varying regulations (Exod. 21–23). Subsequently, Moses would ascend Sinai to spend forty days communing with the Lord, receiving further instruction. This commenced a season of WAITING for the Israelites which culminates with Exodus 32. Let us turn to Exodus 32 and consider what might have been for the people of God...

**Exodus 32:1 (\*PJV)**

1 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, lead us in a time of prayer and worship unto the Lord. Let us pray that we would remain faithful to our covenantal pledge and let us pray for Moses as our leader, as he communes with the Lord on our behalf)!"

**KEY 1** – However, this is not what takes place! Rather, we see something quite different in the biblical record...

**Exodus 32:1–8, 15–35 (NIV)**

1 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

2 Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." 3 So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. 4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." 6 So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

7 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. 8 They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'

....

15 Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. 16 The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. 17 When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "There is the sound of war in the camp." 18 Moses replied:

"It is not the sound of victory,  
it is not the sound of defeat;  
it is the sound of singing that I hear."

19 When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. 20 And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

21 He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"

22 "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. 23 They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' 24 So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

25 Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. 26 So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him.

27 Then he said to them, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.'" 28 The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. 29 Then Moses said, "You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."

30 The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

31 So Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. 32 But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."

33 The Lord replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. 34 Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.”

35 And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.

**Q1. What do we see herein?** Gross impatience and woeful spiritual infidelity.

**Q2. How could those who just covenanted with God act so shamefully and sinfully!**

**KEY 2** – We see herein the anger of the Lord begin to burn against His people. He was willing to show mercy in their earlier seasons of crisis and lack, but their failure to remain steadfast in a season of waiting was met with penalty and judgment. Let us continue with the fourth and final account of the morning...

## #4 – SPIES

Our final account takes place on the border of the Promised Land itself...

**FYI** – The people of God find themselves on the precipice of BREAKTHROUGH and VICTORY...

### **Numbers 13:1–3, 17–27a**

The Lord said to Moses, 2 “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.” 3 So at the Lord’s command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites.

....

17 When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, “Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. 18 See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. 19 What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? 20 How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land.” (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

21 So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, toward Lebo Hamath. 22 They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, lived. (Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) 23 When they reached the Valley of Eshkol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. 24 That place was called the Valley of Eshkol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there. 25 At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

26 They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. 27 They gave Moses this account . . .

**KEY 1** – In this moment of potential breakthrough, I wish the subsequent text read in the following manner...

### **Numbers 13 (\*PJV)**

“We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. Though the people there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large, we should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it in the Lord” This report emboldened the faith of the children of Israel, and in the power of God they rose up to take the land!

**KEY 2** – However, this is not what takes place! Rather, we see something quite different in the biblical record...

### **Numbers 13:27–33 (NIV)**

27 They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. 28 But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. 29 The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan.”

30 Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” 31 But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” 32 And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. 33 We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

### **Numbers 14:1–38**

That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. 2 All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! 3 Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” 4 And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

5 Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. 6 Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes 7 and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. 8 If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. 9 Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”

10 But the whole assembly talked about stoning them. Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. 11 The Lord said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? 12 I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they.”

13 Moses said to the Lord, “Then the Egyptians will hear about it! By your power you brought these people up from among them. 14 And they will tell the inhabitants of this land about it. They have already heard that you, Lord, are with these people and that you, Lord, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. 15 If you put all these people to death, leaving none alive, the nations who have heard this report about you will say, 16 ‘The Lord was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness.’

17 “Now may the Lord’s strength be displayed, just as you have declared: 18 ‘The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.’ 19 In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.”

20 The Lord replied, “I have forgiven them, as you asked. 21 Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth, 22 not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times— 23 not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. 24 But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it. 25 Since the Amalekites and the Canaanites are living in the valleys, turn back tomorrow and set out toward the desert along the route to the Red Sea.[a]”

26 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: 27 “How long will this wicked community grumble against me? I have heard the complaints of these grumbling Israelites. 28 So tell them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say: 29 In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. 30 Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. 31 As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. 32 But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness. 33 Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness. 34 For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.’ 35 I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together against me. They will meet their end in this wilderness; here they will die.”

36 So the men Moses had sent to explore the land, who returned and made the whole community grumble against him by spreading a bad report about it— 37 these men who were responsible for spreading the bad report about the land were struck down and died of a plague before the Lord. 38 Of the men who went to explore the land, only Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived.

**KEY 3** – Ultimately, their cumulative complaint, faithlessness and spiritual infidelity was met with horrific cost and consequence. Rather than enter the Land of Promise, they would have to wander for decades in the wilderness until an entire generation passed, their children eventually entering under Joshua.



## APPLICATION(S)

**NOTE 1** – We have read a lot of Scripture this morning concerning the wicked choices of the people of God. In each section we have wondered “WHAT IF?”—only to see the price and penalty they needlessly faced at every juncture! We could dismiss these accounts as being irrelevant in our generation, but this would be folly. Let us remember...

### **2 Timothy 3:16–17**

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

### **1 Corinthians 10:11**

11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.

**NOTE 2** – Like them, we often find ourselves in moments of a) crisis; b) perceived lack; c) waiting; or d) on the precipice of victory and breakthrough. What we do in these times matters greatly, and unlike the accounts we have read this morning, we are still actively writing our stories...

**Q. What will your story say? What could or should your story say?** Choose wisely!

**NOTE 3** – Next week we will consider figures who could have chosen poorly but chose rightly in the Lord.

## CONCLUSION

**NOTE 1** – Those who wish to give online may do so at [www.NewLifeBarre.org](http://www.NewLifeBarre.org). Those who wish to give in person can utilize the offering boxes located throughout the church facility. Thank you for your faithfulness in supporting this local work of Christ.

**NOTE 2** – Ministry schedule...

**Prayer** – Sunday at 8:45am

**Sunday School** – Sunday at 9:15am

**CYC** – Tuesday from 3–4pm and 4–5pm

**Weekly Study** – Thursday at 6:30–7:30pm

**Women’s Ministry** – 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday at 6:30pm

**Men’s Breakfast** – 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday at 9am

**Potluck** – Following this Service

### **Numbers 6:24–26**

24 The Lord bless you  
and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face shine on you  
and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord turn his face toward you  
and give you peace.