

## Studies in Exodus No. 17

Exodus 15:22-27

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The chapter division between Exodus 15 and 16 is one of those, of which there are many in our Bibles, that are inept. Remember, the chapter divisions were added a thousand years after Christ and are not part of the original text of Holy Scripture. The Bible, as originally written, was divided into neither chapters nor verses. The chapters were added, as I said, a thousand years after Christ; the verses some 500 years later. In many, if not most cases, these chapter divisions are wisely enough made, but sometimes not and not here. The Song of Moses that takes up the first two-thirds of chapter 15 concludes the account of the exodus of Israel from Egypt. The first major section of the book of Exodus concludes with this great hymn of triumph and faith. 15:22 begins the next section of the book of Exodus and, in fact, the next large section of Israel's history, the next section of the great history of salvation recorded for us in the first five books of the Bible. Here begins Israel's pilgrimage through the wilderness, the wilderness wanderings as this period is often called. If ever a new chapter should begin at any certain point, it should begin at 15:22.

### Text Comment

- v.22 That is, Israel moved eastward, away from the *Yam Suph*, the Sea of Reeds, into the steppe land east of Egypt. Few of the places mentioned in the narrative of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness can be confidently identified today. Moses uses names and landmarks that were well known to him but, alas, are no longer so to us. We have to content ourselves with educated guesses as to the general sense of Israel's direction on the march. The best guess is that Israel moved generally southeast, down the west coast of the Sinai peninsula. This area is still today known in Arabic as "the desert of the wanderers." [Cole, 128] Israel, of course, with all her people and animals, had to travel where there was pasture and water.
- v.23 If you remember, when Naomi returned to Bethlehem after her sojourn in Moab, she told her friends not to call her Naomi but Marah "because the Almighty has made my life very bitter."

Water, of course, is always a matter of life and death, but nowhere more so than in the dehydrating heat of the desert. [Durham, 213] I remember being arrested by the comment of General Charles Gordon on this episode of Israel's history. General Gordon, if you remember, was the hero and martyr of Khartoum, one of the great military figures of Victorian Britain. Gordon was a devout Christian and a very interesting figure, a man who played important roles in the military history of both China and Africa, and, along the way, identified, in the environs of Jerusalem, one of the possible sites of the Lord's crucifixion, known still today to archaeology as "Gordon's Calvary." If you remember, Charlton Heston played him in the epic movie *Khartoum*. Anyway, it was this Charles Gordon who said that, in his view, Israel's grumbling for water was a small sin, and would be thought so by anyone who knew the desert. [In Trench's biography, 130]

- v.24 Wells and pools in the desert are often brackish because of the mineral salts. It is not said that the water was necessarily dangerous to drink, only that it tasted terrible. If that is the case, Israel's grumbling becomes still more inexcusable.
- v.25 The verb *showed* is the root from which the noun *Torah* comes, which, as you know, means law or instruction. The Law of Moses, as found in the first 5 books of the Bible, was called the *Torah* by the Jews. But here we see how much richer a concept is *torah* than the English word *law*. This *torah* is gracious instruction in how to find God's blessing. *Torah* is not best translated as commandment or law, but instruction or guidance: God's showing of his people the way of life.
- v.26 The Lord used the occasion of this test of Israel's faith to restate the conditionality that attaches to his covenant with his people. *If they will obey his word, if they will be faithful to him*, they will receive his blessing. He will not curse them as he did the Egyptians for their rebellion, but will provide for them according to the riches of his goodness. The contrast with the Egyptians was suggested perhaps not only because Israel had so recently seen God's judgment fall upon them, but because the first of the plagues God had visited upon Egypt also made the water of the Nile undrinkable. He has proved himself to them as the one who is able to save them to the uttermost and provide for them whatever they need. "Obedience to his will, which implied [faith], would be met by God's protecting hand over them." [Ellison, 86] Always there is this alternative: faith and obedience and, with them, God's blessing or unbelief and disobedience, and, with them, God's curse. *So, the point of the phrase "the Lord showed him" in v. 25 is that Israel should learn the great truth that they need instruction and guidance from heaven.* [Cassuto, 184] And, furthermore, that if they follow that instruction they will enjoy God's blessing. However much we rightly insist on the sovereignty of God, not only that all things come to pass according to his will but that he gives his saving grace to whom he chooses, we equally emphasize the truth that God deals with human beings *according to what they have done*. How we reconcile these two truths we cannot say. That they are both truth we have no doubt for the Bible is too clear, too emphatic in asserting each one.

