

## You Shall Know I AM:

### Grumbling in the Wilderness (Exodus 15:22-16:36)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 11, 2018

#### Introduction

- ❖ How many of you have a test coming up this week? How many of you are stressed out about it and wish it would be postponed or cancelled altogether? Now how many of you are thankful for the opportunity to be tested? How many feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for tests? **I think it's safe to say that very few of us enjoy being tested.** We might accept testing as a way of life, but very few of us see it as a good gift from heaven. Tests are stressful, anxiety-inducing experiences. It's hard to see them as good things.
  
- ❖ **This morning I hope that mentality begins to change as we see the role of testing when conducted by God.** This morning, in our study of the book of Exodus, we've entered the wilderness. The LORD has just rescued the Israelites from Egypt. He delivered them through the Red Sea, defeating their enemies. They're at a high point. After 400 years of slavery and oppression, things are looking like they're finally on the up and up.
  - ▶ But the next thing you know, they're being led into the wilderness. And it's in order to be tested. It says it twice in our passage (15:25; 16:4). The LORD led them out into the wilderness to test them.
  
- ❖ **Now whether or not you see that as a good thing depends a great deal on the purpose of the testing.** If you've ever tried to join a team that had a limited number of spots – this could be a sports team, an orchestra, a band, a dance company, or the cast for a play – then they test everyone because they're trying to weed people out. They're trying to determine who doesn't make the cut. No one likes that kind of test. They're nerve-wracking.
  - ▶ But when a teacher gives you a test (assuming she's a good teacher), she's not trying to figure out who to cut. I know it may not feel like a good thing, but that test is aimed at teaching you something. **The test is not to weed you out but to build you up.** When you understand the purpose, you better appreciate the role of testing.
  
- ❖ So when God was dealing with Israel, he wasn't testing them to determine if they were worthy of his time and attention. He wasn't seeing if they can meet the cut. And we know that based on the order of the narrative. Remember that the exodus from Egypt came before the testing. **The LORD didn't put the Israelites through a series of tests while they were in Egypt to determine if they're worth rescuing.**
  - ▶ No, by his sovereign grace and determination, the LORD chose to put Israel on his team first. He rescued them first and then he tested them. So this testing is about teaching. It's about building his people up, not weeding them out.
  
- ❖ So what was the LORD trying to teach Israel by leading them into the wilderness with nothing to eat and nothing to drink? **It's the same thing he's trying to teach you and me when he leads us into a time of deprivation, into a season of wanting, into experiences of deep need and desperation.** He's teaching you something about yourself as well as something significant about him. As we go through today's passage, I want to show you three responses in the text: 1) Israel's response to a wilderness experience. 2) God's response to his people's grumbling. 3) Our response to God's testing.

## Israel's Response to a Wilderness Experience

- ❖ Let's begin by considering Israel's response to their wilderness experience. Now for them back then, their wilderness experience was literally a wilderness – a desert place. **But for us right now, the wilderness is a metaphor for those difficult, dried up seasons in life.** It's those experiences of feeling empty, like something is lacking, something is not growing but dying. We all go through them. Those are wilderness experiences.
  
- ❖ Now for the Israelite's, their wilderness had a name. It was the wilderness of Shur. Look with me at v22, "*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.*" Now it says that Moses made Israel set out, but knowing the context, we know that Moses made them set out into the wilderness because the pillar of cloud, that God sent by day, was leading them in that direction (Ex. 13:21; Deut. 1:33).
  - ▶ Again, consider the order of events. The Israelites have just experienced a great deliverance. By the grace of God, they're saved. They're freed. They're liberated from that which enslaved them. And immediately God leads them into the wilderness.
  
- ❖ We don't like to hear that. That doesn't make sense. **Our assumption is that, in a spiritual journey, the emptiness and lack are things that come first.** Before our deliverance. Before we're saved. So now that we've experienced God in a profound way, those things should be in the past. Now we walk in his victory. Now we serve in his strength. That's the expectation.
  - ▶ But this text doesn't match up. Deliverance didn't lead to an experience of fullness but of lack. What's happening here? Why is it all backwards? Well consider that maybe we have it wrong. **Why do we assume the closer you get to God that the better life should be?** That greater blessings are par for the course.
  
