

# Israel's Earliest Wilderness Experiences

Exodus 15:1–18:27

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## Introduction

This section of the book of Exodus covers the initial period of Israel's trek through the wilderness. The faithlessness and fickleness that would characterize the Hebrews through their 40 years of wandering is herein revealed, and that quite early. Indeed, it was because of their early demonstrations of unbelief that God sentenced them to wander and die in the wilderness without gaining the land of promise, except for Joshua and Caleb (Heb. 3:17–19). Some important lessons await us in this period of Hebrew history.

"Exodus," refers to a going out, a departure. The first 14 chapters of Exodus record Israel's oppression in Egypt, God's commission to Moses to deliver them, the struggle for their release (including the 10 devastating plagues), and finally, the miraculous march through the dry bed of the Red Sea, resulting in their freedom at last. With chapter 15 an entirely new chapter in Israel's history begins.

## The Song of Triumph (15:1–21)

Chapter 14 closes as follows:

And Israel saw the great work which Jehovah did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared Jehovah: and they believed in Jehovah, and in his servant Moses.

The first 21 verses of chapter 15 are taken up with Moses' song of deliverance, in which all of Israel participated. It is a song of praise and glory to God for the great salvation He had just provided them. This beautiful song has two major divisions. Verses 1–12 reflect on the great triumph they had just witnessed and experienced at the mighty hand of God. These verses retell the opening of the sea for Israel's passage and safety and the closing of the waters, which consumed their foes and former slave drivers. Verses 13–18 project the effects of these mighty acts upon their foes they will face in the future, (including the Philistines, Edomites, Moabites and Canaanites [vv. 14–15]) and anticipate Israel's entering of the promised land.

Verse 19 is somewhat of a sequel to the song itself, providing a review of the events which served as a basis for the song and even summarizing the major events memorialized in the song. Verses 20 and 21 tell of Miriam, called a "prophetess," who led the women of Israel in repeating the opening words of the song (v. 1) as they played on timbrels and danced.

In at least two senses the victory and salvation which Israel gained were typical of things far in the future from that time. First, in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2 Paul wrote of Israel's passage through the sea under the cloud as their being "baptized unto Moses." Just as it was necessary for those ancient people to be thus "baptized" to escape the bondage of Pharaoh, it is likewise necessary that men be baptized in water "into Christ" (Gal. 3:27) by the authority of Christ in order to be saved (Mark 16:16) and to be freed from the bondage of Satan and sin (Rom. 6:17-18). Second, the triumph and freedom gained, and even the song that celebrated them, are typical of the final triumph and freedom yet awaiting God's faithful of all the ages. John saw and heard those who were victorious over the beast singing "the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb" (Rev. 15:2-3) in the courts of Heaven. What a wonderful hope we have to be some day in this heavenly throng of sanctified singers, joining in the song of everlasting triumph!

Consider some practical applications of this episode:

1. It is always appropriate to give praise, glory and thanks unto God in our hours of triumph. It was perfectly obvious to all those Hebrews that they would have been the hopeless prey of the Egyptian army had not God saved them. When we are part of great achievements and spiritual victories, let us never forget that it is the Lord who has made it possible for us to accomplish whatever we may have done. Instead of singing our own praises, let us always give praise and thanksgivings to our God. "Through him then let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips which make confession of his name" (Heb. 13:15)
2. God has always delighted in hearing songs of praise from his children. Beginning with this great song of deliverance, God's people have been a singing people and they remain so. There is hardly any activity that more powerfully stirs our hearts with spiritual passion than singing the great songs of Zion. No wonder the Holy Spirit exhorted: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God" (Col. 3:16). In light of this one passage alone it is as ridiculous as it is erroneous to assert that there is no Scriptural authority for congregational singing. It is wonderful to sing with others of like precious faith, even in solitude, every saint can draw spiritual strength and comfort by singing spiritual songs: "Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise" (Jam. 5:13b).
3. While the **principle** of singing praises unto God as drawn from this ancient episode is worthy of our emulation, the accompaniments to the singing are not. Moses and the Israelites lived under the dim light of an inferior and, in many ways, carnal religious law which allowed the playing of timbrels and dancing in its exercise. The Hebrews had not yet been given the Mosaic law at the time of their deliverance, so they were still under the patriarchal pronouncements. No men are under either the patriarchal or the Mosaic systems since Christ

died on the cross, but all men are answerable to the law of Christ and to it alone (Mark 16:15–16; John 17:2; Acts 3:22, etc.). Christ authorizes men to sing his praises, but not to play or to dance in praise to him (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Likewise, while a woman was allowed to lead others in praise to God in a mixed assembly in the account before us, this cannot serve as a precedent for such under Christ. Such is forbidden in the Lord’s New Testament (1 Tim. 2:11–12).