It is apt that the Lord should identify himself as Israel's healer both because some of the plagues the Lord visited upon Egypt involved sickness and death and because, in this instance, he has provided for the physical health and welfare of his people by providing sweet water.

- v.27 As further proof of the Lord's ability to provide for his people he brings them immediately to Elim, which means "terebinth trees." The twelve and the seventy are both Hebrew images of perfection. Shade, pasture, and clear, fresh water. We are reminded of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: "...he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters..."

We said, last time, that in this part of the narrative of Exodus, narrating as it does a new beginning in the history of Israel – like the book of Acts in this regard – we are treated to a series of *representative facts or incidents*. These facts are not only a recounting of what occurred but a

revelation of the way of believing life in the world. They are not only what happened in Israel's case at the time of the exodus and wilderness, but they are a picture of what will always be the case in the history of the people of God in the world. We noticed last time, for example, from the Song of Moses that Israel will be a singing people and that she will express her faith in God, her gratitude to him, her commitment to him in song as well as by other means. It is an important fact that explains much of what will follow in both biblical history and church history.

We come in this next episode, the first in the period of Israel's wilderness wanderings, to another of these representative facts. The Christian church, as you know, has always understood that this history of Israel in the wilderness is paradigmatic. It is both history and meta-history. That is, it is history, the account of what actually happened to Israel when she came out of Egypt by the power of God and made her pilgrimage through the wilderness to the Promised Land; but it is also a picture of the life of the church and of every individual believer. Paul makes this point explicitly in 1 Cor. 10:6 when, referring to Israel's wilderness history, he says to a largely Gentile congregation in Corinth, "these things occurred as examples [for us]..." We are taught the same lesson in Hebrews 11. Over and over again in the Bible the prophets and apostles return to this history for its lessons for faith and life. It is only being faithful to the Bible to see the exodus as an image of our coming to new life in Christ (our deliverance from bondage to sin and death), the wilderness as the difficult, demanding time of our living by faith in this world, looking for but not yet in possession of the Promised Land, the crossing of the Jordan as death, and the Promised Land as heaven.

Israel in the wilderness is the church in the world. It is, as Paul and Hebrews tells us, also the individual believer in the world. That is generally true. But it is also of great importance to remember that Israel in the wilderness is, by and large, an unbelieving people. In actual fact, Israel in the wilderness is an example of an unfaithful church, an apostatizing Christian. This point is also made time and time again in the Bible. Paul makes it in 1 Corinthians 10. Israel in the wilderness he says is a cautionary tale, a warning of what will happen if God's people do not live by faith. The author of Hebrews makes it a centerpiece of his teaching. Israel in the wilderness, he tells us in his chapter 4, had the gospel preached to her but it did not profit her because she did not combine it with faith. Israel in the wilderness is less an encouragement to us than a warning. This history is a stern warning, the story of what happens to the church when she rebels against God and is unfaithful to him. She perishes in the wilderness, as we will see Israel do.

So, it comes as no surprise to the knowledgeable reader of the Bible that the very first episode of the history of Israel in the wilderness depicts her in a bad light. Three days after the mighty demonstration of God's power on her behalf at the Sea of Reeds she grumbled against the Lord. Some translations have "grumble" others have "murmur." But in this we find another of these representative facts. In Exodus and Numbers, the two books that narrate Israel's life in the wilderness we hear of Israel grumbling against the Lord time and time again. There are at least a dozen passages in the Pentateuch that tell of Israel's grumbling.

One of the books I read on my vacation was David McCullough's fascinating account of the first year of the American revolution, *1776*. It is a story of leadership and heroism, of the beginning of the legends of George Washington, Nathaniel Greene and many others. We Americans, of

course, tend to think of the Revolutionary War in those heroic terms. The story of Bunker Hill, Valley Forge, Trenton and Princeton are part of our national epic. But, as McCullough reminds us in his fascinating history, that history is also the story of cowardice and complaint. 1776 is also the story of Washington's struggle to hold the Continental Army together in the teeth of constant desertions, interminable complaints, petty jealousies and entire units melting away when their enlistments expired – no matter that the American Army was at that moment face to face with the enemy. It is the story of military routs as well as military triumphs, of Continentals turning tail and running as well as standing fast and winning the day.

