

## **The Significance of 40      FCC 5-10-20**

Someone once asked me- what is the significance of the number 40 in the Bible? Why does it appear so often? When people ask me questions, they usually stick with me and I continue to think about them long after the conversation is over. When I heard this particular question, all I could do was shrug my shoulders, but I've thought about it ever since. Recently this question has come back to mind for two reasons- first, because after his death and resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples for 40 days before he ascended into heaven, and second, because interestingly it has been 7 weeks, just over 40 days, that we have had church exclusively online due to the current pandemic. We will come back to that coincidence, but first I'd like to take you through a survey of the occurrences of 40 in the Bible.

### **Noah's Flood:**

*Gen\_7:4 For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground."*

*Gen\_7:12 And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights.*

*Gen\_7:17 The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.*

*Gen\_8:6 At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made*

Here we see God using 40 days of rain and 40 days of flood to purify the earth from its wicked and faithless inhabitants. God saved Noah and his family and brought them through to see a new day, a new beginning. As someone pointed out a week ago Wednesday night, that time on the ark was a long time of isolation, something that resonates with us today.

### **Israelites in the Wilderness:**

*Exo\_16:35 The people of Israel ate the manna forty years, till they came to a habitable land. They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan.*

*Num\_32:13 And the LORD's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the LORD was gone.*

*Deu\_2:7 For the LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing."*

*Deu\_8:2 And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.*

*Deu\_29:5 I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet.*

*Jos\_5:6 For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD; the LORD swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

Our scripture reading in Psalm 95 echoed this, so did Nehemiah 9:21 and Ezekiel 4:6 and Amos 2:10 and 5:25 and Stephen's sermon in Acts and Hebrews. They failed to offer honorable sacrifices during that time, kept wanting to turn to idol worship, and by doing so put God to the test and provoked his anger.

The 40-year wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness is probably the most readily recalled occurrence of 40 in scripture. This time period was the key to getting the people transitioned from the old life of bondage in Egypt to new life in the promised land under God's covenant. The slave mentality, and the temptations to idolatry, had to be rooted out, and the understanding of who Yahweh is and how to repent of sin and worship him with heart, soul, mind, and strength and

love one's neighbor and be the light of the world had to be instilled in the people, as individuals and as a whole. The people needed to understand how to let God be their leader, through the cloud by day and the fire by night and through the priests. A renewal of heart and mind, a rebirth, had to take place, a political, structural, societal and cultural change had to take place, and it needed time to take effect.

### **Moses on the Mountain of God:**

*Exo\_24:18 Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.*

*Exo\_34:28 So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.*

*Deu\_9:18 Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin that you had committed, in doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD to provoke him to anger.*

*Deu\_9:25 "So I lay prostrate before the LORD for these forty days and forty nights, because the LORD had said he would destroy you.*

*Deu\_10:10 "I myself stayed on the mountain, as at the first time, forty days and forty nights, and the LORD listened to me that time also. The LORD was unwilling to destroy you.*

Moses fasted for 40 days and nights on the mountain to mourn the sin of the people, to intercede for them, and receive the Law from God. That Law would become God's primary instrument of the purification and new life for his people.

### **Spying out the Promised Land:**

*Num\_13:25 At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land.*

*Num\_14:33 And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.*

*Num\_14:34 According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.'*

The spies were able to behold the incredible land that God promised to Israel, and envision what life would be like once that wonderful land was theirs. Those 40 days of spying were 40 days of hope. But for every one of those days, the people spend a year in the wilderness to be purified by God so that they would be ready to be the kind of people that could truly receive that promise and live in that promise to its potential. They needed to learn who God is, what sin is, and how to live out God's covenant, the law. God knows that if they won't do it in the wilderness, they won't do it in the promised land.

**Other occurrences:**

Many leaders, judges, and kings were 40 years old when God put them in leadership, such as Moses, Joshua, and Ish-bosheth son of Saul. (For some of us, it takes that long for God to shape us and prepare us for leadership)

Many leaders, judges, and kings reigned for 40-year periods, such as Eli, Saul, David, Solomon, and Joash (Jehoash). (In these instances, it seemed that God used a 40-year time frame to accomplish his purposes through these leaders)

There were many times in Judges that the land had rest for 40-year periods: under Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon. (God gave 40 years of peace- seems like an appropriate response to 40 years of wandering- it's enough time to learn what peace really is and to be restored)

There were also times that Israel was given to the hands of an enemy for 40 years, such as the Philistines in the book of Judges.

