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Exodus 15:22-27

Twenty-first Message

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IT'S IN THE WATER

SERIES: BASIC TRAINING – SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL CAMP

Over the next several weeks we will journey with the Israelites from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai, where God will enter into covenant with his people. To get there, Israel must journey through a vast, untamed wilderness. “Wilderness,” used ten times in Exodus 15:22–18:27, is the theme word in this section. With all of our creature comforts, it’s difficult for us in the modern world to imagine what a shock the wilderness experience was to the Israelites. As Fretheim explains,

The wilderness wanderings, or at least their length and breadth, were a surprise to Israel. Instead of a land of milk and honey, they get a desert. The promise falls short. Deliverance at the sea leads into the godforsaken wilderness. Dancers and singers are stopped dead in their tracks. Salvation from one kind of death leads into the teeth of another. The sea crossing seems but a point of unreal exhilaration between one kind of trouble and another, only the last is certainly worse than the first. Bondage with security and resources seems preferable to freedom and living betwixt and between... Wilderness is life beyond redemption but short of consummation; but the former seems ineffective and the latter only a mirage. The promise has been spoken, but who can live by words alone? The hope has been proclaimed, but the horizon keeps disappearing in the sandstorms. And so trust in God often turns to recalcitrance and resentment. Faith erodes with the dunes.¹

And yet Israel’s wilderness experience, far from being the exception to the rule, will in fact become the norm for spiritual formation and the paradigm for the life of faith. The wilderness will be a required passageway not just for the infant nation, but also for her greatest king, prophets, and ultimately, her Messiah.

Could it be that the modern church has lost much of its life because it has neglected this fundamental truth? How can we expect to survive the modern world, which screams at us with its technological idols, if we have never received basic survival skills in the wilderness? What general would send his troops into battle without basic training? The more strenuous and severe the training, the better the soldier. Perhaps the world is wiser than the church. Today, several organizations have discovered that the best way to restore wounded teenagers who are addicted to destructive behaviors is to send them into the wilderness as a place of recovery and restoration. Stripped of everything familiar and thrust into a new vulnerability, the wilderness oddly becomes a safer place than home. A number of stories of transformation within our own church family have been an inspiration to me.

The title of this series is *Basic Training: Spiritual Survival Camp*. To survive in the wilderness, Israel will have to learn five basic lessons. Without them she will die; with them, she will not only survive, but thrive in the desert. The first three lessons have to do with humanity’s two strongest appetites—thirst and hunger. Most of our modern-day addictions arise because people cannot control their appetites. Alcoholism, obesity, drug abuse and compulsive sexual be-

havior are all indicators that something is terribly wrong in the human psyche. God’s method in the wilderness is to deprive us of the most basic necessities in order to reshape our appetites, so that in the words of Jesus, we will “hunger and thirst after righteousness.”

The fourth lesson will teach Israel about holy war and how to do battle with unexpected enemies. The fifth will deal with the importance of community and how leaders are to nurture healthy relationships within the congregation through small groups. These five survival skills will prepare Israel to listen to God’s voice on Mount Sinai. When you master these disciplines, you and your children will be able to hear God’s voice daily, with the result that you will be equipped to negotiate your way in the world. If you neglect these lessons, the world will devour you. The choice is yours.

The first lesson is found in Exodus 15:22-27, and is shaped around the word water (used six times). The text opens with Israel journeying into the wilderness of Shur and finding no water; it ends in Elim, a lush oasis with twelve springs of water. The question which the text seeks to answer is, How does Israel make their journey from “no water,” at the brink of death, to swimming in “springs of living water”? As such, the text will provide the secret for how we can quench our thirst when we are in a spiritual desert.