No one can read that book without wondering how, if a man had the heart to volunteer to fight for his country in the first place, to take up arms in defense of his liberty and prosperity, he could be so quick to leave his country in the lurch at her darkest hour, or why he would grouse his way through the war. But many, many men did. And this has been, of course, a fact of human life throughout history. We think of the armies of the Confederacy during the American Civil War as noteworthy for their martial spirit, their patriotic fervor, their bravery in battle. But, fact is, desertions crippled the Southern armies during the Civil War.

Well, what is true in the realm of the history of warfare is true still more in the history of the church and of the spiritual warfare. Throughout her history the church has been plagued by cowardice and grumbling within her own ranks and by desertions, sometimes in immense numbers, in the face of the enemy.

This is the theme and the warning of this very first episode of Israel's history in the wilderness. She had witnessed the Lord's devastation of Egypt by the ten plagues, plagues which dramatically distinguished between Egyptian and Israelite. She had left Egypt loaded down with Egyptian wealth, no matter that she had been for so long an enslaved and powerless people. She had seen the Lord once again display his mighty power on behalf of his people at the Sea of Reeds, she herself passing through the water on dry land while the following Egyptian army was drowned and destroyed. We might well think Israel would never, could never doubt the Lord again. After what she had seen Yahweh do on her behalf to deliver her from bondage we might well suppose that she would ever hereafter laugh at whatever trials she might face.

But we are but three days from the *Yam Suph* and Israel is grumbling against Moses, and, by implication, against the Lord because the oasis to which they have come has bitter water. Surely, we think, there must have been many, if not most of the people who drowned out those grumblings by saying such things as, "Look, the Lord did not part the waters of the *Yam Suph* to let us die of thirst in the desert. He will provide. Let us trust him. If he can divide the waters of the Sea he obviously can provide us with water." But apparently it was not so. And, as the narrative continues we will find that this grumbling becomes a characteristic mark of Israel's life in the wilderness.

But, then, let's not make too light of Israel's trial at Marah. General Gordon's comment about this being a small sin – if not really correct, given what the Lord had just done for Israel – reminds us that the wilderness of this world is full of troubles that are nothing to sniff at. A parched throat in the desert is both painful and frightening. In but three days the Sea of Reeds has been forgotten and all that anyone can think of is this raging thirst. And it isn't simply one's

own thirst, it is the concern of parents for their children and of herdsmen for their livestock. The pressures of life, the difficulties we must face, the trials that come all too easily make us forget all that God has done and all that he has promised. The Lord has been very kind and generous through many years to the Bloem family, but no one should think that, for that reason, they still would not stagger under the weight of the blow they received when their son Nick was killed in Iraq two weeks ago. The Lord has been very kind to the Duple family, but no one should think that past faithfulness enough to keep their hearts from being crushed at the death of their four-year-old son. These godly people will recall the Lord's goodness and comfort themselves in the certainty of his provision for them, but they will have to work to do so. Wouldn't you?

So important is this fact – that the burdens of life can make us forgetful of the Lord's grace and power as we have so often experienced it – so necessary is our taking to heart this danger that the same story is told countless times in the Bible. Israel's complaining, faithless spirit in the wilderness will be repeated to lesser or greater degrees times without number in the biblical history that follows. So soon after the glorious conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua Israel forgot all that God has done for us her and abandoned her faith in the face of the trials that she faced. So soon after Israel's glorious ascent to greatness among the nations of the earth under David and Solomon she forgot the Lord her God and began to act as if there were no such God as Yahweh. And in the New Testament it is no different. After the apostolic ministry of the Apostle Paul founded the church in Corinth, after being eye-witnesses to the miracle working power of God, so soon the church began to grumble against Paul, against one another, and against the Lord and began to act as if she had never experienced the wonders of Christ's salvation.

Paul uses this very history in 1 Cor. 10 to teach us of the danger of self-confidence and to summon us to a persevering faith. "Let him who thinks he is standing, take heed lest he fall." That is Paul's way to sum up one of the lessons of Marah. Don't suppose that today's joy in the Lord, tomorrow's wonderful provision from God will prevent you from forgetful infidelity next month or next year, especially when you are battered by the storms of life. What unbelieving Israel did, every true Christian can do as well, as much unbelief as still remains in a believer's heart.

And, of course, that is what we have here: a test of Israel's faith. Do we believe, really believe that God's promises will be kept, every one of them? Do we believe, really believe, especially when difficulties come, that the way of our happiness, our joy, our peace, our prosperity, our goodness lies in following the Lord and his Word faithfully and with determination? Faith is the bottom grace. Faith is the master wheel that sets all the other graces and virtues to turning in the Christian life. Our confidence in what God *will do*, based upon our knowledge of what he *has done*, that is faith and this is the key to everything.

