

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Lessons Learned in the Wilderness

(Studies in Exodus and Numbers)

From Grumbling to Giving Thanks

(Exodus 15-17)

Study #1

Introduction: Cheer up. You could be camping...

I've heard that misery loves company. I'm confident that misery loves camping.

I have long been a cheerleader for camping because of its health benefits and because I enjoy it. I now advocate camping for two additional reasons.

For one, camping builds strong and lasting relationships. Gary Smalley, a Christian counselor and author, reported years ago that families who spent time camping together often bonded.

Not on the trip itself, of course. Smalley wrote that the bonding comes later, usually about three weeks later, after the memories of the trip's calamities and the bruises have faded.

I've camped a lot over the years. Before we had kids, Kathy and I camped frequently. We still like to sleep in a tent, which we did over this past week out in the Guadalupe Mountains of far West Texas.

I've taken lots and lots of camping trips with our kids and a few trips to Colorado with teens and young adults from church.

Unfortunately, while all of these excursions have been rich and wonderful, most of them haven't been as rich with calamity. I can only hope that the next time out will find me and my partners running from a bear or something. Then, we'd really bond.

I'm also a proponent of camping because it builds character. I say that because camping guarantees trials of various sorts. You may get tired, sore, blistered, uncomfortable and inconvenienced while camping. And the Bible says that trials are very useful things for building character. (See James, chapter 1)

Now I may be inching out onto a shaky limb here, but I'm going to suggest that God is also a proponent of camping, and for the reasons I just listed.

Where do I get that? Well, when He wanted to unite the people of Israel, build their national character, and grow their faith, where did He take them? On a forty-year camping expedition into the wilderness.

And since the God of Israel wants to do the very same things with us, here today, we can be sure that He will take us into various wildernesses, too.

For the next few weeks we're going to give our attention to the Old Testament books of Exodus and Numbers to see the lessons ancient Israel learned in the wilderness. I believe that seeing what God taught them will give us a head start in learning what we need to learn from whatever wilderness we face.

And it just so happens that the lesson the Jews learned, right out of the chute, is tailor-made for the Sunday before Thanksgiving.

Our first study takes us to the book of Exodus. In the fourteenth chapter of Exodus we find the Jews gazing at one of the most beautiful sights God's creation has to offer.

The natural world has many different faces, all of them with their own beauty.

- There is the towering majesty of the Colorado Rockies.
- There is the strength of the giant sequoia trees in California.
- There are the amber waves of grain of America's heartland.

Israel's predicament...

God's people were looking out at the placid waters of the Red Sea. But this beautiful view didn't give them serenity. It left them traumatized.

The reason for the trauma was that while the Red Sea stared them in the face, the Egyptian armies were chasing them from behind. Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years and had left Egypt after God sent ten terrible plagues on the Egyptians.

Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, sent the Jews packing. But, very quickly Pharaoh missed his slaves and decided he would go fetch them back.

As we enter the story, the Jews were completely hemmed in. Red Sea in front. Armies behind. No place to run or to hide.

It was at this moment, believing that their chances of surviving their destruction were exactly zero, that the people of God expressed themselves to Moses, God's appointed leader.

God Cares for His People! (Exodus 14-15)

Perfectly Hemmed in (14:11-12)

[11] Then they said to Moses, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt? [12] "Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians.'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

That might have been tough for Moses to have heard. After all, he was only doing what God had told him to do. But Moses didn't take it personally and he responded beautifully.

He directed the people's attention to God. He told them to stand and watch God's deliverance. And did God ever deliver!

Redeemed Through the Red Sea (14:16-22)

God told Moses to take up his walking stick and stretch out his hand over the sea.

When he did that the pillar of cloud and fire which had been leading them from Egypt to the Red Sea re-positioned itself between Israel and the Egyptian army.

Then, [14:21]...the Lord swept the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land, so the waters were divided. [22] The sons of Israel went through the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

The Jews walked down into the dry sea bed, made it all the way across where the Red Sea had been, climbed out on the other side, and then stood on the shore, watching the Egyptians on the far side.

Of course, the Egyptians still wanted their runaway slaves back. So, when God moved the pillar of fire out of the way, they raced after the Israelites, going right after God's people.

Now, quick. What do you think was going through the minds of the Jews as they watched the Egyptian chariots barreling toward them? Panic? Terror? Anger? - at Moses and/or God?

I suspect any or all the above.