I. The Journey To Bitter Lake (15:22-24)

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. 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?” (Exod 15:22-24 NASB)

The wilderness of Shur was about a day’s march from the Red Sea. There is no definitive archaeological evidence as to the exact route the Israelites took in their departure from Egypt, but scholars who accept a southern route for the exodus locate Marah about 47 miles southeast of the Suez, where there is a salty spring called Ain Hawarah. “The soil of the region abounds in soda and the water is salty and bitter.”² Modern-day Bedouins still avoid the spring because of its bitterness. Another seven miles or so to the south there is a lush oasis in the wadi Gharandel, which some speculate could have been the ancient location of Elim.³

Though we can’t be certain of the exact geographical route that the Israelites took, there is no doubt regarding the significance of the theological map which the narrator uses to trace their journey through the wilderness. The place names become permanent theological indicators of Israel’s immature faith and the contrasting faithfulness of God in the psychic memory of Israel. As the apostle Paul would later explain, these things “were written for our instruction,” as lasting examples for us (1 Cor 10:1-14). We will be tracing Israel’s spiritual journey in this wilderness boot camp of faith.

The Sinai desert covers some 10,000 square miles. With rainfall averaging less than four inches a year, the scorching desert heat rises like a slap in the face. Jeremiah's poetic description is enough to send shivers down the spine:

**“They did not say, ‘Where is the LORD
Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,
Who led us through the wilderness,
Through a land of deserts and of pits,
Through a land of drought and of deep darkness,
Through a land that no one crossed
And where no man dwelt?’” (Jer 2:6)**

Water is the key ingredient to survival in this desolate wasteland. The desert has three natural sources of water: rainwater, water holes, and springs. Nogah Hareveni explains that most of the erratic and sparse rainfall in the desert flows into wadis. Some rainfall remains in rock hollows and natural pools that form in rock beds of the watercourse. In an exceptionally wet winter some water holes can maintain rainwater into the following year. But sediment often accumulates, and the resultant algae makes such water less potable. People drinking from water holes must be careful not to stir up the sediment and impurities that lie at the bottom.⁴ Springs, however, are an oasis in the desert, providing a supply of fresh running water. As such, desert springs become symbolic of the abundant life that God longs to supply:

**“Therefore you will joyously draw water
From the springs of salvation.” (Isa 12:3)**

Led by Moses, for three days Israel marches through the wilderness in search of water. But they find none. During my first visit to Israel in 1976, I fell victim to dehydration after just a few hours under the relentless sun in Jericho. One can only imagine their extreme anguish and heat exhaustion after three days. Finally, they spy new hope on the horizon: a watering hole looms in the distance. As their fortunes turn, their faith in Yahweh is renewed.

But they find that the water is severely contaminated. “The irony is palpable. The three-day search for water is ‘crowned’ with finding water that is like poison.”⁵ Instead of the promise of life for parched souls, Moses has seemingly led them to a wellspring of death. Just when their need is greatest, all they are offered is bitterness to drink. Such would be the fate of our Lord on the cross (Matt 27:34). Drink this water and you die! The disappointment is so profound that the bitterness (Heb. *marah*) of the place is memorialized by the community in the fourfold repetition of the Hebrew word *marah* (“bitter”). Houtman’s translation of verse 23 captures it well: “They came to Lake Bitterness, but they could not drink the water of Lake Bitterness. Because it was so bitter the place was called Lake Bitterness.”⁶

The bitter memory is recorded in the scrapbook of Israel’s history, with billboards erected everywhere. They would never forget how their first few steps of faith led them to a well of pollution and how repulsed they were by it. The people land their disappointment at Moses’ feet and “grumble” (Heb. *lun*).⁷ The word describes a strong emotion that vents itself in an aggressive verbal attack or angry rejection. Some scholars translate it “rant,” “rebel,” and in extreme cases, “rage.”

When the general public endures unexpected or prolonged hardships, it doesn’t take long for leaders to fall from their pedestals of praise. Pain gives birth to blame, and any leader in close proximity seldom remains the same. Facing near death, Israel’s trust in Moses evaporates in the desert sun. How often our songs of praise quickly

turn to complaint when it seems God has led us into a bitter barrel of woe! It takes little imagination to hear the people’s complaints: “Moses, Moses, get over here and drink this. What were you thinking, leading us out of Egypt? Slavery in Egypt was bitter, but at least we had water that was drinkable!”

