

We are progressing through the book of Exodus and the story for this morning is the first part of the Israelites journey after their escape from Egypt, starting from Exodus 15:22-17:16 and chapter 18:5-11. I'll read parts of the passage, but I'll paraphrase most of it. I have broken this section of Exodus into 4 episodes and a final response, but before we read the Scripture, let me quickly review the bigger picture of what is going on for the Israelites.

At this point in the story they are traveling slowly through the desert wilderness as Moses leads them, but the bigger picture is this: God himself has miraculously set them free from their slavery, and he is actively leading them to a home he has prepared for them according to his promise. God has promised a home they can call their own, a home of beauty and abundance, a place of freedom and rest. But before they can enter that promised home, they must follow the Lord on a journey that will test their faith and trust in God. That journey and every stop along the way is being dynamically and actively led by God all the way to the final destination of freedom and rest. So remember this bigger picture— God has set them free and he is leading them to their home while he tests their faithfulness to him and seeks to bless them along the way.

Let's read the Scripture for this morning, this is Exodus 15:22-27, the Word of the Lord:

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. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah. ^c) ²⁴ So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"

²⁵ 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 fit to drink.

There the Lord issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. ²⁶ He said, "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."

²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water. (Ex 15:22–27).

This passage is the first of three grumbling episodes in the early part of the Israelite's journey to their promised home. The Israelites were just days removed from their miraculous delivery from the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. The Lord led them into a dry desert where they could only find bitter water after three days of finding none. So the people grumbled against Moses. I can imagine they were yelling at Moses: "bitter water? you brought us to bitter water?! We've walked for days in this hot desert hell and all we get is this bitter water?! Grumble, grumble, Moses!" "Bitter Water Moses!"

Let me ask you right from the start here, how many of you have had your fair share of bitter water in your journey with God? I have. Some of us are holding a cup of bitter water right now—the pungent odor of it sticks to the nose, and we're thinking, oh what I would give for just a taste of that sweet, sweet water I had before. Some of you are staring at a lake of bitter water after a long hard journey- and you're thinking, I can't take this anymore, Lord did you bring me to this bitterness? What are you thinking? Grumble, grumble Moses! If that sounds like your life right now, think about this story and the bigger picture- what is the bigger picture for you and me? God has set us free and he is leading us to our home.

So in response to the grumbling, Moses cried out to God and the Lord told him to throw a piece of wood in the water, and the water became sweet for the people to drink. Then the Lord issued a ruling for the people to test them, saying if you listen carefully to all I say and if you do what is right in my eyes, I will protect you from the diseases I brought upon the Egyptians, for I am your healer. The Lord then graciously responds further and leads them to a beautiful but temporary oasis in the desert with twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. Maybe you are in that oasis right now, and you don't want to ever leave. Well, an oasis is only a temporary stop in the journey. The Lord has more that he wants to show you so don't be afraid to step out from your oasis if the Lord guides you out of it.

Alright, before we move on to the second episode we need to apply a couple things to our own journey with God from this great example. In this life, the Lord will test our faithfulness to him. He will test our loyalty to him, and

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he will test our trust in him. We need to be careful to understand that this testing is not about earning our salvation. Jesus has saved us already, he has brought us through the passover and has promised a home with him, a home he is actively leading us to— that is the bigger picture of our journey and it is sealed with a promise by the blood of Jesus.

However, the testing that the Lord puts us through is all about our growth in faithfulness to the Lord, and the healing and blessings that come with a faithful relationship with God. As we pass through the tests and put our trust in the Lord, our faith grows, we experience healing, and the Lord blesses us. If we trust in ourselves or something else and not the Lord, our faith shrinks, our relationship with the Lord suffers, wounds fester, and we strive to see his blessing— but the Lord never withholds his grace and presence, his love never fails— He is gracious and his salvation is ours forever- so when he leads you to bitter waters, remember the bigger picture and listen to what Jesus said in John 4:14, “...whoever drinks from the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The bitter water is there to turn your face toward the water that never runs dry— to Jesus, the water of life. So come to the sweet water of life, Jesus, and never thirst again.

The second grumbling episode is in Exodus 16:1-36. A couple months after the exodus from Egypt, the Lord leads the Israelites away from the temporary oasis and into the desert of Sin. This time the food has become scarce and the people grumble against Moses and Aaron, saying, “it would have been better if we had just died in Egypt! We had all the food we wanted, pots of meat, leeks and onions, now we’re starving Moses and you did it!” “Grumble, grumble, Moses!”

