**Wilderness Training**

May 23, 2021

Exodus 15:22-17:16

Key Verse 16:4 “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out every day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.”

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he did not take them straight to Canaan, the promised land. He led them through wilderness, and they had very tough experience there. Why didn’t God lead the Israelites to the promised land immediately? It is the same reason why God does not take us to heaven immediately after we are saved through Jesus. Our experience on earth is like wilderness. The answer is that wilderness is God’s school. You learn how to follow God’s instructions in the wilderness. Deuteronomy 8:2 says, “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.” If you follow God’s instructions, things work out well. But if you follow your own thinking, things go badly. It is a very hard lesson to learn. There are 3 things you will learn about God and 3 things you will learn about yourselves. These are two great things to learn in the school of wilderness: What God is really like; what you are really like. Learn how wonderful God is and how dreadful you are. First, things you learn about God: You will learn first of all that God is there with you. God is with you in your happiness and your disappointments. He protects you from enemies and diseases. He provides everything you need just at the right time. Second, you will learn about yourselves. First of all, you are frail, you are very weak. In the wilderness, you are at the end of your own resources. Next, you will discover your sinful nature. Then you will learn your faithlessness. Even though God helps you time and again, you still doubt whether he is going to help you. You still complain. You still grumble. We need to learn how faithless we are and how faithful God is. Even though the Israelites grumbled, God hardly rebuked them. God helped them. God’s patience is amazing. In today’s passage, we will look at several incidents to illustrate this point.

Last week, we learned that the Lord had led the Israelites to encamp by the Red Sea at Pi Hahiroth in order to entice Pharaoh and his army to pursue them. The Israelites were terrified when they saw the Egyptian chariots approaching. Moses, however, told the people to be still and see the deliverance the Lord would bring about for them. The Lord then opened a way across the Red Sea so that the Israelites could pass through the sea on dry ground. When the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. Moses and Miriam led the Israelites to celebrate this great victory. Moses wanted God’s people to take this great victory to heart. The Lord who had defeated the Egyptians would lead God’s people safely past all the enemies and plant them in the Promised Land (15:17). This is the hope of everyone who has made the Exodus out from under the power of sin and death by faith in Jesus the Lamb of God.

But the promise of a glorious future in God did not solve many problems the Israelites faced at the present. These problems were not abstract. They were real. Look at 15:22-24. “Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’” The Israelites traveled into the Desert of Shur and journeyed for three days without finding water. This was a pending disaster for such a large crowd. And then, when Moses led them to a place that had water, they found that the water was too bitter to drink. What a disappointment. They could bear their thirst. But they couldn’t bear the thought that they were being led into the desert by someone who might not know where he was going! Of course, Moses was not leading the people according to his own idea. He had been following God.

Look at verse 15:25a. “Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.” When Moses journeyed from Midian to Egypt, he had with him his family: Zipporah and his two sons. Now, less than a year later, Moses was responsible for the welfare of 2 million people and livestock. He had witnessed the awesome power of God that had brought the superpower nation of Egypt to its knees. But he was hard-pressed to keep his eyes fixed on God instead of on the demanding and helpless crowd of Israelites. He cried out to God in his need, and God answered him by opening his eyes to find a piece of wood that made the bitter springs of Marah become sweet. It was a miracle. At the same time, it was a test for Moses and the Israelites. From now on, they were going to be traveling through unfamiliar territory. They could not rely on their common sense. They couldn’t afford to hold on to their fears and anxieties. What could they depend on in this time of great testing and great uncertainty? It was God’s promise. Look at verse 15:26. “If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.’”

The interesting thing is that at Marah, God revealed himself a new name: “I am the Lord, who heals you.” You will notice that as they go through wilderness, at the place where everything was fine, God did not reveal himself newly. But at the disappointing place, difficult place, and battle place, they learned more about God. If your Christian life has been easy and smooth, there are many names of God you probably would not know. When you are in trouble, you are bitterly disappointed, and you are going through difficulty, it is when you discover more about God. God promised, “Do not be afraid of drinking bad water. I will keep you from all the diseases.” Then the Lord led them to Elim, where there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees. If the Israelites were to survive their journey, they would have to learn to trust in God’s word. If they keep God’s commands and decrees, not only would God save them from disaster, but he would heal them. This is the promise of God to every generation of his people. It is obedience to God’s word that heals us and makes us to be holy people. However they did not learn anything new about God at Elim, even though things were great. Likewise, if you stay at Elim, a comfortable place, you will learn nothing new about God and your spiritual life will be stagnant.

