

Exodus 16:1 – 17:7

^{16:1} Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. ² The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³ The sons of Israel said to them, ‘Would that we had died by the LORD’S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’ ⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction.’ ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.’ ⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, ‘At evening you will know that the LORD has brought you out of the land of Egypt; ⁷ and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, for He hears your grumblings against the LORD; and what are we, that you grumble against us?’ ⁸ Moses said, ‘This will happen when the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening, and bread to the full in the morning; for the LORD hears your grumblings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against the LORD.’ ⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, ‘Come near before the LORD, for He has heard your grumblings.’’ ¹⁰ It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² ‘I have heard the grumblings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’’ ¹³ So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the sons of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat.’ ¹⁶ ‘This is what the LORD has commanded, ‘Gather of it every man as much as he should eat; you shall take an omer apiece according to the number of persons each of you has in his tent.’’ ¹⁷ The sons of Israel did so, and some gathered much and some little. ¹⁸ When they measured it with an omer, he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no lack; every man gathered as much as he should eat. ¹⁹ Moses said to them, ‘Let no man leave any of it until morning.’ ²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul; and Moses was angry with them. ²¹ They gathered it morning by morning, every man as much as he should eat; but when the sun grew hot, it would melt. ²² Now on the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for each one. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³ then he said to them, ‘This is what the LORD meant: Tomorrow is a sabbath observance, a holy sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.’ ²⁴ So they put it aside until morning, as Moses had ordered, and it did not become foul nor was there any worm in it. ²⁵ Moses said, ‘Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field.’ ²⁶ ‘Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the sabbath, there will be none.’ ²⁷ It came about on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. ²⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My instructions? ²⁹ See, the LORD has given you the sabbath; therefore He gives you bread for two days on the sixth day. Remain every man in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.’ ³⁰ So the people rested on the seventh day. ³¹ The house of Israel named it manna, and it was like coriander seed, white, and its taste was like wafers with honey. ³² Then Moses said, ‘This is what the LORD has commanded, ‘Let an omerful of it be kept throughout your generations, that they may see the bread that I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.’’ ³³ Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take a jar and put an omerful of manna in it, and place it before the LORD to be kept throughout your generations.’ ³⁴ As the LORD commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the Testimony, to be kept. ³⁵ The sons of Israel ate the manna forty years, until they came to an inhabited land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan. ³⁶ (Now an omer is a tenth of an ephah.)

^{17:1} Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water that we may drink.’ And Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?’ ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, ‘Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’ ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, ‘What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me.’ ⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and

take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.' And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us, or not?'

The Lesson of Satisfying Israel's Thirst: Exodus 17:1 – 7

- A. Journeying by stages (*massa*) in daily trust of the Lord (17:1)
- B. The people's contention with Moses (17:2 – 3)
 - C. Take the elders with you ahead of the people (17:4 – 5a)
 - D. Take the staff that you struck Nile (17:5b)
 - E. The Lord will stand before you (17:6a)
 - D'. Strike the rock with the staff (17:6b)
 - C'. Moses did so in the sight of the elders (17:6c)
- B'. The place was named Meribah because of their contention (17:7a)
- A'. It was named *Massah* because they "tested" the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord with us or not?" (17:7b)

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Israel's Deliverance*: This episode occurred right after God delivered Israel out of forced enslavement and the threat of whips in Egypt. A 'mixed multitude' (Ex.12:38) went with them. God opened the Red Sea and made a path for them to escape, and then closed the Sea on the Egyptian soldiers who pursued them. Then Moses and Miriam led Israel in a song of praise on the shores of the Sea (Ex.15:1 – 21). God then nourished Israel at an oasis in the wilderness (Ex.15:22 – 27).
- *Mastering or Being Mastered By Your Appetites*. Eve and then Adam 'saw' that the fruit of the forbidden tree 'was good for food,' which reversed God's authoritative interpretation of reality and corrupted human nature (Gen.3:1 – 7). Isaac, dominated by his stomach, was 'guided' by Rebekah and Jacob (Gen.27:1 – 29). Esau, also a stomach, traded his birthright for stew (Gen.25:28 – 34). Jacob, dominated by his sexual appetite, was tricked by Laban into marrying Leah (Gen.28:21 – 27).