But, at the moment of their greatest panic, when their enemies' armies were ready to overwhelm them,¹ Moses lowered his arms.

And as his arms lowered, God brought the waters back together - and it was Pharaoh and his army that were overwhelmed.

After a few moments of stunned silence, the realization sunk in that those who had been about to re-enslave or kill them and their loved ones had themselves been defeated. And what followed was relief and rejoicing.

Celebrating God's Great Deliverance (15:1ff..)

They sang a song, and it's recorded at Exodus 15. It's called *The Song of Moses*. It is an exuberant, celebratory song of thanksgiving for God's rescue.

Having been delivered from slavery, they have now been redeemed from disaster.

Today, four days before Thanksgiving, we stand in Israel's shoes and we remember God's salvation.

Of course, we weren't slaves in Egypt. But we weren't free as we were created to be. We were shackled by sin. We were enslaved by habits and lusts and addictions we couldn't shake.

And, while we weren't about to be destroyed by a vindictive Pharaoh, we had offended a just and holy God and faced His righteous, condemning judgment.

And then - just at the right moment! - when we were still far from God, He sent a Deliverer. Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect life, died as a perfect sacrifice for our sins, and rose from the dead a conquering Savior. When we turned to Him in faith, He set us free to live as God's liberated sons and daughters.

¹ And who knows how close the Lord allowed the leading Egyptian chariot to come to them before the waters receded back into its place?

No longer do we face judgment. We have tasted grace. No longer do we need to submit to the lusts that bind us.

It's like we are joining Israel on the eastern shore of the Red Sea and celebrating what God has done for us. Our hearts join theirs in thanksgiving and praise and worship.

Now, back to Exodus 15. At this moment - post-Red Sea crossing - everything is right with the world for these Jews.

One moment they had been in mortal danger. They were expecting the Egyptians to kill them and enslave their children, returning them to the life of slavery that their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents had known. The next moment, their destroyers were destroyed. They were saved.

Then, of course, after that "next moment" there is another moment. There is always another moment.

God Cares for His People? (Exodus 15-17)

"Gripe Session" #1 (15:22-27)

Water is life

After the people finished singing their song, they turned away from the sea and looked east. And what would they have seen? They would have seen the most barren wilderness you can imagine.

Had you been an Israelite, what would you have been thinking as you looked out at the wilderness in front of you? Something like, "*Man, that is bleak. That is stark.*"

Over the years, I've taken a bunch of memorable trips to the mountains of Colorado. The San Juan Mountains make up some really beautiful real estate.

But, when one travels from San Antonio to the San Juans, one has to travel through West Texas.

I speak as a Texan. I love Texas. But even a dyed in the wool Texan like me will admit that the territory you drive through on the way to the mountains is a bit on the extreme side - extremely barren.

As the Israelite fathers looked out at their wilderness - more like the area around Pecos, Texas than Durango, Colorado - they thought about driving the family sedan across THAT.

There were no roads. Not much in the way of shade. No access to provisions. They were traveling in the company of several hundred thousand of their closest friends and relatives.

They're thinking, *"Egypt was hard. THIS is ridiculous."* They had been redeemed by God's mighty hand, but they are feeling very alone, very small.

Despite how they felt, though, they were obligated to follow the guiding pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night wherever it led them - and it led them straight into that wilderness.

In Exodus 15, God led Israel into the wilderness to learn some lessons that aren't usually learned anywhere else.

For lack of good water (v. 22)

[15:22] Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur;² and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.

When the Jews left the Red Sea area to travel into the desert, they had filled their canteens and water barrels with as much water as they could carry.

That water supply lasted three days. At the three-day point, they had no more water and the caravan came to an abrupt stop.

They gave a name to the place where they first camped that defined the moment. I'll give you the name in a minute. But first, a word about water.

Everywhere in the world, water is life.

Here in San Antonio we are spoiled by the luxury of clean, tasty water. It's available to us at any time of the day at the turn of a spigot. We have the gigantic resource of the Edward's underground aquifer.

But in other places, that's not the case.

When groups from our church have been in Kenya, serving with Crossway, International, we've seen the importance of water. It's hard work to get water for the day. Sometimes the water you collect is contaminated. And sometimes, there isn't enough water. (All of which makes Crossway's water projects such a tremendous blessing!)

In the deserts of the Ancient Near East life hung on the fragile hope of being able to travel from water hole to water hole without drying up.

So, imagine the Jews' panicked disappointment when they stopped at a place with water that was undrinkable.

