

Through the Wilderness

Exodus 15-17

This morning we are going to talk about going through times of hardship and try to see a little more clearly what God might be doing in them. There's a lot of misunderstanding and bad theology out there about suffering. Some people think that it's all about God punishing us for not measuring up, and others think that God doesn't have anything to do with suffering. But today we'll see a different perspective that I hope will encourage us and give us hope when we go through difficult times.

We are continuing to walk through the book of Exodus and today we're going to look at the part of the journey after the crossing of the Red Sea and before Israel arrived at Mount Sinai. During that time they had to go through a large wilderness area called the Sinai Peninsula (Picture) that was uninhabited and could be used for grazing but was too dry to be cultivated for farming. So there weren't cities or villages there because it didn't have the resources to support a community of people. But that's where 2 million Israelites had to cross to make it to Mount Sinai. It would seem like God was making a big mistake to take them through the wilderness, but we will see that he had an intentional purpose behind it.

If you think about it, this was the first time they were completely free from Pharaoh and slavery, and they were beginning something new – a new existence, new purpose and identity, new religion – and it all centered around their new relationship with Yahweh. He was their God, they were his people – and they were about to embark on a completely new way of life. But that meant they had to make some enormous changes because it was a way of life far different than what they knew and experienced in Egypt.

In Egypt, all they knew was slavery and the distorted religious beliefs of the Egyptians and those things shaped their lives. They became a hardened, stubborn, and stiff-necked people who only trusted themselves and they had a tainted view of God. They had no idea what he was like or how to relate to him. So they were in need of major transformation and that's why God brought them into the wilderness. God would use the wilderness to begin that process.

That's one of the same reasons God has us go through times of struggle and hardship. Because we are in need of transformation too. When we come to Christ

we have all kinds of baggage that we've learned from our former way of life – beliefs, behaviors, and patterns of thinking that don't line up with what's true and good and how Christ wants us to live. Even after coming to Christ we pick up bad habits and sinful ways of thinking and acting. We need to be transformed. The old must go, the new must come. And one of the ways God does that is to take us into the wilderness. We learn things in the wilderness that we don't otherwise learn – things that we need to see so that we can change and be transformed more and more into the image of Christ.

So this morning I want us to see what God does with Israel in the wilderness because I see him doing the same kinds of things in our lives today. And my hope is that we will be able to have a different perspective and approach to our seasons in the wilderness that allows for transformation and growth and leads to greater life and joy in Christ.

There are four hardships that the Israelites faced in the wilderness, and I want us to see what God is doing in them. The first is at the end of chapter 15.

Read Exodus 15:22-27.

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.

This first hardship was that they had no water. They couldn't find it anywhere until they arrived at some springs, but that water was bitter with contamination. So this was a big problem – a desperate situation that was very upsetting. But

God told Moses to throw a log into the water and when he did the water became sweet. The people could quench their thirst.

I want us to see what it says at the end of verse 25: *“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.”*

God had a purpose for them running out of water and facing a desperate situation. It wasn't to punish them for something, it wasn't something totally separate from what God was doing. He used it as a time of testing, and opportunity to teach them something. By healing the bitter water he wanted them to see that if they would listen to him and obey his commands and follow his ways, he would bless them. He would never bring judgment upon them like he did to the Egyptians. He wanted them to know him as Yahweh Rapha – the LORD their Healer. He was a much different God than the god of the Egyptians, a much different Ruler than Pharaoh. And God used hardship to reveal that to them.

God does the same thing in our lives. We come to Christ with faulty ideas of who God is and one of the ways he reveals himself and who he really is, is by taking us through hardship. It's during those times that we can see him more clearly and he reveals himself more deeply.

The second hardship Israel faced is in chapter 16.

Read Exodus 16:1-3.

They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, ³ and the people of Israel said to them, “Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

So here we see the hardship was that they were running out of food. Whatever provisions they brought with them were used up and they could see that the

wilderness wasn't going to feed them. They thought they were going to starve to death.

