

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 15:22-27

To understand more about the Israelites' initial journey into the wilderness.

Read the Text:

Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23 When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. 24 And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" 25 And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, 26 saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer." 27 Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water. (Exodus 15:22-27, ESV)

Study the Text:

Welcome to the Jungle

After the plagues, the Exodus from Egypt, and the Red Sea incident, verse 22 begins the next stage of of the Exodus story: "Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur." The wilderness wanderings of the Israelites will play a major role in the development of God's people and their relationship with Him as their covenant God, though it is fraught with disobedience, grumbling, and testing. Below is a breakdown of this initial move into the wilderness and the immediate problems they face.

NO WATER IN SHUR

Verse 22 tells us that, after entering into "the wilderness of Shur," they "went three days in the wilderness and found no water." Old Testament scholar T. Desmond Alexander locates *Shur* as a reference to "a sparsely populated region in northern Sinai, stretching from Egypt north-east into southern Canaan."¹ The word likely means something like "wall," probably in connection with either a line of Egyptian forts or the mountain range of Suez, but no consensus has been reached. The name *Shur* is first found in Genesis 16:7: "The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur." It's also mentioned again in Genesis 20:1 and again in Genesis 25:18. It is also probably referenced in Numbers 33:8 but designated as "the wilderness of Etham," although this is not certain. It could be that *Etham* and *Shur* are two distinct but closely connected areas. *Shur* is also mentioned in 1 Samuel 15:7, and interestingly, both Genesis 25:18 and 1 Samuel 15:7 connect *Shur* to a region called Havilah, which was near the Garden of Eden according to Genesis 2:11. While the location of the Garden of Eden is not known and is guarded by cherubim to prevent anyone entering it (Gen. 3:24), it's still fascinating to see God's people be so close to such a hallowed place. Ironically, when it is first mentioned, it is mentioned in conjunction with "a spring of water in the wilderness," which apparently was either not located or no longer existed by the time the Israelites made their journey. This presents the first major problem the Israelites experience in the wilderness.

¹ T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 312.

BITTER WATER IN MARAH

Verse 23 continues: “When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah.” The name *Marah* comes from the Hebrew root that means “bitter,” which is unsurprising given the reason it is named in the first place. This is the same name that Naomi gives to herself in Ruth 1:20, because the LORD “dealt bitterly with her.” The waters in Marah apparently had a high concentration of minerals that made the water undrinkable. The mention of the word “bitter” is also well-placed, and brings to memory a couple of other movements in the Exodus story we’ve already seen. In Exodus 1:14, the harsh rule of the Egyptians “made their lives bitter with hard service.” Later in Exodus 12:8, the people of God celebrated the first Passover meal with “unleavened bread and bitter herbs.” Even now, having escaped Egyptian slavery, they have apparently not yet escaped bitterness.

GRUMBLING

The lack of water leads the Israelites to do what they will do many times before this story is over: grumble. Verse 24 says, “And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’” In the heat of the desert, the need for water was extremely high. The anxiety of the people was likely elevated to an extreme degree with every passing moment. Even then, before the rise of so-called “modern science,” people knew the limitations of the human body without water were great. And so they began to complain to Moses since He was the mediator between them and the LORD who had delivered them from Egypt.

A SOLUTION, A STATUTE, AND A RULE

Because of the complaint, Moses appeals to the LORD in verse 25, and the LORD shows Moses “a log,” which Moses is presumably either commanded or simply understands by some other manner to “throw it into the water,” which in turn transforms the water from bitter to “sweet.” Nothing is specified concerning any special traits about the log. Some modern commentators have attempted to make sense of this by means of some kind of chemical reaction whereby some element in the log interacted with the minerals of the water to make it drinkable. This is not necessary. The point of this story, and the whole of Exodus for that matter, is that the LORD does supernatural, unexplainable things to save and preserve His people. It is not the log that makes the water drinkable, but God Himself. The log is simply the physical object used to communicate God’s intervention.

