

TRAINING IN THE WILDERNESS

Exodus 15:22-17:7, Matthew 4:1-11

Dan Claire

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Matthew 4:1-11 tells the story of Jesus in the wilderness. It's a strange story, especially if you're new to Christianity. Why on earth would God take Jesus out in the wilderness to be tempted by the devil? Does God expect all Christians to undergo temptation in the wilderness?

Reading Exodus 15-17 gives us insight into these questions. What we've seen each week in our study of the Gospel According to Exodus is that God delivers his people not only *from* death and destruction but also *to* himself *for* the sake of the world. Exodus 15-17 describes what happened after God delivered the Israelites *from* Egypt, and before he commissioned them to be a kingdom of priests *for* the sake of the world. In between their rescue and their commissioning, God drew Israel *to* himself in the wilderness.

The Synoptic Gospels describe a remarkably similar order in Jesus' early ministry:

- First, Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13-17).
- Then the Spirit led him in the wilderness for 40 days (Matthew 4:1-11)
- Then *from that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* (Matthew 4:17 ESV)

Just like the Israelites in Exodus, Jesus passed through the waters, into the wilderness, and out on the mission of God.

What, then, was Jesus' time in the wilderness all about? Was it a retreat, to be trained by his Father? Or was it a time of torment at the hands of Satan? All the Synoptic Gospels say that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Was that the Holy Spirit taxi-service, dropping Jesus off at the edge of the bad part of town and then leaving him there to be tested? What if there is no "bad part of town" in God's universe? What if the wilderness isn't hell on earth, where Satan reigns and God is absent. What if the Spirit of God is present with his people all the time, even in the wilderness? What if the Spirit of God that descended upon Jesus like a dove at his baptism didn't leave him in the wilderness, but actually stayed with him, to train him and protect him? Could it be that the same Spirit of God goes with us wherever we go today?

As we study Exodus 15:22-17:7, we'll see that the wilderness was a training ground, where God taught his people about himself. God revealed himself to the Israelites in the wilderness, so that he might someday reveal himself through his people to the nations. It's the same today: *God makes himself known to us in the wilderness, so that he might make himself known through us in the world.*

WHOM WILL YOU SERVE? EXODUS 15:22-27

In Matthew 4:8-10, Satan offered Jesus incredible power and fame: sovereignty over all the kingdoms of the world. There was only one small catch: Jesus would have to serve Satan. Jesus refused, saying, “*You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.*” Jesus knew that there’s no such thing as autonomy. You’ve got to serve somebody; there’s no one better than the Lord.

We read in Exodus 12-15 how, after 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites finally were freed from serving Pharaoh. Two days after they set out from Rameses, Pharaoh pursued them to recapture them into his service. But that night, by the shores of the Red Sea, the plume of smoke and fire moved around behind the Israelites and stood between them and Pharaoh. It was as if the Lord was saying, “If you want to get to them, you’ve got to go through me first.” Then at dawn the next day, God parted the Red Sea, the Israelites passed through it, and then the entire Egyptian army drowned as the sea closed in upon them. The people of Israel were free.

As we pick up the story in 15:22, three more days have passed, and having traveled deep into the wilderness, the Israelites were thirsty. When they found water, it was Marah—bitter—so they grumbled against Moses, asking, “What shall we drink?”

Only three days since God delivered them from death and destruction. How could they have forgotten the Lord so quickly?

Remember the first plague, when by Moses’ staff God turned the sweet waters of the Nile bitter with blood? Remember what happened three days earlier, when by Moses’ staff God reigned over the waters of the Red Sea, bringing life to Israel and death to Egypt? If you’ve forgotten, then what happened next at the Marah Pool may help jog your memory. “Moses,” God said. “Take *another* stick and throw it into the the water.” So Moses did, and the water became Mitkah instead of Marah, sweet instead of bitter.

In 25b-26 we read the "moral of this story," which is all about serving the Lord. It says:

There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, “If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.” (Exodus 15:25-26 ESV)

Up to this point, the Israelites’ knowledge and experience of the Lord for the most part had been as their Deliverer. Many contemporary Christians’ experience of the Lord is the same: it doesn’t go beyond seeing God as Deliverer. But from this point on in Exodus, we learn that God expects to be more than a deliverer *from* death and destruction in our lives. It’s time for school. *God makes himself known to us in the wilderness, so that he might make himself known through us in the world.* Let’s look at four things God teaches us about himself in vv. 25-26.

1) God wants us to learn that he's our Commander. *There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule. 15:25.* These weren't two different things, but a figure of speech¹ for one thing, namely the command God gave them in v. 26: *"If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes..."* Listen to God's voice, then do what he commands.

The Israelites may well have been surprised by the fact that the Lord was giving them orders. Many contemporary Christians are often surprised to discover this. After God rescued the Israelites from Pharaoh, they might have thought that they were autonomous. But you've got to serve somebody. No longer slaves of Pharaoh, the Israelites had become subjects of the Lord. Today if you're a Christian, you're no longer a slave to sin but instead under the Lord's command.

