

The Test of Marah

Exodus 15:22-27

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 15. When we last left Israel they were singing and dancing at the Red Sea, singing God's praises by the sea, declaring Him to be great. Now, within three days everything has changed. For the mountain top to the valley, seventy-two hours. Here we are in Exodus chapter 15 verses 22 through 27. As the children of Israel make their way to that bitter oasis, that wadi called Marah and find their faith tested. Let me remind you of a few things before we get to this great passage tonight. The rest of the book of Exodus, from this point on, is going to relate the major events of the first year of wandering in the wilderness and there are going to be patterns that repeat themselves, both before and after Sinai in the first five books in the Bible.

On the way to the mountain, on the way to Sinai, four crises occur. There is a lack of drinking water; we come to that crisis tonight. There is a shortage of food. We'll come to that when we come to Exodus 16. There's a further lack of water in Exodus 17, and then there is a sudden unprovoked act of aggression by a wild desert tribe at the end of Exodus 17. In these particular trials that Israel endures one can discern four major elements, two more of which are added after the Exodus. Let me give you all six of them together and then I'll tell you the ones that we don't see in these four stories that we're going to be looking at next. The children of Israel journey, that's the first element. Then they run into a need and respond to it by murmuring, that's the second element. They, thirdly, face God's judgment. Fourthly, they repent. Fifthly they intercede and beg God to intercede for them, and then sixthly there is a deliverance.

Now, in the first four stories that we are going to look at prior to Mt. Sinai, you will recognize immediately that elements three and four of judgment and repentance are absent. This is not because God is pleased with the way that the children of Israel have behaved, and not because the children of Israel don't need to repent, but because in these first four stories it is made abundantly clear that it is not only the grace of God that has delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt across the Red Sea, but it is going to be the grace of God that preserves Israel in the wilderness.

The wilderness theme is one of the great themes of the Scripture. God has

worked this mighty miracle to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt to create them into a new nation, a holy people, a kingdom of priests, and where does He take them? To a dry and waterless wilderness. It wasn't exactly what they were expecting. I wonder if some of you are there in your Christian life? Redeemed from your sins. You know that God has dealt with you graciously. He has spared you the condemnation that you ought to experience, but you still find yourself in a dry, waterless wilderness. You wonder if somehow something has gone wrong. But what we find in all of these great stories and the Exodus is that God has a plan even for this dry waterless wilderness; to get glory for Himself, to display His grace, and to make you into what you are not now, a trophy of His grace. With that in mind, let's hear God's holy word here in Exodus chapter 15, and we'll begin in the 22nd verse.

Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. And when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah, So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" Then he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet. There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there He tested them. And He said, "If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the LORD, am your healer." Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the waters.

Amen. This is God's holy and inspired word may He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord, we thank you for this word. We are mindful of the words of Your servant, the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, who tells us in I Corinthians 10, that these things happened and were written for our instruction upon whom has come the ends of the ages. You intend for us to learn positively and negatively from these great passages. Help us then by the Spirit to see Your truth, to hear it, to bow the knee, do to it, all by grace. In Jesus name. Amen.

One of God's purposes with Israel in the wilderness was to teach Israel to live by grace. Now, living by grace may sound like easy living. It may sound like God really giving it to you easy, it's easy street, it's grace after all. But living by grace mean living in utter dependence upon the provision of God and there is no place where it is more acute, this living by grace, than when you are in the wilderness. God knows that and accentuates our need in order to accentuate our dependency, in order to accentuate the provision of His grace by putting us in the wilderness and that's precisely what He does with Israel. Living by grace means

a bold and active faith in God's word and God's provision. Trusting Him and accepting His providence as good and wise even when we can't sort it all out. So, the Lord puts His people to the test in the wilderness, to humble them and teach them to live by grace, and again and again we will see it becomes apparent that the Israelites did not want to live by grace. They wanted to live by sight, they wanted to live by their lordship, but they didn't want to live by faith, by God's lordship and in accordance with His grace. They rebelled against the fatherly, wise, and good leading of the Lord and they refused to recognize Him as their king and healer, and yet the surprising thing, the thing that strikes you about these stories prior to Sinai is how tender God is in response to these people.