- ❖ You might be thinking, "Okay, deliverance didn't lead to fullness here in Exodus, but that's because we're talking about the Israelites. You're looking at the OT. We're the NT people of God. It should be different for Christians. Our salvation in Christ is much deeper and much more profound than the Exodus."
  - ▶ But you just have to look to Christ himself. If you look at the end of Matthew 3, it's the start of Jesus's public ministry. He gets baptized and has the Spirit of the LORD fall fresh on him and a voice from heaven affirms his sonship. You would think Matthew 4 will begin with Jesus drawing large crowds and growing his ministry. **Instead it says Jesus is immediately led into the wilderness to starve and face great temptation.**
  
- ❖ **Christian, don't be surprised by wilderness experiences.** They're not abnormalities. If God leads you into one, he's not being cruel. He's not treating you unfairly. He's actually treating you like he treated Israel, his chosen people. He's treating you like he treated Christ, his beloved Son. Take comfort in that.
  - ▶ **So the question is not whether wilderness experiences will be there in your journey with God. The question is how you're going to respond to them.** That's where it'll help to look at how the Israelites responded to the wilderness.

- ❖ First, we see them quickly forgetting. **They forget about all the ways in which God mercifully and mightily defeated their enemies and delivered them from bondage.** He did it all – not because they’re so deserving – but because he’s so gracious. And yet they so quickly forgot. Look back at v22. They went three days in the wilderness. Three days from God parting the Red Sea to them blaming Moses for their predicament and complaining about having nothing to drink (15:24).
  - ▶ God graciously provides and then in chapter 16:1, we’re told it’s only a month later and Israel has already forgotten about God parting the waters at the Red Sea and sweetening the waters at Marah. They’re back at it again, blaming Moses and complaining to him about having nothing to eat (vv2-3).
    - But then Moses turns it around. He’s says you’re not really blaming me or complaining to me. You’re doing it to the LORD. Look at v8, *“the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.”*
  
- ❖ **This is the nature of grumbling.** We so quickly forget the thousand days of kindness that he showers on us – a thousand days we don't deserve – and the one day he withholds his mercy and lets us experience the wilderness that we do deserve, we then find ourselves quickly blaming and complaining. We're quickly grumbling against the LORD.
  - ▶ We all do this. We're all grumblers to one degree or another. When life doesn't go the way we had planned, when we're feeling empty and dry, our instinct is to start grumbling. Why? Because we're so quick to forget the mercies of God.
  
- ❖ **Church, it’s for that reason that we gather every week to sing songs of praise to God – which are songs of remembrance for us.** Last week, Henry showed us how the first thing God’s people did after experiencing a great salvation was to write a song about it. Songs help you remember and help you transmit the memory of a particular event to others, especially to those who weren’t there to witness it themselves.
  - ▶ **This is why, if you’re a Christian, it’s so important for you to *not* neglect meeting together every Lord’s Day.** And this is why we put a priority on singing. You might be wondering why we keep singing the same songs and why we keep singing the same kind of songs – songs that seem to simply rehearse the gospel story of Jesus’s death and resurrection. It’s because we’re so quick to forget the mercies of God.
  
- ❖ But even for those of us who do make a habit out of worshipping together every Sunday, who sing songs of our salvation with passion and gusto – even still, the minute our needs or expectations aren't met by God, we often find ourselves grumbling.
  - ▶ **Another reason is because we find it so hard to see beyond what’s immediately in front of us.** We’re so wrapped up in ourselves – so focused on what we’re not getting, on what’s not happening, on how life is not fair. At the root is self-centeredness. It’s the inability to see beyond your immediate needs. **What we need is to shift our focus off the lack in our circumstances and onto the Lord of our circumstances.** We need to get our eyes off of ourselves.

## God's Response to His People's Grumbling

- ❖ This leads to our second point. Let's get our eyes off ourselves and set them on God's response to his people's grumbling. We'll see what God does in the wilderness. Look at vv23-25, "<sup>23</sup>When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. <sup>24</sup>And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' <sup>25</sup>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."
- ❖ So the Israelites go three days without water, and when they finally come across some, they're deflated when they find out it's bitter. That's why they name the place Marah, which means bitter in Hebrew. And as we've already seen, they grumble against Moses, which really means they're grumbling against God.
  - ▶ **But instead of punishing them with a serving of divine justice, God serves them a sweet beverage.** He tells Moses to take a log (literally a tree) and throw it into the water and the water suddenly becomes sweet and drinkable.
- ❖ This gracious miracle of turning water from bitter to sweet brings back memories of when God did the exact opposite – when he turned the life-giving waters of the Nile into blood. Back then, it was a righteous act of judgement against the Egyptians. **That demonstrates the wonders of God's love and sovereign grace in treating Israel so well when clearly they're no more deserving than the Egyptians.**
  - ▶ God goes on to prove in v27 that his love knows no bounds. He leads these grumblers to Elim, a resting place that contained twelve springs and seventy palm trees. In Scripture, twelve and seventy are numbers that communicate the idea of fullness or completion. God is giving them a foretaste of things to come when, one day, he'll finally lead them to the Promised Land. Do you see what's going on? **The Israelites respond to the wilderness by quickly blaming and complaining while God responds to them by patiently forbearing and providing. In this is love.**
- ❖ A month later, in the wilderness of Sin (which is a word related to Sinai and has nothing to do with the doctrine of sin), the Israelites are grumbling again, this time over food. **Instead of raining down judgment, God rains down bread.** This is love and mercy in action.
  - ▶ We're told in v13 that that evening God sent them quail, and then the next morning they awake to discover bread all over the ground. It was called manna, which literally means "what is it?", which is what they ask themselves in v15. They're not sure what this fine, flake-like thing is. Later on in v31, we're told it was white like the seed of the coriander plant, and it tasted like wafers made with honey. **Once again God is so gracious as to bless a grumbling, embittered people with something sweet.**
- ❖ **His grace is sufficient for them.** Look at v16. The LORD commands them to gather an omer worth of manna per person. An omer is about two liters, so imagine a soda bottle full of manna. Read vv17-18, "<sup>17</sup>And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. <sup>18</sup>But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat."