They named the place, ***"Mara."*** Mara means "bitter" and bitter described the water AND the people's spirits.³

In Exodus 15:24, the Jews asked a question of Moses: ***"What shall we drink?"***

There's nothing wrong with that question. It was a perfectly legitimate question. But there was something wrong with the way they asked the question because the Bible tells us that they didn't just "ask" the question. They ***"grumbled"*** it.

² The wilderness of Shur was the name given to the region along the eastern shore of the Red Sea.

³ See the book of Ruth (1:20), where Naomi refers to herself as "Mara" because her life had become so bitter after the deaths of her husband and sons.

Grumbling against God for lack of good water (vv. 23-24)

I know that the Bible tells us that they addressed their “grumble” to Moses. He was the visible target of their grumble. But they knew that it was God who had brought them into the wilderness. It was with God that they had their real beef.

This God, who three days earlier had parted the Red Sea so that they could walk on dry land away from their enemies, is now their enemy. They are grumbling against God.

And notice God’s patience.

God knew that they were just beginning to understand Him and His ways. God wanted them to know His grace and how completely committed He was to their welfare. So, God provided for His people exactly what they needed.

God miraculously provided good water (vv. 25-27)

[25] Then he (Moses) cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet.

That’s nothing but a Class A miracle. And with the bitter water now sweet, they quenched their thirst and filled up their water barrels. Then God led them to an oasis, a place called “Elim” for their comfort and rest.⁴ Elim was exactly what they needed - a shady oasis in the desert with plenty of food and drink.

And how had it happened that they had come to Elim?

They came there in exactly the same way that they came to Mara. God led them by the pillar of cloud and fire.

God was teaching His people something profound about His character and about His posture toward them. He is teaching them that He is good. He is for them.

The people stayed at Elim for some time. They were comfortable there. They found refreshment. Some of them might even have wanted to settle down there.

But they were never called to settle down in the desert. They were bound for the Promised Land so they kept following that pillar of fire and cloud.

They arrived at their third destination, an area known as “***the wilderness of sin***” (for “Sinai”) about six weeks after the Exodus.

“Gripe Session” #2 (Exodus 16:1-36)

Grumbling against God for lack of food (vv. 1-8)

The wilderness of Sin⁵ is a large, sandy tract of desert in the southwestern section of the Sinai Peninsula. There in that wilderness, we find the people singing a familiar song - “*The Grumble*”. Listen.

[2] The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. [3] And 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.”

Before they had grumbled about the lack of water. Now they grumble about a lack of food.

And let’s not make fun of the Jews here. To be in the desert without water or without food is not a minor inconvenience. It’s a calamity. You can’t feed your family. This is serious.

⁴ [27] *Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the water.*

⁵ Etymologically related to and geographically close to *Sinai*, not connected with our English word “*sin*” in any way.

But their response must have seemed like a slap in the face to God. They remembered what it had been like in the land of captivity, and they yearned to be back in Egypt. *“We’d rather be enslaved in Egypt than face the hardships that come with following God on the way to the Promised Land.”*

Then, they turned to Moses and accused him of attempted genocide: *“You have brought us out to this wilderness to kill us.”*

To his credit, Moses again understood that their grumble was actually leveled against God. So, Moses spoke to the people.

[16:8] 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 grumbings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumbings are not against us but against the Lord.”

Now, just a word or two about grumbling.

Grumbling is not so much the noise we make with our voice. It is the attitude that grips the heart.

We grumble when we question God’s goodness. A grumbler questions whether God is for him. Grumblers accuse God of being unjust.⁶

And the people of Israel were grumbling against God in the wilderness of Sin for the way He was dealing with them. They couldn’t square the hard times they were going through with the idea that God was good or that God was for them.

Despite His people’s grumbings, though, God didn’t reject them or withdraw from them. No, He gave them exactly what they needed.

God miraculously provided food / manna (vv. 13-36)

While the people were grumbling, God responded to their need - NOT to their grumble - in a most unique, completely miraculous way.

He first sent quail to them in the evening, which they promptly ate. That was a wonderful provision of food, of course. But, the really surprising part came when the Jews left their tents to greet the sunrise.

[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.”

This is what we know as “manna.” The word we translate “manna” is a combination of two Hebrew words that mean “what” (man) and “it is”. (hu) or, more or less, *“What is this?”*

Which means, of course, that when your kids say, *“What’s this?”* to the dinner you set before them, they are being biblical.