I'd like you to see two or three things in this passage, and again I'd like to give you three words to sort of hang the passage on as we work through it. The first word, difficulty, verses 22 and 23. The second word, faithlessness, ouch, that hurt, faithlessness, verse 24. And the final word, grace, verses 25 through 27. These three sections I'd like to walk you through tonight.

I. The difficulty.

First verses 22 and 23. Here Israel finds herself in a real difficulty. Israel's circumstances are difficult to say the least, and we don't want to underemphasize that or ignore that, or downplay that at all. Israel was facing real hardship in the place she found herself, and I want to say that there is a spiritual principle in this, for us, and that is there is every reason to expect trials in the Christian life as well.

This section, verses 22 and 23, contains indications of the initial movements from the edge of the land of Egypt, from the edge of the Red Sea area, into the wilderness. Names like Shur, and Marah, and Elim, and the three days, all of those tip us off that Israel is making her entry way into the wilderness now, and this section picks up on the story, which we left off at Exodus 14:29. We've been singing and praising God with Israel for twenty something verses, and now we pick up with a story that was left off back in Exodus 14:29. Numbers 23 will give you a fuller itinerary, but Moses here is giving you an outline of the movements of Israel in the wilderness.

It's a really strange phrase used here in verse 22. Look at the language of the first few words, 'then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea.' This passage might literally be translated, 'Moses caused Israel to set out,' and it may indicate Israel's reluctance to leave the Red Sea. He calls Israel to leave.

The name *Shur* in verse 22 means *wall* and it may well indicate the walls built by the Pharaohs. Those wall fortifications in the eastern delta of the Nile, but at any rate we are seeing language here that is showing us or reminding us graphically of the children of Israel edge into the wilderness.

Then they arrived at the wadi, they arrived at this oasis with a well, but the springs there are bitter. Desert springs are often bitter in the Sinai and the bitterness of the water leads to a bitter response on the part of the people. Put yourself in their shoes. They wouldn't have had much with which to keep a long supply of water on the journey in the wilderness. They would have been relatively short term dependent on supplies of water that could be replenished along the way. They get to this well and it's undrinkable. The bitterness may suggest something that is actually poisonous and not potable. But imagine yourself as a mother and here you are in the wilderness, in the heat of the wilderness, and you've found no water for your babies for three days and what supplies you had are now exhausted and you fear the grief of watching your children dehydrate and die in the hot desert before your very eyes. The trial that Israel is facing is real, and before we scold them to quickly for their response to it, let's realize the reality of the trial within the shadow of this great national victory.

Now, the children of Israel in the wilderness have come to a place where it seems their exodus will end very quickly in death in the wilderness. So, within a shadow of this great national victory comes a real trial that breaks Israel's spirit. Does that ever happen to you? God deals with you very tangibly. He helps you through something that you thought you could never get through. He answers prayers in a remarkable way, in a way that is so tangible that you can feel it and then suddenly you get to a place and it's as if none of it ever happened and the spirit is broken. That's where Israel is, in great difficulty. There are patterns that are repeated not only here in Exodus, but also in Numbers and throughout the rest of the Old Testament. This is a cycle that you are going to see in much of the history recorded for you in the Old Testament. And they seem to indicate to us, as believers, that as we read these stories, that these stories are more than interesting, they are directly applicable to our own lives in regard to spiritual principles. So, we must be ready for these tests ourselves. That's the first thing we see, this difficulty.

II. How the children of Israel respond to the difficulty.

Secondly in verse 24, the response of the children of Israel to this difficulty and it's disappointing because their response is faithlessness. Israel's response is really a faithless, rebellious, response. We see a faith failure in Israel when, as we have just been told in Exodus 15 that the children of Israel believed God because of what He had done to the Egyptians, now, their faith fails. Their belief falters, and I want to say for us again directly that faith failure is a central problem for our sanctification because faith is one of the principle tools of sanctification. God grows us in the image of the Lord Jesus Christ by growing us in faith, so faith failure is a central issue in our growth in grace.