Questions

1. Read the background note on living by your appetites vs. living by faith in God. How does that theme continue now that Israel is in the wilderness in Exodus 16 – 17?
 - a. In some sense, this story shows what God had to do to continue to shape His new community. There are still *internal* struggles that Israel had which God needed to guide and shape.
 - b. It also represents, to a limited degree and indirectly, the struggles of a believer delivered from enslavement to sin and learning to trust God.¹
2. Count how many times the word ‘hear’ or ‘heard’ appears in Exodus.
 - a. Who hears whom? God heard their grumbling and complaining (16:7, 8, 9, 12).
 - b. Does the hearing go the other way? No, Israel ‘did not listen’ (16:20). And then, on the Sabbath, some of them went out to gather manna anyway, even though God told them not to (16:25 – 30).
3. How come Israel doesn’t seem to extrapolate from the Exodus deliverance that God is on their side?
 - a. Illus: Do you know anyone with memory loss or Alzheimers? What is it like to relate to someone who has memory loss? You have to constantly build or rebuild trust with them.
 - b. Why was it hard for the Israelites to remember what God had just done for Israel by bringing plagues on Egypt (Ex.7 – 12), saving and delivering Israel out of Egypt (Ex.13 – 14), and providing them with water and fruit (Ex.15)?
 - c. Why is remembering an important part of any relationship?
 - d. Why is it hard for us sometimes to remember what God has done for us? Especially what He’s done for us in Jesus to set us free from the deepest enslavement of all – to the corruption in human nature.
 - e. What are some practical ways we can remember what God has done for us?
 - i. Read ‘identity in Christ’ passages like John 15:1 – 17 or Romans 6:1 – 11 or Ephesians 2:1 – 10.
 - ii. My college pastor used to pray every day, ‘Lord Jesus, live your life out through me today’ and then listen for his voice or nudging throughout the day
4. In an ongoing sense, how is God trying to teach Israel that He is trustworthy?
 - a. He delivered them. Then in the oasis, God gave them food and water. Now, He has brought them into a place where there isn’t an obvious source of food and water. But it’s necessary in Israel’s case
 - b. Is there a literal dynamic for us as Christians, now, like this? Not in the sense that God always takes us into a place of actual physical hunger and thirst, although that might happen incidentally. But yes in the sense that God takes us *into Jesus Christ* where we learn to let him nourish us emotionally and spiritually.
 - c. Illus: Here is how we might experience gluttony and greed and fear today in a similar sense that Israel experienced hunger and thirst and anxiety. There was an online confessional called www.notproud.com. People posted their confessions of things they are not proud of doing. The website was organized according to the seven deadly sins – a view from medieval Catholicism. The founders have now published a book from the postings. Here are some examples of things people confessed:
 - ‘I drank so much on Saturday night that I threw up four times the next a.m. And I was throwing up so hard that I popped some blood vessels in my eye and now half of my left eye is covered with blood. Not too sexy.’ (p. 115) (Gluttony)

¹ Some Christians believe that the sequence from Egypt to wilderness to promised land represents a normative experience for Christians after conversion. See e.g. Laurence W. Wood, ‘The Wesleyan View’, edited by Donald L. Alexander, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). The sequence can be described as a two stage salvation process involving present spiritual life, and lays the framework for Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal emphases to expect it for all, in some form. My abbreviated response is that while this journey could be descriptive of *some*, it is not normative *for all*. There is a qualitative difference between the physical deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and the more profound deliverance of Jesus’ humanity from the corruption of human nature, and the connection by the Spirit that the Christian believer has with him. It is true that in the Christian view of time, believers are ‘in the wilderness period’ while waiting for Jesus to return and make the whole world a renewed garden (1 Cor.10:1 – 13; Rom.8:18 – 25). But in the heavenly reality, believers already walk in the fullness of our union with Christ by the Spirit (Heb.4:8 – 11; Rom.8:5 – 11).

- ‘Anytime someone tries to give one of my friends’ attention, I automatically steal the spotlight away from them. I must be the center of attention. I must have all the love.’ (p. 128) (Greed)

‘Peering in on the trials and tribulations of others is an intriguing, unsettling, and, at times, very comforting activity. It’s we slow down to look at car wrecks and why reality television has tantalized the world’s cultural palette. You may find yourself in this collection, either through your own words, or through the feeling that someone somewhere has traveled down the very same path. These confessions shine a spotlight into the many dim corners of our collective psyches.’ (Scott Huot & GW Brazier, founders of notproud.com)

- d. How did we get our needs met before we came to Jesus? Now that Jesus has delivered us out of enslavement to sin, how can we learn to trust him to nourish us?
 - i. Illus: Harriet Tubman understood what it was like to serve God faithfully without being nourished by the applause of many people. She was born in Maryland’s Dorchester County around 1820, into the terrible life of slavery. Around 1844 she married a free black man named John Tubman and took his last name. (She was born Araminta Ross; she later changed her first name to Harriet, after her mother.) In 1849, in fear that she, along with the other slaves on the plantation, was to be sold, Tubman resolved to run away. She set out one night on foot. Tubman followed the North Star by night, making her way to Pennsylvania and soon after to Philadelphia, where she found work and saved her money. The following year she returned to Maryland and escorted her sister and her sister’s two children to freedom. She made the dangerous trip back to the South soon after to rescue her brother and two other men. On her third return, she sought her husband, only to find he had taken another wife. Ouch! Undeterred, she continued, and found other slaves seeking freedom and escorted them to the North. After the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850, she had to take slaves all the way to Canada. By 1860, Tubman had made the perilous trip to slave country 19 times by 1860, including one especially challenging journey in which she rescued her 70 year old parents. During the Civil War, Harriet worked for the Union Army, first as a nurse, then a scout, then as a spy working behind Confederate lines. After the war, she retired to a small house in Auburn, New York. She was tired and penniless, but still she devoted herself to providing shelter and care to poor blacks. She supported herself by selling vegetables from her garden. In 1869, a white admirer published a book called *Scenes of the Life of Harriet Tubman* as a means of earning her some money. But she gave most of that money away to people in greater need. When the book was published, Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist and former slave, wrote to her these words: ‘Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way...I have had the applause of the crowd...while the most that you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scared, and foot-sore bondsmen and women, who you have led out of the house of bondage, and whose heartfelt ‘God bless you’ has been your only reward.’²
 - ii. Illus: I know a young woman who is a frosh in college, experiencing the loss of familiar people and things. During her first semester, her relationship with her roommate went really sour, mostly because this roommate had issues. But this was a relatively small school and it felt like people either took the roommate’s side or stayed at a distance. I don’t know if she should transfer or stick it out, but I’m sure that for the time being, this was an invitation from Jesus to trust him to nourish her on his affections for her.
 - e. Much later, why would Jesus teach us to think of the Holy Spirit as nourishment, as bread (Lk.11:13). He taught us to pray, ‘Give us this day our *daily* bread...’ (Lk.11:3). Why daily?
 - a. Well, it’s not like there are lots of places in the wilderness with enough water for a large crowd like this!
5. Why does God take the Israelites to another apparent thirsty, parched, dead-end in the wilderness, a place with no water?
 - a. Well, it’s not like there are lots of places in the wilderness with enough water for a large crowd like this!