- ▶ So no matter if some gathered more or some gathered less, God made sure they were all filled. His grace was sufficient for them. His grace was just enough. **Not too little grace that they're overcome by their hunger and thirst in the wilderness, but not too much grace that they grow self-sufficient and no longer look to God.**
- ❖ That's how God's grace works. It's sufficient. **He shows us the exact amount of grace that we need to accomplish his good purposes in our lives.** Think about what this means. God knows your need, and he's going to sufficiently provide. **I didn't say fully provide but sufficiently.** God will sufficiently provide for the needs of his people.
  - ▶ It reminds me of our Lord's own words in Matthew 6, "<sup>31</sup>Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' <sup>32</sup>For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup>But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Mt. 6:31-33)
- ❖ Christian, even if the LORD has you in the wilderness right now, you don't have to be anxious. You can rest in the fact that your heavenly Father knows what you need and will sufficiently provide. **The question is: Do you believe it? Do you trust in God to sufficiently provide for your needs – for your daily needs?**

### **Our Response to God's Testing**

- ❖ This is the test. We started by saying that God intends to test us – not to weed people out – but to build people up. This leads to our third point. We've considered Israel's response to the wilderness experience and then God's response to his people's grumbling. Now let's talk about our response to God's testing.
  - ▶ Look at chapter 16:4. "*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."*
- ❖ **The testing is to determine whether they will obey his law (torah) or not.** That's an interesting choice of words since the Law (the Mosaic Law, as we typically know it) has yet to be given to Israel. That doesn't happen until later in chapter 20 at Mt. Sinai.
  - ▶ What that means is that here, in chapter 16, God is testing his people – not to cut them – but to prepare them for Mt. Sinai and the Ten Commandments. **Life as the covenant people of God will call for faithful obedience to walk in his law.** So this moment in the wilderness is a training grounds for the many years to come where they'll be wandering in the wilderness and called to walk in his law.
- ❖ **Now the particular test here in v4 is whether or not the people will go out and only gather a day's portion every day.** For an agrarian people, that's a tough ask. If your life and livelihood depended on seasonal patterns and weather conditions – things outside of your control – then when you get a bumper crop, you take advantage of your good fortune and harvest as much as you can, storing up the extra because the future is so unpredictable.

- ▶ So for these Israelites to wake up in the morning, see manna covering the ground as far as their eyes could see, and only gather a day's portion – that goes against every instinct in their bones. But that's the test – will you do it? Will you trust and obey?
- ❖ It says in v20 that for those who refused to trust and obey, who tried to put some manna aside for the next day (just in case it's not there), they woke up to rotted manna that "*bred worms and stank.*" **Let's be careful not to misapply this verse and conclude that the Bible is condemning those who put aside savings for retirement or a rainy day.** It would be wrong to draw out some principle suggesting that Christians are only supposed to live on a day-to-day budget. That saving is inherently an act of unbelief.
  - ▶ Now it could be – but it really comes down to your heart. Why are you putting aside savings? **Because you want to be a good steward of God's good gifts or because you don't trust God to pull through and provide for your future?** For these Israelites hoarding extra manna, it's clear that they didn't trust God or his word when he promised new manna every morning.
- ❖ Now there's another part to this test that God's putting them through. If you look at v5, there are instructions for how the Israelites were to prepare for the Sabbath. So apparently even before the fourth commandments was given, God's people already observed the Sabbath. Which makes sense since it's not like the Law created the idea of a Sabbath day. No, it predates the Law. It's part of the creation order in Genesis 2:2. **God kept the Sabbath and rested from his labor on the seventh day, and he calls his people to do the same.**
  - ▶ Let me read v5, "*On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.*" So on Friday morning, they're each allowed to gather 2 omers (4-liters) of manna because on Saturday morning you won't find any manna anywhere. At the same time, God promises that on that Friday evening – and that evening only – the extra manna won't go bad. It won't breed worms and stink. All of this was a test – to train them to trust and obey.
- ❖ Now v27 tells us that unfortunately, on Sabbath morning, some people still went out to gather manna and obviously found none. The LORD was not too pleased, and he rebuked them. But he didn't destroy them – though he had every right to.
  - ▶ **No, he wasn't testing them to figure out if they were worth saving.** He already saved them by his grace, and now he was testing them to teach them – to teach them to trust and obey.
- ❖ Later on in the book, in chapter 20:20, we find the Israelites cowering in fear at Mt. Sinai. The LORD is delivering the Ten Commandments, but the people can't handle him speaking directly to them. They feel like they're about to die. Moses tries to alleviate their fears and says to them, "*Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.*"
  - ▶ Do you hear that? God's people don't need to fear – as in fear he's going to kill you or cut you off. **He didn't save you from your sins just to kill you for sinning.** "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you."