The opening verb of verse 24 betrays God's assessment of the children's of

Israel's attitude: 'so the people grumbled at Moses'. That's not the last time you're going to hear that language used about the children of Israel. This is the first time that the verb *grumble* or *murmur* appears in the Old Testament, but it will reappear over and over in the Hebrew Bible, in Exodus 15, 16, 17, Numbers 14, 16, 17, and in Joshua chapter 9. In every instance it portrays that rebellious attitude of the Israelites against their leaders, against the God-appointed authority structures and even against God Himself. The grumbling of Israel becomes the dominant negative theme throughout the Exodus wanderings. Instances of it reoccur repeatedly in the books of Exodus and Numbers. The children of Israel were faithless and so they will grumble or murmur a dozen times in the first five books of the Bible. No wonder Paul says in I Corinthians 10, that we are to look back at the story of the Exodus and we are to see how they murmured and grumbled and were faithless, and we are to not do that. The Apostle Paul holds that up as a negative example to us and he says, don't do that. We're to learn from them negatively.

You know, from time to time we'll hear someone say, "You know, they just can't help it because they had a bad example in their father," or "They just can't help it because they had a bad example in their mother." Well, God's saying, "Your parents in the faith did a really bad job in the wilderness. Don't be like them."

There was one of the most touching stories I have ever read about the childhood of Tomas Jonathan Jackson, Stonewall Jackson, the Confederate general. You remember that his parents died when he was a young boy and he was shifted from family member to family member until he finally rested under the control and oversight of a fairly important and prominent uncle. But his uncle was a hard man and a cheat, he was an alcoholic, and he had a terrible reputation amongst the friends in his Virginia community where he resided. And at the age of ten, Thomas Jackson decided that he did not want to be like his uncle. He knew that whatever his uncle was like, he did not want to be like that and he determined to establish principles of moral living that were different from the example he had been seeing. Well, Paul is saying, "Look at that example and don't do that. Don't be like that." He's giving us a negative example here, but as they will many times later, look at verse 24, the children of Israel in their extremity don't go to the Lord, they go to Moses. They grumble to Moses, they confront him, they blame him. Their need is real; their response is perfectly understandable. I would have been right up at the front of the line with them, but it's not excusable. It's not excusable because their grumbling against Moses is an implicit rejection of God's provision and that's made clear in Exodus 16, isn't it? Well, wait until we get to that story to work that out.

Israel's faith is being tested in their circumstances and it's being found to be weak. How is your faith doing? How are the circumstance that you are in now displaying the weakness of your faith and your need to grow? Maybe you're being drawn away from the Lord by something right now and your faith is faltering. Whatever you're being drawn to, away from Him, seems more tangible,

more real, more satisfying than the promises that's he's made to you. Maybe you're going through a hard trial right now, a physical trial. Maybe it's a trial in your own body. Maybe it's a trial in the body of a loved one and I'm not sure which is a harder trial to go through, though I have a suspicion, and your faith is faltering. It's time to look at it and ask ourselves, how we're responding, and then to look to the Lord for grace to grow in faith.

III. God's response to the people's failure.

There is the faithlessness of Israel, a central problem in sanctification and when we get to verses 25 through 27, we get through the refreshing, surprising response of God's grace. God's response is not what you would expect. You expect Moses to say that "God is your judge, God is your King, you're rebelling against your King, and in your wickedness God will judge you." And the word that God has for these people is a word of miracle and command and test and provision and in all these things God's grace is magnified. Let's look at each of them.

First His miracle. Moses, in verse 25, can do nothing. Moses is no wonder worker who has independent power and authority apart from God to work miracles to get Israel out of their messes, and so he cries out to God - that's what Israel should have done - and he cries out to God. And doesn't that remind you of the language used in Exodus 2? Israel had known that back then. They cried out to God, but somehow, in the midst of this trial they had forgotten it, so Moses does it for them. He's an intercessor.

Friends, God has called you as a kingdom of priests to intercede for one another and sometimes you will need to intercede for one another when your faith has failed. You'll need to intercede for them just like Moses. To cry out to God for them when they don't seem to have the strength in themselves to go on.

At any rate, Moses cries out to God and the Lord miraculously sweetens the waters. He shows Moses a tree and he has him throw it into the waters and I want you to see God's patience and grace here. There is no word of rebuke, there is no word of chastising, but there's a sweet and gracious answer from God. He makes these waters drinkable. Doesn't that remind you of the reverse of the first plague? Do you remember, as God cursed Egypt He had made their drinkable water undrinkable. Now, the first miracle in the wilderness is to make this undrinkable desert water drinkable. Do you see the pattern of how God turns blessing into curse for those who hate Him, but turns curse into blessing for those on whom He has set His love?