And six days every week, for the remainder of their forty years in the wilderness, God provided for their food needs in this way.⁷

Every day (except for the Sabbath; they collected twice as much on the day before the Sabbath), just as surely as the sun arose, they would find manna on the ground, free for the taking. Manna was yet another evidence of God’s on-going care and concern, a tangible expression of His love for them and of His goodness.⁸

OK. Surely now that God has provided food and water, His people are totally convinced of His goodness and of His commitment to them. There will be no more “grumble sessions.”

⁶ My Bible Encyclopedia identifies grumbling as an open act of rebellion against the Lord.

⁷ Exodus 16:31 - And the house of Israel named it manna, and it was like coriander seed, white; and its taste was like wafers with honey.

⁸ The Lord made clear that the manna could not be hoarded, and was not to be wasted. (see vv. 16-30)

Well... Right after the inauguration of the manna era, the people found themselves in a pickle. And they immediately took out their guitars and started strumming the chords to "The Grumble" again.

"Gripe Session" #3 (Exodus 17:1-7)

Grumbling against God for lack of water - again (vv. 1-3)

[17:1a] 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"

As with every move they made from site to site, the reason for the move from the wilderness of Sin to the place called Rephidim, was that the pillar of cloud and fire had moved. They were following the leading of God. And there is only one biblical descriptor of Rephidim.

[1b]...and there was no water for the people to drink.

So, what do you think the people will do now? We're sadly not surprised.

[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?"

As before, they addressed their words to Moses. But, as before, their gripe was with God. Our gripes are always, finally, against God.

They wanted to know, *"What kind of a God would bring His people out from Egypt into the wilderness?"*

We might ask, today, *"What kind of a God would allow difficulties and challenges and trials and pain?"* Certainly, not a good God.

Prior to everything we have considered this morning, we know that God had acted on behalf of His people. From the days of Abraham forward, He blessed them through Isaac and Jacob and Joseph.

He sustained them and grew the people even during the four hundred years of Egyptian captivity.

Today, we've watched as God led them out of Egypt through the Red Sea, provided sweet water for them in the wilderness of Shur and manna every morning.

This is the God the Jews now accuse of drawing them out to the wilderness so that He might destroy them.

Had I been God listening to their grumble, I might have been tempted to fulfill their suspicions.

But, God is good. He didn't turn on His people. He proved yet again that He was unalterably committed to their welfare. And, instead of destroying them, He provided for them exactly what they needed.

God miraculously provided water from a rock. (vv. 4-6)

The people seemed ready to shoot the messenger and to stone Moses to death, so Moses turned to the Lord.

[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."

Moses did exactly what God told him to do. He took his walking stick, struck a solid rock with it, and God brought forth water from the least likely substance around.

Once again, there was a crisis of thirst. Once again, the people grumbled. And once again, God abundantly met His people's need.

Conclusion:

So, when you find yourself in the wilderness, here is Lesson #1: God is Good!

Wilderness Lesson #2? Don't doubt Lesson #1.

It's tempting to doubt Lesson #1 in the wilderness. But the wilderness - with its challenges and heartaches and inconveniences and tragedies - is part of God's core curriculum for all of His children's growth and development.

It was for our Savior. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Holy Spirit led Him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. That time in the wilderness steeled and prepared Him for all the challenges ahead.

The wilderness was required for Israel, too. After a miraculous deliverance through the Red Sea, God led the people of Israel to bitter places. Places with no food, no water, bad water. He led them to these places to teach them that He is good even when life is hard.

It is likely that He will lead us anywhere else? No. God's school of discipleship leads through the wilderness.

So, if you find yourself in a wilderness right now, do what Israel forgot to do. Don't deny the difficulties, but...

- *Remember His past mercies*

Would you take time this week to reflect on the forgiveness you have received from God - and give thanks?

- *Remember His provision*

Would you take time in the coming days to remember moments when you have seen God's timely provision for your need for comfort and encouragement, for food or clothing and shelter - and give thanks?

- *Remember His goodness*

Would you take a time out from a busy schedule some time soon, and with others, memorialize how God has showered you with evidence of His goodness - and give thanks?

- *Remember His redeeming love poured out on you in Jesus - and give thanks.*

Would you, right now, pause to give thanks to God for having rescued you from an Egypt-sized slavery to sin and redeemed you from a Red Sea-sized danger of judgment by the death and resurrection of Jesus? Would you give thanks to God for the freedom you have received from God to live as you were redeemed to live?