### **The Murmuring at Marah (15:22–27)**

From the place of escape on the eastern shore of the Red Sea, Israel began its trek through the wilderness toward Canaan. After a journey of only three days their water supplies were exhausted. Hardly had the sounds of the song of triumph and thanksgiving died on the air before a new cry arose from the people — they murmured against Moses because of their thirst. This was but the first of several times the sounds of whining and murmuring would be heard in that fickle, faithless, and ungrateful people. As we shall see even in the few events covered in my assigned text, murmuring became the ordinary, habitual behavior of the Hebrews. Later, their complaints were so sorely displeasing to God that on one occasion He sent a plague among them, destroying 14,700 lives (Num. 16:41–49). On another subsequent episode their murmuring so provoked God that he sent fiery serpents among them so that “...much people of Israel died” (Num. 21:4–6).

There was water at Marah, but it was too bitter to drink (for such the word *Marah* means). When Moses brought the complaint of the people before God, He identified a tree to His prophet, which, when cast into the water, made it sweet. Here it is appropriate to ask if Moses could have sweetened the bitter water by use of any other tree than that of God’s selection. Obviously, to ask it is to answer it. Had Moses’ attitude been, “One tree is as good as another,” and had chosen a tree he preferred, two results would have followed: 1) Moses would have been disrespectful, disobedient, and sinful toward God, and 2) the water would have remained bitter.

When God specifies what He chooses/desires/commands men to do in any circumstance, they dare not presume to make changes or substitutions. Most people who claim to believe in the Bible deny this sacred principle. *One church is as good as another, One baptism is as good as another, One doctrine is as good as another, One kind of music in worship is as good as another*, and similar statements are proof of this denial. Just as Moses was content to use the tree of God’s choice, so must we be content with God’s choices in all matters. Had Moses been like many moderns, he might have reasoned, “I like this other tree, and God did not say I could not

use it." God did not have to name every tree in sight and forbid the use of each one. His specification of the one authorized it alone; all others were unauthorized.

It is appropriate at this point to briefly discuss God's attitude toward murmuring. As mentioned earlier, Israel's murmuring at Marah was but the first of several times she did so in the wilderness. New Testament writers use these occasions as warnings against such behavior in God's people in the new dispensation (1 Cor. 10:10-11). Those murmurings sorely provoked God so that He deprived that newly-freed generation of the land of promise (Heb. 3:8-11). The root of the complaining, gainsaying, murmuring spirit is unbelief, which leads to rebellion (vv. 16-19). We are to serve the Lord without murmurings (Phi. 2:14). This ugly trait could keep us out of the promised land of Heaven.

After sweetening the water, God put the people to the test. He challenged them to hearken diligently to His voice and His commandments, promising that in return He would not send upon them the diseases He had inflicted upon the Egyptians. Doubtless, this challenge and promise were in anticipation of the giving of the covenant/law which He would deliver and enact at Sinai in a few days. The response of the people is not registered in the text, although we may assume that they promised to obey God, as they later surely promised (Exo. 24:3).

From Marah they journeyed to Elim where water was plentiful, flowing from 12 springs surrounded by 70 palm trees. At this oasis they encamped for some time before making their way further toward Sinai.

### **Murmuring for Food – God Gives Manna and Quail (16:1-36)**

Israel was never satisfied with the gracious provisions of God for her. Neither did she ever learn from the repeated demonstrations of God's power that He would preserve her by whatever means necessary. Thus, soon after the sweetening of the waters at Marah, which had been preceded by the remarkable rescue from the Egyptians, she was griping and complaining again. As the Hebrews approached the wilderness of Sin the people murmured against Moses and Aaron because of hunger. They accused their leaders of bringing them into the wilderness to starve to death, and in their fickle forgetfulness, they momentarily forgot the rigors of the slavery from which God had rescued them. They yearned for the old days in Egypt.