Israel’s bitterness and complaint provide a sharp contrast to the sweet miracle that is about to take place.

II. Bitter Water Turned Sweet (15:25a)

**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.
(15:25a)**

Rather than respond to their complaint directly, Moses cries out to the Lord, turning the water crisis over to him. So responsive is God to their needs that no speech is recorded, just quick, decisive action. He shows Moses a piece of wood (the verb *jarah* also conveys the idea of teaching, thus *torah*), assuming he will know what to do with it. Moses immediately throws the wood into the lake and the bitter water is purified and made sweet, suggesting that it is now quite safe for drinking.

In all the miracles in the wilderness there is a mysterious combination between the natural world of creation and the supernatural. God is leading Moses to see something that is right in front of him, so that with proper use and divine aid the creation will be restored to an Eden-like state. One of the fundamental purposes of the wilderness was to teach the Israelites that radical dependence on God would give them a lens to see that what they needed to survive lay right in front of them.

We find the same pattern in the life of David as he made his way into the wilderness. Fleeing from the hotly pursuing Saul, he arrives at the tabernacle in Nob and asks Ahimelech the priest, “What do you have on hand?” (1 Sam 21:3). David is given not just ordinary bread, but consecrated bread, and no ordinary sword, but Goliath’s. In the wilderness, David learns to survive through prayer, combined with what was at hand. When Jesus, the new and greater Moses, provides food for the multitudes in the wilderness, he begins by asking the disciples to take stock of what they already had at hand. With but a few loaves and fish, Jesus consecrates these elements to God, and through divine aid the creation multiplies until the multitudes are fully satisfied.

The miracles in the wilderness were not arbitrary acts of power. They were specifically designed to make Israel keen observers and avid scientists who through prayer might discover the divine secrets hidden within the created world. Thus we should not pit faith against science. Faith gives birth to science. As Moses listens to the instructive voice of God about a piece of wood, and simply obeys, bitter water is turned into sweet. The term is used of the lush sweetness of a ripe fig (Judg 9:11), the satisfying pleasure that wise counsel brings to a friend (Prov 27:9), and the sweet delight that intimate fellowship brings among brothers (Ps 55:14). Obedience to God is above all things sweet and highly satisfying.

While Israel is quenching her thirst and playing in the waters, God follows up with some rather pointed instruction.

III. God’s Testing Place (15:25b-26)

There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there He tested them. (15:25b)

Having performed the miraculous transformation, God raises a billboard of his own and boldly (“there...there”) plants it right next to Israel’s “bitter” display (*marah*). To our surprise we discover that this “bitter” place was in fact a test of Israel’s faith. To test (*nissah*) a person is to reveal his true character. Just as melting metal brings all of its impurities to the surface, so the wilderness dramatically exposes all the impurities of Israel’s faith. This becomes the turning point in our text, and gives a brand new lens to the situation. We learn that God had intentionally led them into the pain and trouble for one reason: to purify their weak faith. Following the great deliverance at the Red Sea, God wanted to know if Israel would trust him completely for her every need. What follows is God’s exposition of the miracle.

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.” (15:26)

The first miracle which Moses performed in Egypt was to strike the Nile with his staff, and the river turned into blood. This is reversed in the wilderness. Moses throws a piece of wood into the putrid waters and they become sweet.⁸ Moses simply obeyed God’s simple instructions and all that was bitter became sweet. God now explains that Moses’ actions are to be a paradigm for Israel’s faith. If they pay diligent attention to hear and obey God’s word (his *torah*), none of the plagues that fell upon the Egyptians will fall upon them. For just as God turned polluted water into sweet, so now if Israel obeys God’s voice, she will be healed from all her diseases. (This may indicate that the bitter waters had made her sick.) But the healing doesn’t come cheaply. Israel must make a radical commitment to leave the “ways of Egypt” and pay close attention to the Lord’s instruction along the way.

