

Exodus 15:22-16:36

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To set the scene for our passage today let's recall where we left off with the Israelites. After being powerfully protected by God during the plagues in Egypt, the Israelites were rescued from their captors' pursuits by God's parting of the Red Sea. I was so struck by Meesh's description last week of the Red Sea moment being a picture of the transformation from death to life. She reminded us our salvation is not dependent on our ability to swim to the other side of the sea but instead on God creating that path. During her talk a couple of weeks ago, Ellen referred to the Israelites as "Passover people", because they were called to continually remember God's promise of protection to them during the Passover. In our passage today the Israelites will forget God's faithfulness when they are faced with trials yet again. It stands out to me that God surely was not surprised by His people's lack of faith. Rather He steadfastly provided for them and then set up ways for them to recall His provisions, whether that be through powerful miracles, the yearly Passover feast or the saving of manna in a jar of remembrance.

Let's dive into our passage for today in Exodus 15 and 16. In the first days of their freedom we find the Israelites in a wilderness, without drinkable water, and lacking food. As we walk through this passage we will see a pattern of God's people having great physical needs, grumbling about their lack and the Lord responding with sustenance and patience. Exodus gives us a front row seat to God's deep love for His people, He meets their needs when they have nothing to offer in return. We will also explore God's grace in providing training to His people about how to place their trust fully in Him who cares for their ultimate good.

In Exodus 15 verses 22-27 we see the first "test" the Israelites will encounter in the wilderness. As I mentioned before, they are riding the high of victory over their captors only to now find themselves in a desert wilderness with only bitter, undrinkable water. They respond with grumbling to their leader Moses, who cries out to God on their behalf. God shows Moses a branch to put in the water and the water is miraculously made sweet. God is about to begin training the Israelites' hearts but He clearly chooses to provide for them first. He did not require anything of them before he gave them this blessing of sweet water in the wilderness. This is a foreshadowing of the gift to come through Jesus's sacrifice.

God reminds the Israelites of his faithfulness to protect their wellbeing so that they are more able to put their trust fully in Him when trials continue to come later. Verse 25 tells us "that's the place where God set up rules and procedures; that's where he started TESTING them". In a sermon covering this passage, Keller points to Deuteronomy for clarification about this. In Deuteronomy 8:2-3 God explains he tested His people in the wilderness to know their hearts. God desires a relationship with His people and wants goodness for them. He is gracious to give safe water and train the Israelites, so that their hearts are softened and they can turn to Him who knows what is best for them.

Bruckner's commentary further explains the word "tested" can also be translated "trained" or "proved". I have a much less weighty comparison to make but I think it will provide some helpful understanding of these various translations and words. Over the last couple of

years I have been learning to make sourdough bread and so I've learned a lot about proving (or proofing as modern day bakers now call it). Let me explain.

If you've heard anything about the sourdough process, which I am sure you have because us sourdough bakers can be quite passionate sourdough evangelists, you have heard about the sourdough "starter". The starter is what gives sourdough bread its characteristically sour taste. But more importantly it is what contains the fermented flour and water that is the perfect environment for "wild yeast" to thrive, helping give bakes their proper rise during the "proofing" process. If your starter is not active enough your bread will not rise and will be inedible. Worst case scenario, if your starter is left inactive for too long it will be unable to sustain the wild yeast and won't be able to be used for baking. So to make sure your starter is active and thriving and ready for a bake you must "feed" it flour and water and then watch for the activity, or proof of life. After mixing in new flour and fresh water, you leave it for hours out on your countertop hoping to draw in more wild yeast from the environment. After this process the starter should be actively bubbling and doubled in size from when you left it. The starter has now proven to be strengthened enough to withstand the heat of the oven and develop its deliciously airy and chewy structure. This is where the baking term "prove or proof" your dough comes from. Bakers must supply the right conditions for dough to grow and thrive in preparation for baking. They must prove their dough into a thriving state to achieve the perfect bake. God wants His people to thrive, God is looking to train their hearts to lean on him and trust him for protection and provision to withstand the trials that will come their way. He knows what will make them a thriving people ready to face what lays ahead. God offers testing and rules and statutes that will help keep His people thriving and in a trusting relationship with Him.