Here is a wonderful illustration of the timeless relevance of Holy Scripture, if ever there were one. Here we are, an at least somewhat sophisticated, comparatively educated congregation in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Tacoma, Washington, studying an account of Israel at an oasis in the Sinai desert 1,400 years before the birth of Christ – almost 3,500 years ago – and finding that the account of her experience in that long ago desert *precisely parallels our own* and serves as an important lesson in how *we* must live and how *we* must not. Man's situation has not changed

from that time to this, not really, and the lessons of life are the same now as then. What a magnificent proof of the absolute relevance of the Bible. And what is it that we are being taught in this paragraph of Holy Scripture? The difficulty and the essential importance of faith in the Lord our God, of trust in his Word, of confidence in his promises, and of living our lives day by day – no matter our difficulties – in the conviction that the way of the Lord alone is right.

I read recently an account of Hudson Taylor, the 19<sup>th</sup> century English missionary to China, who exemplified in a particularly attractive and memorable way, a robust faith in the Lord. Hudson's Taylor's own understanding and practice of faith has been summed up in four particulars.

1. First, faith rests on God's faithfulness. That is, faith is neither a mere hope that things will turn out right nor our counting on nothing but a bare promise, hope against hope as it were. Faith is counting on God in the full recognition of who God is, what he is like, and, still more, what he has already done for his people. God has given us many, many reasons to be confident in his Word and in his love. This, of course, is grandly illustrated here in Exodus 15. Israel was but three days from the *Yam Suph*. The reason we scratch our heads at Israel and wonder how she could have been so stupid is precisely because it is so obvious to us that it was positively irrational to doubt God after all the mighty things he had done to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt. There is something very strange, unnatural, even more than faintly ridiculous about Israel's behavior at Marah, so soon after she witnessed one of the most spectacular miracles of all history.

We were with Florence's mother in Iowa a month ago. I know that many of you have had the experience of dealing with an aged and forgetful parent. It was frustrating because she could not remember what was said or done just a few minutes before; she couldn't remember who it was who was speaking to her even though we had just introduced ourselves to her shortly before. But we all understand that this is a sickness, a condition of her brain brought on by advancing years. She cannot help it. She doesn't remember because her brain doesn't work properly any more. We know that and it helps to ease the frustration that anyone naturally feels in speaking to someone you love who can't remember who you are or what you are doing there.

But what of this kind of forgetfulness when there is no excuse for it, when the brain is working as well as ever? What of this inability to keep a thought in one's head when it is nothing but a positive refusal, an unwillingness to remember what should never be forgotten? The husband who regularly forgets his wife's birthday or their anniversary; the teenager who regularly forgets to do his chores or his homework, the person who regularly forgets to acknowledge gifts given and kindnesses shown. Then we are not so ready to pardon the forgetfulness. But now what if what is forgotten is *what God has done*, the remarkable, wonderful, life-changing, eternity-gracing things that God has done: whether parting the waters of the *Yam Suph*, or sending his son into the world to redeem his people, or raising him from the dead, or sending the Holy Spirit into the world to call the elect to new life in Christ, or forgiving his people's sins, or promising to give to his children all that they need and much, much more, if only they will seek first his kingdom and righteousness? What then?

We have but to remember what God has done and then act accordingly. We have to remember what God has shown us and follow his guidance. We have no reason to doubt and, given what God has done and said, to forget is irrational, inexcusable. Faith in presuming on the faithfulness of God. That is the first thing to say about faith and it is clearly said here in Exodus 15. Israel had but to remember the events of three days ago!

2. Second, another emphasis in Hudson Taylor's understanding and practice of faith was that faith is, in Holy Scripture, the confidence of a child in a loving parent. God is not only the faithful one, the mighty one, he is our heavenly *Father*. He loves us and cares for us. We can trust him not to treat us with indifference or unconcern. No one is more committed to our welfare than he himself. We can trust no one to have our interest more upon his heart than the Lord himself. Israel had been shown this too. If you remember, we read in 4:22 that Moses was instructed to tell Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says, 'Israel is my firstborn son...Let my son go...'" Yahweh was Israel's father and he acted in fatherly love to free his son from the misery he was suffering. All that God had done in Egypt had been done *for Israel* and God's people had received from his hand more than they could ever have asked or thought. The Lord had proved his love and care for his people. Israel had only to remember that to face with aplomb the new trials that would come in the desert. The fact that Israel forgot the Lord's love – unbelieving people that they were – is no reason to suppose that we will forget it or should allow ourselves to. Nothing is more certain than the fatherly love of God for his people. It should make it all the easier to trust in the Lord when we remember how much he loves us and how often and how spectacularly he has proved that love. As one theologian has put it, "Father, is the Christian name for God." Well, Israel forgot that she had a father and that was a crucial failure of faith and led to her doubt, her grumbling, and her disobedience.