God told Moses He would "rain bread from heaven" (v. 4) and that at evening time they would eat flesh, and in the morning, they would be filled with bread – that they might know that He was God (v. 12). God also gave them instructions in connection with gathering the

manna that would test their faith and obedience (v. 4). They were to gather a daily portion (one omer for each person) on each of the first five days of the week, but on the sixth day they were to gather a double portion to relieve the need to gather any on the seventh. By this means God not only tested their submission to his will, but also helped introduce the sanctity of the sabbath, which He would shortly set forth in the Decalogue. By limiting their daily gathering to one omer per person, with any overage spoiling overnight, God taught them the lesson of daily dependence on his provisions. Similarly, centuries later, Jesus taught the disciples to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Mat. 6:11). In a land of plenty it is easy to forget our daily dependence on God for our needs (as most of our fellow-citizens do), but we dare not.

The promised flesh for their consumption was a massive flock of quail that landed in the camp. The quail were not a part of the daily provision as the manna was. The manna was described by Moses as “a small round thing, small as the hoar-frost on the ground” (v. 14) and “like the coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey” (v. 31). This God-made/sent food, provided till they reached the borders of Canaan (v. 35), must have been both nutritious and delicious. It saved the people from having to stop long enough to plant, nurture, and harvest crops for their food. A pot containing an omer of manna was set aside, later to be placed in the ark of the covenant beside Aaron’s rod and the tables of stone (Heb. 9:4), at Jehovah’s command, for a perpetual reminder that God fed them in the wilderness (vv. 32–34).

Christ referred to the manna as that which typified Himself, the true “bread of life” sent down from Heaven (John 6:31–35, 48–51). Paul also spoke of the manna, calling it “spiritual food” which God provided for the people in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:3). It was “spiritual,” not in the sense that it nourished them spiritually, but in that its source was spiritual—it was given by God supernaturally, thus “spiritually.” If the people had only made the correct application of the gift of manna (i.e., as a manifestation of God’s power and grace), it would have, in this sense, been a source of spiritual strength, however.

Some of the Israelites provoked God by disobeying His orders for gathering the manna almost immediately. Some tried to keep some of the uneaten manna overnight but found it foul and filled with worms the next morning (vv. 19–20). In spite of the prohibition to gather any manna on the sabbath, some foolishly sought to do so, although there was none to be found (vv. 27–28). These simple commands, like the one given to Adam and Eve in Eden (Gen. 2:16–17), were unmistakably clear, but they were ignored and despised.

Israel's flagrant violation of these Divine mandates typifies not only their history, but also the history of all men, Jew and Gentile: "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). As in this case, God has frequently given commands to men to prove their faithfulness to Him. It would seem that the command to Israel to march around the walls of Jericho (Jos. 6:2-5), the command to Naaman to dip seven times in Jordan (2 Kin. 5:10), and even the command of Christ that men must be baptized to be saved (Mark 16:16), fall into this category. Careful, unquestioning, willing obedience will ever be the proof of man's love for God and His Son (John 14:15; 1 John 2:5). Whether or not we understand why God commands a thing is totally beside the point!

Another principle worthy of notice in this section is the fact that, although the murmuring was directed toward Moses and Aaron (v. 2), it was correctly perceived by them as murmuring against God: "Your murmurings are not against us, but against Jehovah" (v. 8). This event is similar to the later rebellion of Aaron and Miriam (Num. 12) and of Korah (Num. 16), in that in both of these cases it is also made clear that to oppose God's chosen leaders or spokesmen is to oppose God Himself.

This principle has not changed. When men refuse to submit to Scripturally qualified elders who are doing the work God gave them to do, they are rebelling against God because He has placed them over us in our local congregations (Heb. 13:17). Further, when men teach that elders have no authority in the local congregation, and thus encourage rebellion against godly elders, they are following in the steps of Korah who fomented rebellion against the authority of Moses. Further still, when faithful men preach the Word of God and men murmur and complain about the messenger and try (sometimes successfully) to run him off, they are really crying out against and opposing God. May we see that it is the message such people despise and, beyond that, the source of the message—God himself. However, it would not sound very good to rail against God or his Word directly, so evil and rebellious men strike out at God's spokesmen. Let it be clearly understood that all murmuring and rebellion against the message or the messengers of God is no less than murmuring and rebellion against God Himself, regardless of time or place.