After healing the bitter water at Marah, and establishing the start of their faith training, God declares in verse 26 "I am the Lord, your healer". God is making it clear He cares about both their spiritual AND physical well being throughout these times of training. He makes a statute that they shall incline their ears to hear his voice, and do what is right in his eyes and he will protect them from the diseases he put on the Egyptians. He is calling back the memory of the plagues in Egypt and more broadly referencing to Egypt being a land of disease as is stated in Deuteronomy 7:15 which says:

"And the Lord will take away from you all sickness, and none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you knew, will he inflict on you, but he will lay them on all who hate you." God promises HE will be their healer from disease if they will only soften their hearts toward him and follow Him in faith. The very next place the Lord guides them to after this declaration is the healing oasis of Elim. Bruckner suggests that during these weeks the Israelites spent by the 12 springs of Elim, the Lord was healing and repairing them physically from all they had encountered throughout their time in Egypt.

In the next test we hear about the Israelites being without food and God providing daily bread to meet their needs. The Lord is gracious to again provide for their physical needs and also to give instructions about the provisions in order for them to grow in their faith and trust in Him alone. They were to gather only what they needed for each day and a double portion on the sixth day. The first day some of the Israelites found it hard to trust this provision and gathered more than was needed for that day. These Israelites were placing their trust and faith in their

own abilities to be prepared. They discovered their “preparedness” instead led to rotting inedible food the next day. God again instructs his people through Moses to only gather what was needed for the day in front of them. They were to trust God’s provision to come each day as He promised. The Israelites hadn’t yet been given the commandment of the sabbath but this was preparing their rhythms and their hearts to be tuned toward God. Bruckner states:

“The Lord’s testing was a plan to form this assembly into a people who would bless the world through the way they lived. The manna given with instructions was the beginning, He was preparing them for the more comprehensive instruction of the Torah at Sinai.”

Being a mom of little kids this reminds me of what it’s like to teach my kids responsibility. I can’t just expect my toddler to put their dirty clothes in the laundry basket without any prior instruction or help from me. I need to be teaching this little by little over time. It starts all the way before they are even capable of physically managing this on their own. First we are modeling the task for them, and maybe narrating it “these are dirty, here’s where I am putting them”. Then we are inviting them to help do the task, “can you help me put your socks in the laundry basket?” We might say. After enough repetition we can then hand it over “Can you show me where we put these dirty clothes?”. Until one day, before our very eyes, our kids are putting their dirty clothes into the laundry basket (about 85% of the time) without our help! God did not leave the Israelites on their own, expecting them to follow Him and put their faith in Him completely, 100% of the time. No, He taught them little by little, modeling, instructing, and providing opportunity for it to be practiced under His watchful care. His training shaped their hearts, preparing them to follow His commandments that would set them apart as His people.

With this particular time of testing and the specific food the Lord provided to the Israelites here, I want to address that many have found scientific explanations for this arrival of manna and quail. Let’s consider what this might say about the Lord, the creator of science! There were known migratory patterns of quail in this region, leading them to show up in daylight exhausted and easy to catch after a long night of migratory flight. And the manna is said to have possibly been the known sweet substance that came from the secretion of aphids in that area. But, as I mentioned earlier, God is the creator of all things and the quantity of the manna and quail was surely miraculous, as was the absence of both on the seventh day. We can clearly see God was at work and safeguarding His statute and provision of rest for His people. I love how Motyer sums up these ideas:

“how deep the Lord’s love and care and power was to at the beginning of time say to himself “my people will one day pass this way, mortally thirsty and disappointed by undrinkable water- I will plant a tree to await their arrival...My people will one day pass this way threatened with death by starvation and at that point my aphids will work and my quail will fly. It will all be ready for them”....Our needs have already been anticipated in his foreseeing, far-seeing grace, which is ever on our side. Trials may catch us by surprise but never the Lord.”

Though Moses responds impatiently to their grumbling in this time of testing, the text tells us only that God HEARS their grumbling, provides, and invites them to draw near to Him. In verse 6 Moses and Aaron say to the Israelites “In the morning you shall see the Glory of God,

because He has heard your grumbling against the Lord. For what are we, that you grumble against us?”. They are frustrated with the Israelites grumbling and remind the Israelites that God hears them and He alone is the one able to provide. The Israelites have forgotten God’s promise of deliverance when they are faced with this testing. Their suffering causes them short term memory loss of the recent miracles of care and protection given by God to them. How often do we forget the ways God has cared for us and watched over us? When trials come our way how quick are we to question God’s faithfulness? I know I often have.