Think about it: It is well within God's rights to command us. In fact, it's the only loving thing for God to do, really. As we're adopted into his family, we've got to learn his house rules, which are never onerous, but always, always life-giving. God is our commander.

2) God wants us to learn that he's our Teacher. *There he tested them. 15:25.* A better way to understand the word translated "tested" in 15:25 would be in terms of being taught or "trained."² It's not as if God was curious to see whether they would fail or succeed in the wilderness. If God had been *only* testing them, then he wouldn't have followed up with the lesson in verse 26. No, a better way to understand the "test" of 15:25 is in terms of training. School was in session there in the wilderness. God was training them.

What was God training the Israelites for? Mission. Just like any foreign service officer has to become proficient in US government and history and foreign policy and immigration law, God's people must know the Lord before they are sent out to represent him. *God makes himself known to us in the wilderness, so that he might make himself known through us in the world.*

3) God wants us to learn that he's our Observer. *Do that which is right in his eyes. 15:26.* Verse 26 reveals that God was watching the Israelites to see whether they would obey him. This makes sense, in that God was training them. But what if you've been a slave all your life? What if you're accustomed to being watched by a malevolent taskmaster, eager for an opportunity to crack his whip on your back? For the ancient Israelites, and for all of us who have been ruled by sin, it's overwhelming to think of the Lord as our constant observer.

Let's not forget, however, what we've already seen in Exodus regarding the mercy of God. It is his nature to have mercy, and God prefers mercy over justice. If he gave that barbarous Pharaoh ten chances in the plagues, imagine how much more kindness and leniency and mercy he will give you and me. Yes, God is observing us, but as our loving Father, rather than a murderous taskmaster. God is on your side; he wants you to succeed in mission; that's why he watching your progress as he makes himself known to you.

¹ A hendiadys.

² We find the same word in the David and Goliath story. When young David faced off against Goliath, he chose not to wear King Saul's armor, not because it hadn't been *tested*, but because he hadn't *trained* in it.

4) God wants us to learn that he's our Sustainer. *I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer. 15:26.* The “diseases” God is talking about in 15:26 are none other than the plagues, which makes this the most shocking revelation in the whole episode. The Israelites probably said, “Hold on a minute. We thought the plagues were for bad guys. Now you're telling us that God might strike us with them too?”

Yes. In fact, if God disciplined Pharaoh, how much more will he discipline his own children?³ Pharaoh's fate awaits those who reject God and rebel against him. But God sustains those who draw near to him.

God then says in v 26, “I am Jehovah Rapha—the *LORD your healer.*” While this could include healing in a medical sense, it has a much larger range of meaning, since medicine as we know it wasn't even imagined yet. The idea of “healer” in 15:26 tends toward preventative medicine; God is saying, in effect, “I am the Lord who *sustains* you.” When we rebel against him, he may choose to discipline us by withdrawing his creative and sustaining power, as he did in the plagues against Egypt, when God allowed the created order to come unraveled. Those who reject the Lord may suffer the same fate as Pharaoh.

To drive the point home, God led his people deeper into the wilderness in 15:27, to “The Porch”—Elim—which had 12 springs of water, and 70 palm trees. It was a foretaste of life in the Promised Land. It was also a vivid reminder of God's power over creation. Even in the midst of the desert, God can create a lush oasis.

So it turns out that God didn't abandon the Israelites in the wilderness. Rather, he taught them about himself, as a way of preparing them for mission. Let's see what he taught them next.

TO WHOM WILL YOU LISTEN? EXODUS 16

Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness, learning better how to listen to his Father's voice. Then in Matthew 4:3-4, Satan found him and offered him an alternative voice to listen to: his. Jesus refused, however, saying, “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” Jesus had learned the importance of listening to his Father's voice.

³ Quoting Proverbs 3, Hebrews 12 says it this way:

*“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”*

You must endure discipline, because God is regarding you as his children. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are not disciplined by God, as he does for his other children, then you are illegitimate children rather than the children of God. (Hebrews 12:5-8)

As we read in Exodus 15:26, God commanded the Israelites at the Marah Pool to listen to his voice. In chapter 16, they didn't. In fact, the word for "listen" was used five times in this chapter. Four times it described God listening to the Israelites' grumbling. Once it described the Israelites not listening to Moses. Exodus 16 clearly wasn't their best moment.

Nevertheless God was gracious and merciful to Israel. When they complained of hunger, God's response wasn't a plague. Instead, God rained bread down upon them daily for the next forty years. It was a creation miracle intended not only to feed them, but also to train them more about the God *who makes himself known to us in the wilderness, so that he might make himself known through us in the world.* In this Exodus 16, God wanted to form the Israelites with two essential habits: 1) daily bread, and 2) weekly rest.

First, God formed them to turn to him daily.

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 train them, whether they will walk in my law or not." (Exodus 16:4)

So the people went out that next morning and gathered manna for themselves. They loved it, because it was the good stuff. Not styrofoam crackers, but sweet bread, tasting like the honey they would find in the Promised Land.