### **Murmuring for Water – Moses Smites the Rock (17:1-7)**

God led the people on through the wilderness of Sin to Rephidim where they found no water. Once more the people murmured against Moses, this time accusing him of bringing them

into the wilderness to die of thirst, as before they had accused him of bringing them forth to die of hunger. Moses called their murmuring a “striving” with him and a “tempting” of Jehovah (v. 2). Moses said that the people were so upset that they were about ready to stone him (v. 4). Although God had so abundantly provided for their needs through many marvelous manifestations of his power, those faithless Hebrews could never seem to learn to trust him.

At God’s instruction, Moses took his rod and some of the elders of Israel unto a rock in Horeb upon which God would stand. Moses was then commanded to smite the rock with the promise that out of it water would flow. Moses followed the Lord’s instructions, and the water came forth. Rephidim was not far from Horeb (another name for Sinai [Deu. 1:6]). Likely the elders were to accompany Moses so that they could bear witness to the great miracle Moses performed, perhaps helping to convince Israel to trust in God. Moses named the place “Massah” (“tempting” or “proving”) and “Meribah” (“chiding” or “strife”), for obvious reasons.

Once more, let it be emphasized that God specified which rod Moses was to take with him to the rock: “thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thy hand, and go” (v. 5). What if Moses had decided he wanted to take some other rod? Would God have blessed him to produce the water? Would he have been obedient to God? Even if taking the specified rod, what if he had decided that “one rock is as good as another,” and thus had struck some other rock or rocks? Such an attitude would have represented rebellion, and surely, he would have produced no water, but much condemnation from God. Such an attitude towards matters specified by God still represents rebellion and will fail to bring forth God’s spiritual blessings. As faithful Moses did, let us be content to do just what God says.

Just as Paul referred to the manna as “spiritual food” God provided for them in the wilderness, he also spoke of the “spiritual drink” of which they all partook (1 Cor. 10:4). He specifically identified Christ as that “spiritual rock” of which they drank, which is an unmistakable reference to the water which was miraculously brought forth from the rock. The water brought forth by Moses was literal water, but, as set forth earlier, it was “spiritual” in the sense that it was supernaturally supplied. Also, if Israel had reasoned rightly, she would have seen and remembered the grace and power of God demonstrated in the production of the water from barren rock, thus awakening and strengthening her spiritual senses.

What are we to make of Paul’s declaration that Christ was that rock from which the “spiritual drink” flowed and that the rock followed Israel? The following things are evident:

1. The pre-incarnate Christ was with Israel in the wilderness.
2. Christ was the real source of their water from the rock, thus he is figuratively called “the Rock.”
3. It is not affirmed that the literal rock followed them, but that Christ (typified by the rock) was with them throughout their wanderings.

We are made to marvel once more at the types and shadows of God’s Word.

### **War with Amalek (17:8-16)**

While still encamped at Rephidim, near Sinai, the Amalekites attacked Israel. Amalek was a grandson of Esau (Gen. 36:12). His descendants settled in and claimed much of the Sinaitic peninsula. It would appear that Amalek feared the encroachment of such a great number of people on their feeding and watering areas, and thus attacked. Moses gave further details of the attack in Deuteronomy 25:17-18, saying that Amalek “...smote the hindmost of thee, all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God.”

Moses commissioned Joshua to prepare an army for counterattack the next day. Moses told Joshua he would “stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God” in his hand. The army was prepared and Moses, rod in hand, took his place on the hill, accompanied by Aaron and Hur. While Moses held up his hand (presumably with the rod in it), Israel prevailed, but when he lowered his hand to rest his arm, Amalek prevailed. To keep Moses’ fatigued hands in the air, Aaron and Hur seated him on a rock and stood on either side of him, holding up his hands until sundown. The result was that “Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword” (v. 13).

Jehovah commanded Moses to write of this battle in a book that it might be perpetually remembered (especially by Joshua) that God would eventually “...utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven” (v. 14). Moses also built an altar, naming it “Jehovah-nissi” (“Jehovah is my banner”) and then proclaimed that God had sworn that He would have war with Amalek “...from generation to generation” (v. 16). Later, Moses specified that after God had given Israel rest from her enemies in Canaan, then would Israel “...blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget” (Deu. 25:19). The Amalekites were again engaged in battle at Kadesh-Barnea, at which time they prevailed over Israel because of God’s displeasure with their lack of faith (Num. 14:39-45). God intended to carry out his promise to utterly destroy the Amalekites through Saul, but the king rebelled, spared some of them, and was rejected by God as a consequence (1 Sam. 15:1-23). Joshua is first



mentioned in this battle with Amalek. He was the first general of Israel's army. He ascended the heights of Sinai with Moses to receive the law, being called the "minister of Moses" (Exo. 24:13). He would later represent the tribe of Ephraim as one of the twelve spies sent into Canaan from Kadesh-Barnea and stood with faithful Caleb in urging the people to rise up and possess the land (Num. 13:8; 14:6-9). He was Moses' (and God's) choice to succeed him to lead Israel into Canaan (Num. 27:18-23), which he successfully did, recording those events in the book that bears his name. He was a man of deep faith and dedication toward God.