Take a note of this- the Israelites completely misremember their slavery in Egypt and they mistake their former life for good times of abundance and satisfaction. Like an old addiction that refuses to die, that former life dangles at the front of their mind, saying, “come on back old friend, you remember how good it feels here... don’t you?” “Come back!”

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How many agree that old addictions are the toughest to get past? Like the Israelites, when we begin our journey with the Lord, and we find that we have been set free from that old life of slavery, in no time those former addictions rise back up to tantalize us. The former sins pull at us and we forget how much those addictions enslaved us, wounded us, and made our life a living hell. In our journey, by design, the Lord brings us to a place in the desert where our soul begins to hunger, and we are faced with the reality of that deep hunger. Our carnal reaction is to reach back for whatever filled our emptiness before— it could be a sexual fling, or an alcoholic binge. It could be compulsive shopping, over eating, or an occupation that takes all of your time and mind away from the reality that you're in right now.

In whatever old addictions you are dealing with right now in your journey, remember the bigger picture. God is the one who has led you to that place where those familiar hungers have risen up, and he brought you there to show you that his food is the only food that truly satisfies. Remember the bigger picture of what God is doing— what is the bigger picture? Let's say this together, "God has set me free and he is leading me to my home." His healing is here for you right now. Don't let that old life and the addictions that God has already set you free from return to enslave you again— trust in God and move on with him!

In response to the Israelites grumbling, the Lord rained down sweet bread from heaven in the morning and quail for meat in the evening on a daily basis for six days out of the week. And the Lord said to gather only what you need for the day, and do not store any of it up for the next day except for on the sixth day. On the sixth day, gather up enough for two days so that you can rest on the seventh day.

We need to take note of this daily provision. This daily provision highlights our daily dependence on God and the importance of weekly Sabbath rest, but I believe this also is a response to the Israelite's short-sightedness and their hunger for what satisfied them in the past. They were blind to the big picture of God bringing them out of slavery to the promised land. They could only see what was immediately in front of them at that moment, which was the immediate hunger and the false memories of

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satisfaction in Egypt. The moment of their hunger blinded them to the bigger picture of God's provision and deceived them into thinking the former life was better. So God responds to their short-sightedness by forcing them to gather food for just one day at a time, with a double portion on the sixth day so that they may have a Sabbath rest on the seventh. The seventh day of rest was a gracious provision that they did not enjoy as slaves in Egypt. This was done to teach them that they must depend on the Lord every day for the food that truly satisfies, and the Sabbath day of rest reinstated the hampered memory of the harsh reality of their slavery, where they had no rest at all!

One final note before we move to the third episode. Some of the Israelites still did not fully trust in the Lord and did not fully listen. They tried to go out on the seventh day when there was no food from heaven, or they would store up for the next day when they weren't supposed to. This is indifference to the Word of the Lord. This shows a lack of commitment and lack of loyalty to the Lord. My friends, when the Lord brings you into that place of hunger where your addictions rise up, and he says to you, "come to me today and I will fill you for today, but only for today..." you will be tempted to indifference. Indifference will keep you stuck in the chains of the past. Do not become indifferent to his Word, commit yourself to his daily bread and you will soon find the rest and healing that you need week after week. Jesus said in John 6:51, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven, whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world." Jesus is our daily bread and the one in whom we find rest and healing from the inflictions of our past addictions. Sinful habits are broken by a daily dose of Jesus.

The third episode of grumbling is Exodus 17:1-7. Here, the Israelites went from place to place as the Lord led. And the Lord brought them to a place where there was no water at all- well can you guess what happened? Grumble, grumble, Moses!! This time they not only grumbled but they began to fight with Moses and were ready to stone him. By doing this, the scripture says that they tested the Lord. So in other words they tested God by not trusting in his provision and by rejecting his chosen leader, Moses— they lost sight of the bigger picture again.

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So the Lord responded by telling Moses to take his staff, the same one he used to strike the plagues upon Egypt, and strike the rock at Horeb. When he struck the rock with his staff, water came out for the people to drink. So the same staff that Moses used to strike the Nile and turn it to blood was used to strike fresh, pure water from a rock for the thirsty Israelites. God did this to show them that he is indeed the all-powerful God who is for them, with them, and not against them. He is all-powerful and nothing like the gods of Egypt. And what the Lord uses to bring destruction, he can also use to bring healing. What the Lord uses to bring destruction, he can also use to bring healing. That which struck you in the past and brought you to your knees with such pain, God can use to bring you to a place of wholeness and dependence upon him, by his Son, Jesus. So come to Jesus, who was struck and bled that you might be healed.