After having provided water for His people, God then uses this time to establish some ground rules for their relationship. While His covenant is not confirmed between Himself and His people until chapter 20 (at Sinai), He still sets forth general expectations. At this point, the people only know the LORD through oral stories of about the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) and through the terrifying plagues of Egypt that decimated that kingdom and while providing for them a way out. But who was to say that God would not lay upon Israel the same kind of plagues that He did in Egypt? So God “made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, 26 saying, “If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer” (Ex. 15:25-26). The LORD establishes with His people the basic understanding that He will never lay upon them the plagues of Egypt as long as they are obedient. Their relationship with Him will demand their obedience and trust. If God can conquer Pharaoh through a series of plagues, can He not do anything? Rather than complaining about a lack of water (or later food and shelter and security), they will have to trust God, not through blind obedience, but through their experience in seeing Him do supernatural things in their midst.

Some have read this passage and tried to argue that God will never allow His people to become ill: “I will put none of the diseases on you” (Ex. 15:26). This is a gross misinterpretation of the text. The “diseases” are

specifically “the diseases of Egypt” or the “afflictions of Egypt,” a clear reference to the plagues. It is not that the LORD will prevent His people from ever getting sick, but that He will not lay upon them the same afflictions that He laid up on Egypt *assuming that they are obedient*.

SPRING WATER IN ELIM

Verse 27 continues: “Then they came to Elim.” Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart notes, “The location of Elim is, like so many other places mentioned in Moses’ ancient narrative, uncertain; but assuming the people continued traveling southward toward Mount Sinai, a reasonable conjecture would be to associate the spot with the Wadi Gharandel, a riverbed in Shur that has plenty of water and trees in certain places.”² And in Elim they find not only water, but palm trees as well, a place suitable for drinking and also reprieve from the heat of the sun. Notice also the significance of the numbers: “twelve springs of water,” and “seventy palm trees.” The number 12 is often connected to the people of God (twelve tribes, twelve apostles, ‘the 144,000’ [a multiplier of 12]), and the 70 is a number of completion (seven multiplied by ten, where seven represents the perfect number of God, and ten represents completion [think ten commandments]). These numbers are likely not literal, but symbolic of God’s perfect provision. After being tested with no water, God provides, lays out His expectations, and then brings His people to a place of divine intention and provision.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the expectation that being on a journey with God will not be without trials. The people of God have left the oppression of Egypt and have begun to travel to the promised land, but they will face a number of trials along the way which will force them into dependence on God (see also: 2 Cor. 1:9). Exodus will present the people over and over again as grumblers, malcontents, and faithless, and over and over again God will both discipline them and provide for them along the way. Perhaps the life of being sanctified into the image of Christ could be viewed in this way as well. The journey that God takes us on is perfect, but not without problems. Another takeaway is the importance of obedience. God makes conditional promises to His people based on their willingness to submit to Him and obey Him. God is perfect and therefore is perfectly within His right to make demands of imperfect people. Will we submit? That’s always the question.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 15:22. From where and to where did Moses lead Israel? What did they lack?

2. Read Exodus 15:23. Where did they arrive next? Why was this place called “Marah?”

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 15:24. What were the Israelites grumbling about?

² Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 368.

2. Read Exodus 15:25. What did Moses do in response to the grumbling? What did the LORD show him, and what were the effects of the log on the water?
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Day Three

1. Read Exodus 15:25. What did the LORD do after showing Moses the log?
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2. Read Exodus 15:26. In your own words, summarize the statute that the LORD put before His people?
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Day Four

1. Read Exodus 15:26. What do the “diseases” specifically refer to? What do they not refer to?
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2. Read Exodus 15:27. Where do they go next? What is significant about the number of palm trees and springs? (Hint: See above notes)
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Discuss the Text!

Week 38 Discussion: Obedience

One of the clearest themes in Exodus 15:22-27 is the importance of obedience to God. Talk as a group about the importance of obedience to God in your own life and about some of your successes and failures with it.

1. Icebreaker: Is obedience a helpful skill to learn in general? In what other areas of life is obedience necessary?
2. In what part of your walk with Jesus are you most obedient?
3. In what part of your walk with Jesus are you the least obedient? What changes do you need to make to become more obedient?
4. How do obedience and blessing work together in the Christian faith?
5. How has being obedient specifically resulted in blessing in your life?
6. How can accountability help you with disobedience?

Takeaways:

1. Moses leads the Israelites out of the Red Sea and into the wilderness.
2. The Israelites’ lack of water results in them grumbling to Moses, who in turn cries out to God.
3. God provides fresh water for the Israelites and lays out the ground rules for obedience.