### **The Visit by Jethro (18:1-27)**

Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, is first introduced to us in Exodus 2:18, under the name of "Reuel." Moses served as a shepherd for him during his forty years as a fugitive in Midian (Exo. 3:1). Some have sought to make of Reuel and Jethro two different persons, with Reuel as the father of Jethro, thus making Jethro Moses' brother-in-law. While it is possible that the Hebrew word rendered "father-in-law" is general enough to be rendered "brother-in-law," I see no reason for supposing this to be the case. It seems more likely that Jethro and Reuel ("Raguel," Num. 10:29, KJV) are simply different names for the same person. Such was the case with "Israel" and "Jacob" and with "Hoshea" and "Joshua" (Num. 13:8). Both Reuel and Jethro are called "the priest of Midian" within the span of only nine verses (Exo. 2:18; 3:1).

Moses had left his wife, Zipporah, and their sons, Gershom and Eliezer, with her father when he returned to Egypt to deliver Israel. Jethro brought them to Moses for a reunion. After Moses rehearsed all of the events of the past few months, resulting in their escape from Egypt and their preservation in the wilderness, Jethro rejoiced and praised God for their deliverance. He then built an altar and offered burnt offerings and sacrifices unto God. The fact that Jethro was a priest in Midian who knew of Jehovah indicates that there was still some knowledge of God among the Gentiles, apparently traceable back to the fathers. There is a further indication of such in the person of Balaam, who was on "speaking terms" with God (Num. 22:8-13). These incidents also demonstrate that God had not forgotten the Gentile world when He separated Israel as His chosen race.

When Jethro observed Moses trying to judge the cases of all of the nation of Israel personally, he suggested placing other faithful men as judges over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, respectively. They would thus be able to settle the smaller matters, reserving only the

cases of great import to be decided by Moses. He accepted this wise advice of his father-in-law and probably was grateful for this expedient suggestion of delegation of responsibility as long as he lived. Following this reorganization of Israel's judicial system, Jethro returned to his home.

We will do well to notice that the "Boston Church of Christ" relies upon this subdivision of Israel as its pattern of pyramidal authoritarian structure. In its July 17, 1984, church bulletin, Jim Blough, a deacon wrote:

The real value of the house church unit, however, is found in a principle of leadership which was first introduced in the ministry of Moses, described in Exodus 18:13-26.... As the church here in Boston has grown over the last five years, it has repeatedly become necessary to appoint men to meet the needs of God's people; first over tens (Bible Talk leaders), then over fifties (House Church leaders), and over hundreds (Zone evangelists). We currently have only about 1,000 members, but as the need arises men will be appointed over thousands as well.

In response to this I submit the following:

1. The inspired apostles were very clear in authorizing a plurality of Scripturally qualified **elders/bishops/pastors** to oversee (i.e., "superintend") every congregation, whether it has 10 members and meets in a home or 1,000 members and meets in a fine church building (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9).
2. An organizational plan for settling civil cases in the Old Testament theocracy of Israel can hardly serve as a model for the organizational structure of the church of the Lord.
3. This "Boston Plan" establishes various levels of religious rank and equals a system of hierarchy which is foreign to the spirit of New Testament Christianity (notice in the article quoted above that at each level a man is "**over**" his brethren). This system is totally ill-founded and unscriptural.

## Conclusion

Let us learn from the numerous mighty miracles of this section of Scripture that we serve the true and living God, the Almighty. Let us learn that God cares for His people and provides for their needs. Let us learn to trust fully and completely in God's care and power lest we be found among the faithless murmurers who shall lose their reward at last.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Memphis School of Preaching Lectures, hosted by the Knight Arnold Church of Christ, Memphis, TN, March 29-April 2, 1987. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Book of Exodus*, ed. Curtis A. Cates (Memphis, TN: Memphis School of Preaching, 1987).]

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