We've talked about being in a dry place with bitter waters, and about being in a place of hunger where our sinful addictions rise up. We've seen how Jesus is the water of life and our daily bread, that he is the one who can make our bitter lives sweet again. We've seen how he is the one who breaks our sinful habits through a daily dose of his presence. And now we see the rock that was struck so that God's people could live in a dry place without water.

In 1 Corinthians 10:3-4, the Apostle Paul describes what was really with the Israelites in their journey through the desert— “they all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” This passage in 1 Corinthians 10 states that this story of the Exodus and all of these things that happened to the Israelites were examples and warnings for us in the last days, to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things. In verses 9-10, it says do not test Christ as they did, and do not grumble as they did. And I want to highlight this part 1 Corinthians 10:12-13, “if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can endure it.” And that brings us to the fourth episode in Exodus 17:8-16.

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This episode is the battle against the Amalekites. This is a very odd story but it is a perfect fourth episode in this journey. So during this battle in which the Amalekites attacked the Israelites, Moses went up to the top of a hill with the staff of God, as it is called, in his hand. For as long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the enemy was winning. Moses soon grew too tired to hold his hands up, so he sat down on a rock, and Aaron and Hur came to either side and held his hands up until sunset. As a result, Joshua and the Israelites defeated the Amalekite army. In response to what the Lord did, Moses built an altar and named it “the Lord is my banner.” In other words, he worshiped God and proclaimed, “the Lord is my victory!”

The late theologian R. Alan Cole states that the most common interpretation of Moses’s raising his hands is that it refers to prayer. Lifting up the hands refers to dependence on God through the battle. To lower the hands signifies ceasing to pray and thus, ceasing to depend on God. Moses became too tired to continue his intercession and he needed others to come alongside him and help carry his burden.

My friends, we cannot engage battles on our own. God has designed our journey to include battles that can only be won with the help of others who come alongside us, lift us up in intercession, encourage us to persevere, and who bear our burdens alongside us. With that, we need to open up and let our personal prayer battles be made known to others so they can know how to help us pray. If we never open up to each other, we will soon grow too tired. We will lower our hands and stop praying. As soon as we stop praying, the enemy starts winning. Some of you know exactly what I’m talking about, for others, it is a learning process, but I want to encourage you to open up and allow yourself to be vulnerable to the people around you that you can trust, just as Moses did. When you are exhausted and ready to quit, seek the help of those who can come alongside you and pray with you. And never stop praying!! Through prayer, the Lord will show you the way out of your temptation. You will soon be able to worship the Lord and say, “he is my victory!”

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Finally, I want to finish with a short little response from Jethro found in Exodus 18:5-11. Jethro was Moses' wise father-in-law, and I just want to highlight Jethro's response when Moses told him all that God had done for the Israelites up to this point. When Jethro heard this testimony of God's faithfulness and miraculous provision, he said, "praise be to the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh... Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods..." (Exodus 18:10-11).

I love this response because I truly believe that this really what the Exodus and our own journey is about— this is what underlines our journey and gives eternal credibility to the bigger picture that I keep talking about— that we may come to know, and believe, and fully trust that the Lord is greater than all gods and he is for us. There are no other gods greater than this God. You won't find a god in yourself, in nature, in the air around you, in other religions, or in all of the energies of the universe that is greater than this God. He has set you free from your slavery and led you into every place to show you that he is God, he is for you, and there is no one like him. So no matter how bitter the water, how dry the land, how great the hunger, how fierce the battle, or how amazing the oasis, never lose sight of the bigger picture. Trust in God, remain faithful to him, press on! Push away indifference, strengthen your commitment and loyalty, keep your hands up in prayer at all times. When you're too tired, call out to others and do not fear! This is a journey that may last a long time through hardships and obstacles, but the reward waiting for you at the end is well worth the journey— don't lose sight of the bigger picture, you have a guaranteed home the Lord is bringing you to! Before I close in prayer, let's state the bigger picture together one last time: "God has set me free, and he is leading me to my home."

Reference:

Cole, R. Alan. *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 2. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973.