I don't know how many times I have talked to high school fellows and gals who are in some way rebelling against the rule of their parents. They are being required to do something that they do not want to do or forbidden to do what they want to do. And what do I tell them? Well, very often it is just this. "Look, no one loves you more than your parents. Do you believe that?" And they usually do believe it. "Well, they are requiring this thing of you because they love you and because they are older than wiser than you are. Don't you think you owe them the benefit of the doubt. Don't you think you should accept that a requirement motivated by so much love is not only likely to be wise but, in any case, is a requirement you should submit to simply because your parents are doing what they think is best for you because they love you so?" Remember that it is your father who has brought you into your trials, who has laid his heavy hand on you. Look up into a father's loving eyes and then consider whether you have anything to fear and whether you should grumble at your circumstances. Israel forgot she had a heavenly father. Let's not make her mistake!

3. Third, Hudson Taylor made a great point of emphasizing that faith, as a way of life, as a power in our daily lives, is as essential, as necessary in the ordinary round of daily life, in facing the problems of our material existence, as it is for obtaining the forgiveness of sins and entrance into heaven. Faith is not for church only, not even for the eternal issues of

the soul only. Faith is to be a way of life for those who belong to the Lord, who are among his people. And so it was for Israel. It was sweet water she lacked at Marah and it was faith that was needed on her part to obtain it. Moses had that faith and obeyed the Lord in faith and got water not only for himself but for the people. I have too many times realized in my own life and in talking with you and others how often we allow ourselves to think that it is all very well to believe for heaven or to believe for the forgiveness of our sins, but believing for our marriage, our children, our employment, the surmounting of our individual problems is another thing altogether. But the first thing Israel had to believe for in the wilderness, the very first thing, was plain, ordinary water. And in that she is an example for us. Faith is for everything, from water to heaven. And that is because both come from God, along with everything else. In him we live and move and have our being. True faith knows that.

4. Fourth, and finally, faith is not incompatible with the use of means. We sometimes tend to think that faith is a purely spiritual act. In a way it is: it is our confidence in the Lord in the heart. But that act works itself out in many specific acts of obedience that are, in themselves, also acts of faith because they stem from faith, are motivated by faith, and because we only look for success in and through them because we are in them believing in the Lord. So while it is Israel's faith that is on trial at Marah, the lesson that the Lord draws for her is that she is to *obey his Word* and keep his commandments. That is true faith. It is what faith does. Moses is a picture of this in that he was told to throw a particular piece of wood into the water to make it sweet and he did so. He believed in the Lord, he had confidence in Yahweh's faithfulness, and because he did he obeyed and threw the indicated piece of wood into the water and it became sweet. God could have simply made the water sweet himself, but he taught Israel an important lesson by telling her what to do and blessing the doing of it. Faith obeys, faith works, faith employs means.

On Hudson Taylor's first voyage to China in 1853, the ship he was sailing in was caught in a severe storm. He had promised his mother when he sailed that he would wear his lifebelt if it became necessary but when the order to put them on came from the Captain, Taylor felt that it would be dishonoring to God to wear his; it would be a sign of unbelief, as if the Lord couldn't protect him without this human invention. So he gave his life preserver away. But, to his credit, as he reflected on that experience he came to realize that he had made a mistake. "The use of means," he wrote, "ought not to lesson our faith in God, and our faith in God ought not to hinder our using whatever means he has given us for the accomplishment of his own purposes." [Cited with much of the above in Dudley-Smith, *John Stott*, i, 134]

It was not less faith that prompted Moses to throw the stick in the water, but more faith. That is how God expects his people to show their confidence in him: by doing what he says in the spirit of obedience and confidently looking to him for the promised blessing.

So here, at the headwaters of Israel's pilgrimage through the wilderness we have a lesson about the nature and character, about the essential importance of true and living faith in God. Practical, reasonable, sensible confidence in the Lord's faithfulness, in his fatherly love, expressing itself

in every conceivable moment and issue of life, and using those means that are available while we look to the Lord for what he has promised to supply. That, brothers and sisters, is a philosophy of the Christian life.