From this illustration we observe that listening to God’s voice and paying careful attention to his commandments doesn’t mean mastering a body of abstract legal literature, but by being “attentive to the will of God in every life situation.”⁹ And the healing effected is more significant than an individual cure from sickness. Houtman astutely observes that though “healing” does speak of “healing of physical disorders,” more often it is used “figuratively and in a broader sense for ‘to restore,’ returning something to a situation which is regarded as normal, right and good.”¹⁰ Obedience to God then not only affects the community, but the whole creation as well.

Israel is to learn that a life committed to Yahweh in the wilderness is indescribably better than the oppressive slavery of Egypt. The dehumanizing power structures in Egypt had riddled the nation with plagues that sent the environment out of control. But the Lord is a far different kind of master than Pharaoh. He is a God who is supremely committed to the well being of his people, so much so that “YOUR HEALER” is now one of his supreme names. Even if Israel blatantly disregards the moral order and falls under its severe consequences, God will never cease in his longing to heal and restore all who turn back to him. With this God, healing, not judgment, is the last word. Thus the Lord’s instruction reveals a sharp contrast to a bitter life and a complaining spirit, for an obedient spirit will yield an indescribable sweetness. So trials should motivate us to persevere!

IV. Journey To Elim (15:27)

Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the waters. (15:27)

Following God’s transforming miracle and pointed instruction, the Israelites with renewed faith travel further south, to Elim. There they are overtaken with an idyllic site. Not only is there water, it is fresh running water, and in abundant supply—twelve springs to be exact, one for each tribe. Surrounding the springs are date palms, seventy in number. The number seventy is not only symbolic of complete perfection (7 x 10), it is also reminiscent of the opening of Exodus, where we were told that “all the persons who came from the loins of Jacob were seventy in number” (1:5). Later in Exodus, seventy will become the number of elders who lead the nation (24:1, 9).

The picture painted by the narrator is that of an oasis so lush and fertile it is as if each individual has his own personal endowment of life. God was teaching Israel that by faith they would not only survive in the wilderness, they would thrive there, for the date palm with its variety of uses became a reliable source for sustaining life in the desert. As Nogah Hareuveni explains,

[In the fall] dates redden and ripen on the palms, when they are harvested and spread in the sun to dry, in order to be preserved as food for man and beast for the entire year. Date honey is prepared by squeezing the sweet, thick juice from the ripe dates. Even the date pits are saved to be ground into nourishing fodder for old, toothless camels who can no longer chew the date pits. Date palm fronds are collected and used to make shelters and baskets, while the thin fibers holding the base of each palm frond are plaited into exceedingly strong ropes for weaving and tying.¹¹

The sweetness of Elim has replaced the bitter memory of Marah. Every fall, the Israelites would reenact God’s amazing provision in the wilderness with the feast of Sukkot, when they lived in booths made out of palm branches. In this way Israel was to never forget how by faith one could not only survive the wilderness, but actually thrive in it. Later the prophets would use the memory of Elim as a foretaste of the Messianic age, when the Spirit would be poured out to spiritually revive a parched nation:

**“For I will pour out water on the thirsty land
And streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring
And My blessing on your descendants.” (Isa 44:3)**

With this background we can begin to appreciate the magnitude of the promise which Jesus makes at the temple on the feast of Sukkot. John writes,

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38)

What a marvelous offer! If we look closely at what Jesus has done with the old story, we discover that obedience to Torah is redefined by “believe in Me.” By believing in Jesus we receive the refreshing life of the Spirit as a pure gift, and as we drink deeply of those sweet waters we are more than able to obey God’s word.

V. Israel's Survival Guide vs. Modern Thinking

In conclusion, I would like to point out three areas where our canonical "Survival Guide" challenges much of the current thinking of the church. First, the wilderness totally changes our expectations for how God leads us; second, it changes our orientation about what God is supremely after; and third, it radically reduces what we think we need to survive and transform our modern world.