The first thing I want us to see in this hardship is how they responded. There was bitter grumbling, despair, and even accusations against Moses and Aaron. We've seen this kind of behavior before. It was a deep rooted problem that they learned while slaves in Egypt. If you're a slave with no hope and nothing you can do, it makes sense to grumble. But they weren't slaves anymore – they were free. And they didn't belong to Pharaoh – they belonged to Yahweh. Everything was different, and they didn't need to grumble anymore. They needed to learn to trust God, pray, and wait on him.

So this hardship brought a deep rooted area of sin to the surface and to their awareness so that repentance could happen. And I see God doing the same thing in our lives. Hardship stirs things up and brings sin to the surface that we need to deal with. So it not only reveals things about God, it reveals things about ourselves that we otherwise wouldn't see.

My story of the struggle with depression...

Here again God provided for the Israelites. It says in Exodus 16:4-5: *“Then the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I am about to 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 they will walk in my law or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.”* So God provided bread from heaven, called manna that rested on the ground every day like dew. They were to gather just enough manna for each day and leave the rest on the ground so they would learn to trust him for their provision. Then on the sixth day they were to gather twice as much because the seventh day was to be a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. God was teaching them to rest in him and that they could go to him to find rest.

These were things that they had never known in Egypt. As slaves they had to fend for themselves. Pharaoh and their taskmasters weren't going to provide for them. They never had the freedom to rest – they had to work every day. So they learned to rely on themselves and their own strength and hard work. It was deeply embedded in them. But Yahweh wanted them to rely on him and experience his

provision and rest. So in the wilderness he revealed himself to them as their Provider and Rest.

The third hardship is at the beginning of chapter 17.

Read Exodus 17:1-3.

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to 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 the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

In this hardship you can see they run out of water again – similar to the first two, and you would think by this time their response would be different, that transformation was beginning to happen, but it wasn't. They grumbled just as much as before. Yet the story goes on to say that God still provided for them, this time he gave them water from a rock. Not only was he their Healer, Provider, and Rest, he was also Patient and Merciful.

The final hardship is in Exodus 17:8-13.

⁸ Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. ⁹ So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." ¹⁰ So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹ Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. ¹² But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. ¹³ And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

In facing an enemy army and being forced to go into battle, God revealed himself as Israel's Protector and Defender. He was with them and would give them the victory.

In all of these hardships God was at work. He had purpose – to reveal to them things about themselves and things about him – things they had to go through the wilderness to experience. It was in the wilderness they experienced him as Healer, Provider, Rest, Merciful, Patient, Protector and Defender. And it was in the wilderness where they were confronted with their deeply rooted sins of grumbling, unbelief, and self-reliance.

God was taking a people who had been hardened by a lifetime of slavery and false religion and transforming him into a people for himself. It was a messy process, filled with troubles and failures, but God had a purpose in all of it.

As you read about other people in the Bible, you see them go through seasons in the wilderness as well. The whole book of Job is about the wilderness he went through. Many of the Psalms tell of David's years of struggle. Even Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness as part of his preparation for ministry. God uses the wilderness to shape us, transform us, train us and reveal himself to us.

Hebrews 12:5-12... James 1:2-4 says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Romans 5:3-4 says, "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

As I look back at my life I can see seasons in the wilderness that were very difficult times for me, but I can see that in those times God revealed things about myself that I needed to see and repent of – things I otherwise wouldn't have seen – and I experienced him in ways I otherwise wouldn't have known.

Maybe you find yourself in a season of hardship and you been traveling through a wilderness of your own. I encourage you that God is with you in the wilderness and he will use it for your ultimate good. He wants to reveal himself to you and bring about transformation in your life. And with some things, the wilderness is the only way to learn. I encourage you to press into Jesus during this time of struggle. Take a posture of humility and openness and ask him to show you what he wants you to see.