EXODUS 15-17: Tests in the Wilderness

*[Cover slide]* This is a view of what is known today in Israel as the Wilderness of Zin – Z-I-N. Later on in our passage you will note it is called the Wilderness of Sin – S-I-N. It has nothing to do with our English word “sin.” It is simply a Hebrew place name. Anyway, this picture gives you some idea of the rather harsh landscape the Israelites journeyed thru on their way to the Promised Land.

How many of you like tests? The truth is most of us are not too fond of tests, whether they are in a school setting or in life. But they are necessary. The Bible tells us that we can expect tests in our Christian walk. James 1:2-4 says, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness (NLT says “endurance”). And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” In other words James is telling us that the testing of our faith produces spiritual maturity and godly character (the meaning of “perfect” in this context). Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:6-7 that we will face many trials and tests in our life. But nothing happens to us outside of God’s plan and purpose for us. So, these trials, allowed by God are necessary in order to stimulate spiritual growth and to strengthen our faith. There are basic lessons that we need to learn as God’s children. And the tests, which God allows in our life, helps us to learn them. We don’t have the option to audit the courses in our lives that God requires we take.

This morning we’re going to be looking at Exodus Chapters 15 thru 17 and God’s testing of His covenant people in the wilderness. Now, they’ve already faced one test so far on their journey from Egypt to Canaan. That first test took place at the Red Sea, which we looked at last week. So, how did they do on Test #1? Frankly, they failed miserably. As you will recall they panicked when they saw the army of Egypt approaching them and, bottom line, they did not trust God. Given their weak spiritual condition this really isn’t too surprising. The people of Israel have a lot to learn about what is expected of them as God’s covenant nation. But their amazing experience of deliverance at the Red Sea taught them a valuable lesson about their God. They learned that God is their Protector. He is their Provider. He is their Deliverer. God is not going to promise something to His people, make a covenant with them, go to all the trouble to get them out of Egypt only to let them be destroyed. No! He’s got big plans for them. He is a good God, a gracious and loving God, a covenant keeping God, and He will protect His people and provide all of their needs. So, as we left off last week, the people praised God for what He had done and then they declared their trust in Him for the future, as He leads them to their ultimate destination, which is, the land of promise. So, at least for the moment the people seem to have learned their lesson. With that let’s pick up the story in Exodus Chapter 15, verse 22…

READ Exodus 15:22-24

The Hebrew word “Marah” means bitter. According to the Torah Marah was a well of bitter water. Marah is the name that Naomi, Ruth’s mother in law, gave herself in Ruth Chapter 1 after she felt the Lord had dealt bitterly with her following the deaths of her 2 sons and her husband.

The memories of the Israelite people are short. Just three days before, at the Red Sea, they had declared their trust in God. The last verse of Exodus Chapter 14 says, “So the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses.” Then they praised God in that great song of Moses in Chapter 15. Now we see them again, facing a second test, and what do they do? They grumble against Moses. The people are in the wilderness. They’re weary and thirsty. They see this well and they get their hopes up. Water! They rush to well, draw the water up, only to be disappointed at its bitter taste. So, facing this dilemma, what should the people have done? Who is their source for everything? Is it Moses? No, it’s God. So they should have done what Moses does next and cried out to God. Instead they grumbled. Verse 25 tells us that God tested them. Test #2 The Bitter Water of Marah. Well, did they pass or fail? Hint: short memories, easily disappointed, failing to trust God, lack of understanding, murmuring, complaining, forgetting what God had done previously, focusing on their circumstances rather than on God… They failed! Again.

READ Exodus 15:25-26

What is God saying to the people? Trust Me. Obey Me. You are my people. I am here to heal you and sustain you! That sounds pretty simple, but the people are having a hard time learning this basic lesson.

So in answer to Moses’ prayer, God shows Moses a log (ESV). A better translation (KJV, NASB, NET, RSV) is “tree.” The NIV says “a piece of wood.” So God gives Moses special revelation. He shows Moses a tree or at least a part of a tree. Moses takes that tree and he throws it into the bitter water of Marah. And by a divine miracle, by an act of God, His grace, the bitter water become sweet, which allows the people to drink it.

Application: As I read this I was reminded of another tree, this one is in the New Testament. Jesus bore the wrath of God for us on the cross, what Galatians 3:13 identifies as “a tree.” And because of what Jesus did on that tree we have been justified, forgiven, adopted into God’s family, reconciled and redeemed. Jesus saved us. He turned the bitterness of life caused by our sin, our separation from God, into sweet fellowship with Him. Saved by grace. We didn’t deserve it any more than the people of Israel deserved this divine miracle here in the wilderness.

I love verse 27…READ Exodus 15:27

God is so gracious to His people, isn’t He? After the experience of Marah where the people of Israel were tested and didn’t fare so well, God leads them to an oasis called Elim. There the people find plenty of fresh water and trees and enjoy much needed rest. Ecclesiastes 7:14 (NLT) says, “Enjoy prosperity while you can, but when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. Remember that nothing is certain in this life.” God is sovereign. He ordains both the good days and the bad days. We just need to trust Him on our journey thru life, no matter where He leads us.