The obedience God was looking for from his people is not abstract or conceptual, but practical. As the Israelites traveled through the desert on the way to the mountain of God, they continued to be tested at the level of their basic human needs. Look at 16:1-3. “The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.’” The Israelites had been traveling for a month, surviving on the food they had brought with them from Egypt. That food was now gone. Again, they faced the prospect of a journey through an unknown place of desert not having any idea of what they would eat from day to day. They were not starving. But the idea that they would starve scared them greatly. They longed for the certainty they had in Egypt. They did not remember harsh labor. They only remembered that they had food to eat. They were truly slaves in their inner men. How could God set them free from their slave mentality and help them win the victory in any circumstances? God had a plan to use their time in the wilderness to teach them to depend on God’s promise for their survival.

Look at 16:4-5. “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.’” The Lord had in mind to feed his people bread from heaven. God’s provision from heaven would be enough for each day. God’s provision would be double on the day before the Sabbath, so that his people might rest in God on the Sabbath. This provision was God’s miraculous care and mercy for his people that would sustain them throughout their journey. At the same time, this was God’s way of testing and training his people to obey fully his commands so that they might be healed of their slave mentality and grow as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

**First**, God wanted to train his people to come to him daily for their needs. Look at 16:13b-15. “In the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat.” Just as the Lord promised, he sent bread for his people to eat in the morning. The people called it, ‘manna,’ because they didn’t know what it was. It looked like coriander seed. But when they ate it, it tasted like wafers made with honey. The Lord commanded them to gather 3 pounds of manna each day for each person. They had to gather it in the morning, before the desert sun caused it to melt away. If they gathered it in obedience to God’s command, they didn’t have to worry if they had enough. Each person gathered as much as he needed. But if someone calculated that they would gather more for an extra day or a week, whatever they didn’t eat the day it was gathered became rotten and full of maggots. Then Moses became angry because of their disobedience. In this way, the people learned to depend on the Lord for their daily bread day by day.

**Second**, God wanted to train his people to rest in him. Look at 16:22-26. “On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much… ‘This is what the LORD commanded: “Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.”’ So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. ‘Eat it today,’ Moses said, ‘because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.’” One day in seven, the Lord called on his people to rest from their labor and to devote themselves to God. It was a reminder that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deut 8;3) God’s provision for the Sabbath day was miraculous. The left over manna which would have spoiled if kept for any other day did not spoil or rot when kept for the Sabbath. In this way, the Lord assured his people that his provision was not just for the sake of their bodies, but to strengthen them in their spirit. Once again, some of the people paid no attention to the Lord’s commands and went out to gather manna on the Sabbath. But they found none. The Sabbath was a sign, separating the Israelites from all the other nations. Exodus 31:13 says, “You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.” The people were to rest, trusting that God’s provision was enough. There is no end to the things that we should do, living in this fast-paced and highly competitive world. But as God’s people living by faith in God’s provision, we can have peace, knowing that God provides according to our needs and in a way that helps us to depend on him more and more. God always gives us what we need, not always what we want. Praise God! May God help us to trust in God for our daily bread!

The Israelites moved on from the Desert of Sin and encamped at Rephidim, and there was no water. So Moses and the Israelites quarreled. Evidently, Moses was growing frustrated because of the people’s stubborn refusal to believe. The people on the other hand, were growing restless because of the constant struggle just to survive. They were almost ready to stone Moses. People tempted God. They were testing God. They were pushing God. Moses called the place Massah, meaning “testing.” So Moses cried out to the Lord again, and he instructed Moses to lead some of the elders out to Horeb. There, he was to strike a rock and the Lord would provide water for the people. It must have seemed to Moses that the Israelites had learned nothing from their journey thus far. Should the Israelites have trusted in God to provide them water in the desert as he had up until then? Of course! But God was concerned for his servant Moses so that he should not fall into the sin of anger and unbelief. Therefore, God helped Moses begin to focus on raising up leaders for the people who would help him in shepherding them. So God had Moses go with the elders some distance from the camp to the Mountain of God, and there he struck the rock in their presence. It was to help the elders to grow in faith and to influence their people to believe as well.

Then the Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites. Joshua was assigned the task of leading the Israelites in battle against them. Moses, Aaron and Hur went up on a hill to pray. Things didn’t look good for the Israelites against the more experienced Amalekites. But when Moses prayed, holding up his hands to heaven, things quickly turned in Israel’s favor. Moses was happy, but tired, so he let down his hands. Then the Israelites began suffering large losses. So Aaron and Hur got a rock so that Moses could sit, and they stood beside him and held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other. With this kind of coworking, God gave Israel the victory over the Amalekites. When the battle was won, they learned more about God. “The Lord is my banner”; Jehovah Nissi. God is my victory. The Amalekites represent our sinful nature. It is never removed from the believers until they die. We will have to battle with the sinful nature until we die. There are two things we can do to triumph over the sinful nature; prayer and word of God. May God give you the victory over your sinful nature. As you go through wilderness training, may God bless you learn God’s faithfulness and grace more and more.

Big Idea: God trains us in wilderness to learn God’s faithfulness