Moses warned them not to hoard it, because it was only good for the day. But some of them didn't listen to him, and the next morning they discovered a mini-plague in the bread box: their manna had spoiled. The message was simple: depend on the Lord *daily*. Bring your needs to him every morning, and trust in him to provide. Learn this now in the quiet of the wilderness before he sends you out into the world on your first diplomatic mission. Develop the habit of beginning each day with him now before you go out into the hustle and bustle.

Second, God taught them to imitate him in both work and rest. God isn't like Pharaoh. For him, *not* every day is the same. God works six days, and then on the seventh he rests. When the Israelites moved in with God, he expected them to live according to his house rules. That meant working every morning, six days a week, to harvest manna. But then on the last day they were to rest in God's bounty. Every Friday yielded another creation miracle, a jubilee harvest that would last them two days without spoiling.

Moses commanded them to sleep in on the 7th day, but once again some didn't listen. They got up early to harvest more manna, but none was to be found. The lesson here was also quite simple: rest with the Lord weekly. God's yoke is easy and his burden is light. Follow his schedule, and you'll enjoy a healthy balance of work and play.

Many of us in Washington are workaholics. Many important needs and good causes "just come up," and we keep on working rather than taking time to rest. It becomes a kind of badge of honor that we wear, reading, "I'm so important that I need to be on duty 24/7." Yet it's all an illusion.

The Lord holds everything together all around us, the several dozen things we fancy we're responsible for, and then the billions and trillions of others that we don't even know about. When we stop listening to God each day, we lose track of what he has given us to steward and what he hasn't, and we consistently overestimate both our abilities and our responsibilities. It's a downward spiral, because the busier we get, the less time we have to listen to him.

God is training us to return to him every morning for our daily bread, to reorient our lives and our priorities to him. This enables us to practice a kind of godly triage, doing what he gives us to do, and not worrying about what he doesn't. In fact, as we listen to the Lord, we learn from him a kind of godly procrastination, putting off those things which don't need to be done in order to find our rest in him. And so through turning to him daily, he helps us get to the end of the week in such a way that we can take a break and rest in him.

So once again, in spite of their grumbling, God didn't abandon the Israelites in the wilderness. Instead, he taught them about himself, to prepare them for mission. Let's see what he taught them next.

WILL YOU LIVE CORAM DEO? EXODUS 17

In Matthew 4:5-7, Satan dared Jesus to throw himself down from the roof of the temple, just to see if God would protect him. But Jesus refused, saying, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Through his training in the wilderness, Jesus had learned to walk by faith and not by sight, believing and trusting in God's presence even when God remains unseen.

The most important lesson of the wilderness is learning to live *Coram Deo*, in the presence of God. In the quiet of the wilderness, we grow accustomed to his presence with us, so that we know he's with us when we represent him before the nations.

Exodus 17:1-7 describes another water miracle. The Israelites quarreled with Moses because they were thirsty. So God led them to Horeb (Mt Sinai), back to the place where Moses first met with the Lord. And there Moses once again raised his staff, and this time struck the mountain, and a new stream emerged. And they named the stream "Testing & Quarreling," Massah & Meribah, because they quarreled with Moses and tested the Lord there.

How did they test the Lord? By doubting his presence with them. See the end of 17:7:

They tested the Lord by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" (Exodus 17:7 ESV)

After all that they had seen the Lord do through the Ten Plagues. After their dramatic rescue at the Red Sea. After following the pillar of fire/smoke day and night for two months, and drinking sweet water along the way. And on this particular day, still with crumbs of this morning's manna caught in their beards, how could they possibly doubt whether the Lord was among them? Easy. The same way many of us will go back out into "the real world" tomorrow morning and leave God behind as we go. We are habituated to these compartments. We turn off God and turn on the idols without even thinking.

This third incident at Massah and Meribah, mentioned again in Psalm 95 and elsewhere, stands as a permanent reminder of how easy it is for us to doubt God's presence with us. That's why our training in the wilderness is so important. Remember, *God makes himself known to us in the wilderness, so that he might make himself known through us in the world.* In the wilderness, we learn to walk by faith and not by sight, so that we can represent him faithfully as his ambassadors.

CONCLUSION

It turns out that the wilderness isn't such a bad place after all. The Lord is present even there—maybe even especially there—because it's where he takes us to train us.

Few of us have ever spent forty days in a true wilderness, but all of us have experienced training of one sort or another, so all of us should be well-suited to learning from the Lord. He promises not to give us more than we can handle.

So what is the Lord teaching you right now? Maybe he's calling you to give him your allegiance. Say goodbye to all the other idols that compete for your time, and say yes to serving him. God wants us to turn to him as our Commander, Teacher, Observer, and Sustainer. When we know him in these ways, we enjoy lives of purpose and joy.

Maybe God is calling you to develop habits that enable you to listen to him. Do you turn to him first for your daily bread? By following him each week, do you find that you're able to work when he works and rest when he rests? You've got to believe that he's sovereign and completely capable of handling all our loose ends. Listen to him and obey him. His word is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path.

Certainly God is teaching all of us to do away with our compartments, and to live life *Coram Deo* before him. Isn't that what we all want? That's what enabled Jesus to make the most of his time in the wilderness. Through Christ, we can live *Coram Deo* too.