The lesson God is trying to teach His covenant people and the lesson we need to learn as well is this: No matter the circumstances, TRUST GOD!!

Well, one thing about good teachers – when there’s a key truth to be learned, a good teacher will keep driving it home until their students finally learn it. And so far the Israelites have shown that they haven’t learned it. Two tests so far and they’ve failed them both. So, it should come as little surprise when they face yet a third test. And this one comes in Chapter 16.

READ Exodus 16:1

Here we get our first indication as to how long the people of Israel have been on their journey – it’s been exactly 1 month since they left captivity, since that great Exodus from Egypt (cross reference with Exodus 12:1-6, they left on the 15th day of the first month).

READ Exodus 16:2-3

Notice that it is “The whole congregation of the people” who now grumble. Last time we were told that it was simply “the people” who grumbled. So before it had been a lot of the people who grumbled and now everyone is grumbling. Grumbling is contagious. Clearly the people haven’t learned yet to trust God. OK, so what is it that they are grumbling about this time? They’re hungry. So the third test is hunger in the Wilderness of Sin. Now this is actually a two-part test as we will see. The first part the test, the people again have failed (grumbling, self-pity, discontentment, not trusting God, poor memory about how things were in Egypt, etc). The second part of the test will come after God miraculously provides them food. More on that later.

Let me point something out to you which may not be that obvious. These people, though hungry, are not in jeopardy of starving to death as they are claiming to Moses in v 3. It says in Exodus 12:38 that when they came out of captivity in Egypt they had “very much livestock, both flocks and herds.” And then later in Numbers 11:22, after they depart from Sinai, we’re told that they still have these flocks and herds. So, although the people are hungry, they’re not in any danger of starving to death. God had provided them with adequate resources to sustain them on their journey from Egypt to Canaan. I just wanted to point that out to you.

Yet again we see here that God is so gracious, so patient with His people…

READ Exodus 16:4

Part 2 of this test was to see whether the people would be obedient. God says, “I am about to rain bread from heaven for you…” One commentary I read said that the people better be glad that God didn’t decide to rain down fire and brimstone instead. God exercises such loving patience with His people!

READ Exodus 16:5-7

So really the people aren’t grumbling against Moses and Aaron but against God. The chapter goes on to explain that God sent quail into the camp at twilight, in the early evening. God provides manna, bread from heaven, in the morning and then meat, quail, in the evening.

As you read thru Exodus Chapter 16, something very interesting jumps off the page at you. It’s here in this chapter that we get the very first mention of the Sabbath, the 7th day of the week as a holy day of solemn rest. It’s taught to the people of Israel in conjunction with their gathering of the manna. It’s the second part of the test. Specific instruction is given to the people – they are to go out each morning and gather just enough manna to last for that one day. No more. On the 6th day they gather enough for 2 days because God says that the 7th day will be a Sabbath day of rest. It won’t be until Chapter 20 at Mount Sinai that God issues the 10 commandments one of them being “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” And it won’t be until Exodus Chapter 31 and 35 that God gives Moses specific laws pertaining to the Sabbath. Here in Chapter 16 is the precursor to all of that, the first mention of a solemn day of rest. The whole purpose of the Sabbath was to give God’s people a day of rest. God knew they needed it. That’s the reason why Jesus said that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27) God in His grace gives His people a much needed break. Now, were the people obedient to follow this? Exodus 16:30 says, “So the people rested on the 7th day.” They passed the second part of this test, Test #3.

Application: Shouldn’t we trust Jesus? Yes. Wasn’t it our Lord who said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”? (John 6:35). First Corinthians 15:45 says that “the last Adam (speaking of Jesus) became a life-giving spirit.” So the same Jesus who saved us also provides for us. He is the bread of life. He is the spiritual nourishment for our weary hearts.

READ Exodus 17:1

Have the people learned to trust God to provide for their every need? Have they learned this basic lesson yet? Here is Test #4 No water at Rephidim.

READ Exodus 17:2-3

Here we go again! Same song, fourth verse. The people once again fail the test. But again, God comes through…

READ Exodus 17:4-7

The people chided with Moses, quarreled publicly, threatened to kill Moses, panicked. They just won’t learn the lesson to trust God! But God is so good. He again supplies their physical need. He miraculously provides water from a rock.

Application: Wasn’t it Jesus who said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”? Didn’t He say, “Whoever believes in me…out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”? (John 7:37)

So shouldn’t we trust Jesus? He saved us so we should trust Him also to meet our physical needs and our spiritual hungers and thirsts.

OK, so let’s wrap this up and we’ll sing. What is the lesson that God wants the children of Israel and us as His children to learn? ***Trust Me and obey Me no matter the circumstances.*** Has He ever failed you before? What makes you think He will fail you now? He won’t. Jesus said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Heb 13:5) “So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”

We’re going to sing a hymn about that. It’s called “Trusting Jesus.”