² distilled from Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*, p.135-6; see also Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People*

- b. But really, this is a long lesson in dependence.
 - c. What other kinds of lessons does God repeat if we don't learn them the first time?
 - d. Notice that three days into the wilderness journey, God took Israel to a place with no clean, drinkable water (Ex.15:22). Through Moses, God purified the water by throwing a tree into it, interestingly (Ex.15:23 – 24). It was probably an acted reference to the garden of Eden, where the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil both symbolized God. There, a tree in some sense symbolized God again: God used its life to purify water for Israel.
 - e. Does Moses' staff symbolize a tree also? Probably. Again, I think this is meant to make the people think of the trees in the original garden.
 - f. Why does God remind Moses and Israel that the staff is the staff which struck the Nile River? Because of its association with life-giving water, and power over it. Near the two trees of the garden of Eden was a source of water. So again, this is probably meant to remind them of the garden.
 - g. The Nile was Egypt's water source. God showed He had power over that. Then God showed that He had power to turn bitter, undrinkable water from an oasis into sweet, drinkable water (Ex.15:23 – 25). Now God is showing that He has power to bring forth water from a rock. The level of faith needs to go up because the level of experience and miraculous power is going up.
6. In what sense are these two episodes 'tests' (16:4; 17:2, 7)? Who tests who?
- a. Who tests who? God tests Israel the first time, to refine them, strengthen their ability to trust Him. Israel tests God on the next occasion, just complaining and grumbling. They test His patience.
 - b. Tests from God are not arbitrary, or capricious. They are refining. Later, Israel will need to have developed their trust muscles to enter into the land of Canaan with faith and courage. Because they are failing here, the text suggests, they fail later.
 - c. Why does Moses try to interpret this for them in this way? When we are refining by the test God gives us, we do not test God in response.
 - d. Normally, bread is from the grain of the ground, and water comes from the clouds in the sky. In the wilderness, everything is a bit upside down. Yet God is teaching Israel to trust Him, and teaching them that He is good and faithful to them.
 - e. Illus: Brian Morgan, a teaching pastor at Peninsula Bible Church of Cupertino, writes: 'Even though God answered Israel's test with grace, Moses wanted to make sure Israel would never again presume on that grace. There he left an eternal reminder of her immature faith, by renaming the place. If we ever think we have lost our way in the desert, there is not one, but two blatant billboards pointing the way home. Written on each is a one-word exclamation that no one can miss. In large letters it reads Massah and Meribah! The terms serve as a severe warning for how, when facing prolonged "thirst," appreciation for God's care can quickly turn to accusation (Meribah). And the simple trust of our daily journeying (massa') can be quickly transformed into a "test" (Massah), where we reverse roles with God. The narrator has saved the worst for last. It is not until after the miracle which saved Israel's life that we hear her condemning accusation, "Is the Lord among us, or not?" Perhaps such words were too much for the listener to hear in the midst of the debate. They would have created too much tension for us to remain sympathetic to Israel. So the narrator saves the shock for the end. Like swallowing bitter medicine after drinking water, the terrible taste remains. But Moses wanted these names to become bitter bywords, so that whenever future generations were languishing of thirst in a wilderness, the thought of testing God would be revolting. And it worked, for the memory of Massah was kept alive by Israel's storytellers (Deut 33:8 – 11) and poets (Ps 95:8 – 11) for every generation. And for the faithful who found themselves at the end of rope in a dry desert, instead of testing God, like David, they redirected their thirst towards God:

"O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly;
My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water." (Ps 63:1)

It is very important to the life of a congregation that we not only meditate on these ancient texts, but also hear the living testimony of those who have discovered this hidden spring in the desert (John 7:38). Jesus said that he is the source of the true living water. May we have the faith to find that to be true.