Goliath took a stand against Israel for 40 days before David killed him.

Elijah fasted for forty days and forty nights on Horeb, the mount of God, after which he heard God speak to him in the still small voice.

After that he anointed kings in Syria and Israel, and anointed Elisha to be prophet in his place.

Through Ezekiel the prophet, God decreed 40 years of desolation in Egypt, its people would be scattered, after which God would regather the Egyptians.

Jonah called for repentance in Nineveh for 40 days.

There were 40 bases of silver on each of two of the walls of the tabernacle- think of the significance of that- this is the place of worship in which atonement was made for sin, people were purified and at peace with God.

As we look to the NT we see that God's use of a time period of 40 in the OT is consistent with the ministry of Jesus:

**Jesus was tempted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness.**

*Mar 1:12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.*

*Mar\_1:13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.*

*Luk\_4:1 And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness*

*Luk\_4:2 for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.*

Jesus was tempted and tested for this time as God's confirmation to us that his Son was truly human and yet was truly without sin. This 40-day testing had to come before his public ministry began- this was the necessary foundation and preparation for an effective ministry. He learned to rely on God for sustenance.

**Jesus appeared to his disciples for 40 days**

*Act\_1:3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*

Jesus had the grace to spend time with his disciples to build their faith in his resurrection and to teach them about the kingdom that they would be called to serve and grow. The purpose of this 40-day time was to prepare his disciples for a new phase.

As we look at this recurrence of 40 in the Bible, there are a few themes or purposes that these occurrences have in common. It is more than coincidence. There is

- Sanctification- includes discipline or testing
- Preparation- being tested or taught so as to be ready for a coming phase in God's plan
- Rest- to experience the peace that results from following God

Now my point is not to say that we were supposed to have church online for about 40 days or be distancing for 40 days. Also, my point is not to say that we should try to make the number 40 fit with anything that is happening during this pandemic. My point is that when God wants to test us, sanctify us, prepare us, or train us, he uses a challenging time frame to do so. He pushes us to the max that we think we can handle, or even beyond what we think we can handle, because that is the length of time it takes to really change the way we think, to alter the course of our lives, to change our habits, to solidify those changes in our lives for the long term, or to thoroughly prepare us for the next phase of service.

Look back over your own life- reflect on the times of trial or testing you have had, or even times of peace that you have had. Don't try to identify ones that lasted for 40 days or years or 40 of anything, don't try to force the number 40 to fit with any of it. The point is not the number, the point is the principle we learn from the use of that number. Think about the challenges that lasted about as long as you felt you could handle, or even a little bit longer. Think about the significance of those times in your life- think about the way God used that time to test you, form you, teach you, or prepare you for what he

had next, or even a time of peace he gave you that was long enough to restore you. What did you learn? How did it change you?

This formation time is not just something that God does in our individual lives, but something he uses to shape his people as a whole. We are enduring the effects of this pandemic together as a church. Our particular church, FCC, is dealing with it, as well as the global church. Think about the way this pandemic has challenged us as a church. Again, don't try to make the number 40 fit with anything, think about the fact that this period of time, regardless of its length, has pushed us to the limit of what we can handle, whether it is mental, emotional, or financial.

Finally, this formation time is one that God uses to shape entire nations. Israel wasn't the only nation to go through a 40-year trial; Egypt did too. Now I'm not trying to compare the sins of the U.S. or any other country today to those of ancient Egypt- at least not this morning, but I am saying that God wants to use this time of trial to shape our country. What will our country, and we as citizens, learn from this? How will we let this change us?

Maybe we have learned about our tendencies for apathy, doubt, complacency, or insubordination. Or, maybe we have learned about our propensity for panic, fear, and over-reaction. Maybe we've learned hard lessons about financial planning. Maybe we've learned more about our family relationships or lack thereof. Maybe we've take time to think about what we really care about in life. Maybe we're discovered how much we need each other. Maybe we've learned about what technology can and can't do for us. Maybe we've learned what means to trust God. Those are just a few ideas. Scripture is challenging us today to reflect on the ways God is using our current circumstances to shape us as individual believers and as a church.

Let us pray...