- ❖ So there is a proper kind of fear he wants to instill in you. It's not a fear of potentially being cut off. **If you understand the order of God's salvation – that he rescues you first and then he tests you – then you can be sure he's not trying to weed you out but build you up.** God tests you – to teach you to trust him. That you may not sin.
  - ▶ And for the Israelites we do see them finally learning to trust and obey. Look at v29, *“<sup>29</sup>See! The LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place; let no one go out of his place on the seventh day.”* <sup>30</sup>*So the people rested on the seventh day.”*
  
- ❖ **Church, I would contend that this test of the Sabbath still stands for us today.** I think most Christians assume the Sabbath doesn't apply to the Church. We think that was only a part of the old covenant. We don't observe the Sabbath in any strict sense anymore. Some Christians might agree it's important to still observe a Sabbath, but it doesn't have to be on a particular day of the week (Saturday for the Jews and Sunday for most Christians in church history). **But I think it's safe to say that most Christians today don't observe a Sabbath rest in any intentional manner.**
  - ▶ Now there are a whole host of interpretive issues that we could address when trying to understand how the fourth commandment applies today. We don't have time to get into them. But I think we can all agree with Jesus's words when he says in Mark 2:27 that, *“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”*
  
- ❖ **The point is that God asked for the Israelites to rest from gathering manna on the Sabbath – not because he was trying to burden them with arbitrary rules and regulations – but because he was trying to teach them to trust.** God's saying, "Trust that I'll sufficiently provide for your needs and your family's, and demonstrate that trust by refraining from your labor. Stop working for one day and really depend on me to get by."
  - ▶ Church, what is that going to look like for you? **Maybe that means training yourself to refrain from your labor every Lord's Day.** What if from sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday, you intentionally rested from working or studying (or whatever your current vocation) and spent that time resting in God and with God's people? **It would be a test – a test of how much you trust God and his providence to sufficiently provide for all your needs.**
  
- ❖ What these tests in the wilderness are ultimately trying to identify is the reason why a person follows God. **They're trying to show you whether you're ultimately following God for who he is versus what he gives you.** This point becomes even clearer when you connect our passage with another account in Scripture of another miraculous feeding that involved a divine testing and a bunch of grumbling.
  
- ❖ I'm thinking of **John 6** where Jesus provided bread for the five thousand. In v5 it says, *“<sup>5</sup>Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”* <sup>6</sup>*He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.”*

- ❖ The story goes on to describe how Jesus multiplies five loaves and two fish, and all five thousand have their fill to eat. It's no surprise that the crowds love him for it, and they keep following him. But Jesus recognizes that they're just after more food.
  - ▶ **So he draws a connection with Moses and the bread from heaven, but goes on to call himself the True Bread of Heaven.** It says in v32, "<sup>32</sup>Jesus then said to them, *Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. . . .<sup>35</sup>I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*"
  
- ❖ **So when they realize he's not dishing out any more physical bread, the people begin to grumble.** It says in v41, "*So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."* And little later on in v60, it says some of his disciples were grumbling. Then it says in v66, "<sup>66</sup>After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. <sup>67</sup>So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" <sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, <sup>69</sup>and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."
  - ▶ Amen. **You see, those other disciples proved that, in the end, they're following Jesus – not because he's the Holy One of God – but because he's useful.** So when he begins to get weird on them (talking about feeding on his flesh and drinking his blood; v56) – and when he disappoints them and no longer provide for their needs as they expected – they grumble, turn back, and no longer walk with him.
    - **But Peter and the Twelve keep following after Jesus – not because he's useful to get what they need – but he himself is everything they need.** To whom shall we go? You and you alone have the words of eternal life.
  
- ❖ Friends, this may be why God is putting you through a wilderness experience right now. It's probably why he's disappointing you. It's a test to see how you respond. Which is a test to see why you follow God. Do you walk in his law because you find it useful to get what you need? Or is it Jesus himself, the Holy One of God, that you need?