What a beautiful contrast in God's dealings with the people. And you know, it's tempting to see, isn't it, with the ancient and medieval Christians, it's tempting to see the Lord Jesus Christ right in the midst of this great passage. Doesn't it still

grab you when you read verse 25, "and he cried out to the Lord and the Lord showed Him a tree." The ancient Christian commentators always saw the cross in that tree and certainly there is a great redemptive analogy there, but whatever the case is, there is clearly something miraculous going on here. There is no naturalistic explanation provided by Moses for what has happened, for solving the mystery of the transformation of this bitter water. This is sheer supernaturalism. This is God acting, and the whole passage emphasizes that the Hebrews are totally dependent upon God for their survival. They must learn to trust in Him and He can provide. That's the first thing we see, God's gracious response, His miracle.

Then when we get to verse 25, the end of verse 26, and we see a command from God in reference to this test. God follows up this miracle, we are told in verse 25, by giving a statute and a regulation. That statute is not recorded for us, unless verse 26 is the regulation that is being referred to, but the point is this: it's not enough for the people of God to sing and to rejoice; they must also listen to God and obey Him. They must not only sing and rejoice in His deliverance; they must also obey Him. Freedom from service to Pharaoh doesn't mean 'anything goes' for the children of Israel. Freedom from service to Pharaoh means freedom to serve God. Service to Pharaoh was tyranny. Service to God is itself true freedom, but true freedom always means obedience to God's word, listening to Him.

Furthermore we're told that the Lord tested them. Presumably this refers to the testing which they underwent at Marah, and, of course, they failed that test.

Now, I want to say, very quickly, God's purpose in testing was not to produce failure. You remember James tells us in James 1:13, that God does not tempt. In other words, He does not test for the purpose of causing you to stumble, but God's test does reveal to the children of Israel the weakness of their faith and their need for Him. And so, God in verse 26 weaves obedience into the life and discipleship of Israel long before they come to Sinai.

This does three things. First off all it shows them that obedience to the Lord is the way of life. Secondly it shows Israel that the ten words that they will be given at Sinai do not exhaust the meaning of what it is to do the will of God in this life. The ten words will summarize, but before the ten words are given God has already been guiding them as to what it means to be a believer in this world. He's going to have some things to say after the ten words. So the ten words can't be taken in isolation and made into some sort of external code, extrapolated from the heart and the soul of what God is doing in the life of His people in the wilderness and turned into some sort of legalistic code. They are household instructions and they come in the context of other commands from God. There is a larger covenant context given for the law.

Finally God gives this command here in verse 26 so that children of Israel will

realize when they come to Sinai that law, that command, that obedience is nothing new in the life of faith, not something new that's happening in Exodus 20. The Lord had always been commanding His people and guiding His people and giving them instructions by the word. In verse 26, God also says, as the children of Israel are obedient He will spare them the plagues of judgment which He brought against Egypt, and in contrast He will show Himself to be the provider for and healer of Israel. That title, "the Lord your healer" is a common title for the Lord God in Scripture. You'll find it in Isaiah, you'll find it in Hosea, and the incident at Marah is but an illustration of that great reality. The Lord Himself is the one who heals His people. We sing of it in the Psalms often.

One last thing, God's kind providential provision is also made clear in verse 27, isn't it? *Elian* means terebinth trees and apparently those trees were the most distinctive mark of that wadi, that oasis in the wilderness. The numbers twelve and seventy are typically symbolic in that they very often point to fullness in Hebrew literature. Even if we don't spiritualize them, it's striking isn't it, that there is a spring for every tribe and there's a tree for every elder in Israel. It seems to suggest the fullness of God's provision for all of His people. You see, it's not just that Israel is delivered by grace at the Red Sea, it's that Israel is spared and kept and preserved by grace, by His gracious provision in the wilderness.

Isn't it the same for us? We're not only justified by the grace of God, but we're sanctified and held and kept and preserved by His grace. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we need to be reminded in our own wildernesses of your sustaining grace. Convict us of our sin, show us our need, display Your glory, demand O God the honor and the duty which we owe to your name and we'll give it gladly as you enable us by Your sustaining grace. Help us to trust. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

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