In verse 9 Moses and Aaron say to the Israelites “Come near before the Lord, for He has heard your grumbling.” And as soon as they looked toward the wilderness the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud”. The Lord calls them back to Him when they forget His faithfulness. God does not fixate on their forgetfulness or even their ungratefulness for his provisions; instead he turns His ear toward them and gives them more of Him. In Exodus 16:12 the Lord says when they eat the meat and bread they will “know that I am the Lord your God.” He hears their grumbling and offers for them to see and know Him. He provides for their physical needs but also offers for their hearts to know Him as a good and faithful God.

In his provision of manna the Lord says “you will wake in the morning and see the glory of God”. I was surprised to learn that the word used for Glory here is the same word used to denote God’s presence in the cloud in Exodus. The manna is a manifestation of God’s glory. The command given later in verse 33 and 34 to keep an Omer of manna in the ark of the covenant further highlights the manna’s connection to God’s presence and glory. The preserved manna was to be a reminder of God’s daily provision of bread in the wilderness AND His presence with them during their entire forty years of wandering. God is gracious to meet the Israelites physical needs during this distressing time but how gracious He is to also meet them with his own presence. With that in mind, Bruckner calls us to look ahead to the New Testament and consider how “the physical symbol of bread in the Last Supper continued and added weight to this amazing theological initiative by God.” In Luke 22:19 Jesus says to his disciples at the Last Supper “this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of ME”. Jesus is reminding His disciples that just as God provided physically for His people in the desert with the manna and quail, Jesus is now providing for his disciples with the Last Supper. Just as God provided spiritually for his people in the desert through training their hearts to rest in Him, Jesus is now providing spiritually for His disciples through the breaking of His body on the cross giving them a way to true salvation and rescue from the brokenness of our world.

This portion of scripture in Exodus gives us great insight into the human experience of suffering and God’s response to it. I recently walked through a season of suffering and I have to admit there were moments when I certainly questioned God’s provision, protection and care just as the Israelites did. The Lord met me with unwavering patience, love, and steadfast grace. I was privileged to feel His presence through the believers around me. When I felt despair and anger, God was near. When I dared to question His plan and His provision He was steadfast in providing provisions I did not know to ask for. When I begged God to take away the suffering and was angry when it continued he was steadfastly gracious to open my eyes to his own broken heart at the suffering of his creation.

In a sermon considering today's passage, Keller directly addresses suffering in a way that cut right to my heart during my season of suffering. Keller said:

"wilderness, or desert, was not in the Garden of Eden. Disaster, war, suffering and evil were not in the 'blueprint' of creation. When we see Jesus at the tomb of his friend Lazarus we know that the lord of the Bible is as angry and as intolerant and unhappy with the evil and suffering in this world as you and me but we see Jesus using that tragedy for great and glorious purposes in His timing...in His timing He will weave our suffering into something great and glorious. Respond in faith and it will make for something great and glorious."

God did not turn away from me in my suffering, God had not forgotten me when my tragedy struck. His people surrounded me and wept with me, HE wept with me. He gave me the gift of his presence when I had nothing but grumbling to offer. The Lord hears and He sees and He invites us to draw near to Him for provision and goodness in the midst of our deserts. I am too close to my suffering to see how He may be weaving it into something great and glorious. But I know God is a good and loving God who I can trust to have a good and glorious plan. The Israelites were hyper-focused on their present distress and quick to forget God's goodness and provisions from the days before. But God was gracious to continue providing for them and steadfastly inviting them to draw near to Him. I wonder if you might consider where you might be missing God's invitation to draw near to him even, and maybe especially, in times of distress and suffering? Lean into Him, sisters, He sees you and longs for you to know His goodness.

Will you pray with me? Lord, we praise you for the ways you are weaving our stories into your great and glorious plan. We praise you for your grace in giving us provisions in our wildernesses before you begin the hard work of training our hearts in those wildernesses. Please Lord God, would you continue to soften and train our hearts! Tune our hearts to your glory that we may stand firmly in times of trials. Would you please meet these women right now, Lord, wherever they might find themselves today? Make your presence known to them each day in very tangible ways as you did for the Israelites. Thank you that you are a mighty God who sees and hears us and invites us to see and know you too. Amen.