First, God leads us to a place with no water, endlessly delaying our gratification until we almost despair. The purpose of delayed gratification is to create an attitude called "appreciation"—a profoundly rare commodity in the modern world. Being filled with appreciation for our most basic needs is one of the greatest gifts we will ever possess. Delay increases our capacity for appreciation.

But then to our utter amazement, just when we think we have found a well to satisfy our thirst, we drink and it is bitter. We go from no water to bitter water. How often have we entered into a new relationship or a promising new situation thinking it would satisfy our deepest thirst, only to be severely disappointed? The bitterness brings all of our complaining and murmuring to the surface. But the bitter drink is good for us. If the lack of water intensifies our thirst, drinking bitter water purifies it. We learn that taking any of God's gifts of the creation, even something as basic as water, without his divine touch, will consume us with bitterness.

The bitter experience goes a long way toward exorcising old demons of our past and prepares us to take God's word seriously. It is then we learn to pray earnestly and listen intently for his tender voice. When we do obey his word, out of bitterness we find healing and a wonderful sweetness. We experience an unmatched intimacy with God. In this way the gift of the wilderness transforms our character. We now hunger and thirst after righteousness. We discover that this is the supreme thing that God is after: not success, but character arising out of a pure faith.

And notice that the transformation happens in a profoundly simple way. Moses cries, and God speaks. There are no seminars to attend, no complicated steps to memorize, no workbooks to purchase, let alone software! The wilderness transforms God's people through the simple tools of prayer and God's word. And with those gifts, the "bitter lake" becomes sweet. For a few moments time is impregnated with eternity, and springs of water are flowing everywhere. Instead of complaining, we ought to thank God for the bitter experiences that have left indelible memories of what life is like without him.

This has implications not just for our journey, but also for how we should train and pray for our children. There is a dangerous spirit of parenting operating today. I call it the "Martha Stewart World of Parenting." The goal in this competitive age is to create the perfect world for our children.

We carefully chart out their life from cradle to grave, seeking to coddle and indulge them with every highbrow opportunity known to man. We find the best pre-schools, research the elite elementary schools, and maneuver them into the choicest middle school. By the time they get to high school we have enlisted tutors, hired sports trainers, musicians, and SAT test preparers. Heaven help the poor school administrator if our child should ever land in a mediocre classroom! But in the end we have to ask, What have we trained them for? Have we robbed them of wells of bitterness which create a hunger and thirst for righteousness, giving them the faith to transform our Sodom-like world into Eden-like Elim?

By God's loving grace may we train up the next generation to love the wilderness.

Survival Guide #1

Satisfying Our Thirst In the Wilderness

- a Journey: The Red Sea to the wilderness of Shur, with no water (22-23)
 - b The desperate situation: Bitter waters and rage (24)
 - c Speech: Moses cries to the Lord in desperation (25)
 - x The Center: The place becomes a testing ground of faith (25b)
 - c' Speech: The Lord instructs Moses in obedience (26a)
 - b' The new possibility: Obedience will lead to healing (26b)
 - a' Journey: Shur to Elim, lush with life and water (27)
 1. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 171-172.
 2. Henry O. Thompson, "Marah," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
 3. Jeffrey R. Zorn, "Elim," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.
 4. Adapted from Nogah Hareuveni, *Desert and Shepherd in Our Biblical Heritage* (Lod, Israel: Neot Kedumim, 1991), 57-61.
 5. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 1996), 2:302.
 6. Houtman, *Exodus*, 296.
 7. The term "grumble" in all but two cases (Josh 9:18; Ps 59:15) is found within the wilderness narratives and characterizes Israel's lack of faith.
 8. See also 2 Kgs 2:19-22 where salt became an antidote and purified waters, as did flour in 2 Kgs 4:38-41.
 9. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 179.
 10. Houtman, *Exodus*, 309.
 11. Nogah Hareuveni, *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage* (Kiryat Ono, Israel: Neot Kedumim, 1980), 75.

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