Lessons from the Wilderness

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[0:00] Our focus will be there and on chapter 16 this morning. You'll find it in your pew Bibles. It will also be projected on the screen.

! Again, it's a little bit longer reading, so bear with me. But we kind of need to get the context here and understand the interaction between God and his people that happens with them now out there in the desert.
So starting Exodus 15, verse 22. Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went into the desert of Shur.
For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter.
And that is why the place is called Marah. So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, What are we to drink? Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood.
[1:12] And he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. He said, If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians.

For I am the Lord who heals you. Then they came to Elam, where there were 12 springs and 70 palm trees.
And they camped there near the water. The whole Israelite community set out from Elam and came to the desert of Sin, which is between Elam and Sinai.
On the 15th day, the second month after they had come out of Egypt, in the desert, the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. Then the Israelites said to them, If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt.
There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted. For you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death. Then the Lord said to Moses, I will rain down bread from heaven for you.
[2:26] The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way, I will test them and see whether they follow my instructions. On the sixth day, they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other day.

So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, In the evening, you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt. And in the morning, you will see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against him.
Who are we that you should grumble against us? Moses also said, You will know that it was the Lord when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him.
Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord. Then Moses told Aaron, Say to the entire Israelite community, Come before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling.
While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud, pillar of fire and cloud. The Lord said to Moses, I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites.
[3:37] Tell them, At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God. That evening, Quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.

When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, What is it?

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For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded. Each one is to gather as much as he needs.
Take an omer for each person you have in your tent. And the Israelites did as they were told. Some gathered much, some little. And when they gathered it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered too little did not have too little.
Each one gathered as much as he needed. Then Moses said to them, No one is to keep any of it until morning. However, some of them paid no attention to Moses.
[4:42] They kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them. Each morning, everyone gathered as much as he needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away.

On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much, two omers for each person, and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. He said to them, This is what the Lord commanded. Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord.
So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning. So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it.
Eat it today, Moses said, because today is a Sabbath to the Lord. You will not find any of it on the ground today. Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any.
Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. And the Lord said to Moses, How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?
[5:49] Bear in mind that the Lord has given you the Sabbath. That is why on the sixth day, he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day.

No one is to go out. So the people rested on the seventh day. The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.
Moses said, This is what the Lord has commanded. Take an omer of manna and keep it for the generations to come so they can see the bread I gave you to eat in the desert when I brought you up out of Egypt.
So Moses said to Aaron, Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it and then place it before the Lord to be kept for the generations to come. As the Lord commanded Moses, Aaron put the manna in front of the testimony that it might be kept.
The Israelites ate manna forty years until they came to a land that was settled. They ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan. And omer is one-tenth of an ephah.
[6:58] The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So the wilderness, it has a way of teaching you things.

In the wilderness, you don't have all of the creature comforts and the nice things and the nice routines that you normally depend on, right? It's just you and the elements and God.
In the wilderness, you're raw. You're exposed. You might have to empty your bladder without the benefit of a bathroom. You might get burned by the sun, blasted by the wind, by the rain.
You're exposed. You often learn a lot about yourself out there. And you learn a lot about the people you're with, if you're with other people, and about life, too, and what really matters, and also about God, creator, or sustainer, redeemer.
You learn things. Psalm 8 says, What is man, O Lord, that you are mindful of him? And I know that's the thought that's come through my mind after I've been out in the wilderness for a while, hiking through the mountains, like some of you have done recently, hiking through the mountains in Colorado, and you see the grandeur of what's all around you, and you get a sense of the grandeur of our great creator, and you think, What is man?
[8:34] Who am I, Lord? That you are mindful of me. And you come to that place, and you're humbled, and you become a little more introspective, and you maybe become a little more mindful of yourself, too, and your own life, and where you're at, and it's a little unsettling, even, sometimes.

Being out there alone with your thoughts, with God, in the wilderness. I spent a few days one time in Death Valley, California.
I went in March. So it wasn't too hot yet in March, but the wind was relentless. That's what I remember.

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I was always tired, always thirsty because of the wind. I remember driving into the campground where I was going to set up my pup tent for the night, and there were about four other pup tents there, and they weren't staked to the ground because that would be futile.
They were kind of like tied to these little bushes, and they were actually just kind of flying in the wind like kites, and I thought, I think I'm going to sleep in my car tonight. I didn't even bother setting up my tent.
[9:43] It's not a real hospitable climate. I remember driving around and coming across a couple of ghost towns, people with big ideas moving out there but not staying long.

The harsh place to camp, the harsh place to live, the harsh place to be. You find yourself exposed out there in the desert.
It's also, of course, very quiet and very beautiful, and that's why it can be very formative as well, being out there. Actually, that time in Death Valley for me, it really left an impression, and the God who met me there left an impression on me through the course of those three or four days.
And the truth is, really, from ancient times, people have gone out into the desert and they've come back changed and they've come back different. Elijah, David, John the Baptist, Jesus, they all spent time in the wilderness.
And the people of Israel did too. And that's kind of our focus for this morning for a few minutes. Our focus is on their experience out there in the wilderness. And we're going to glean for ourselves today some lessons from their experience.
[11:04] And I want to add, too, that this sort of sermon, this genre of sermon, lessons from the wilderness, is not something I came up with. It's been done down through the ages.

There's actually a good example of it in 1 Corinthians in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul, he's writing to the Corinthians and he includes in his letter a little sermonette about lessons from the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness.
1 Corinthians 10. He brings up three episodes from Israel's wilderness years and he unpacks the lessons. And then in verse 11, he says, these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.
So that's what we have here. In the book of Exodus, as we found throughout this series, we find that it's a powerful revelation of God. It reveals God to us. It also reveals specifically the work of the Holy Spirit and points ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ in all different sorts of ways and this great redemption that we have in Christ and all these things.
But it also has these practical life lessons. Apparently, the way God sees it, what happens in the wilderness can't stay in the wilderness.
[12:24] It's got to be passed on. These things happened to them as examples were written down as warnings for us, for the Corinthians, for us too. So we're going to look at three wilderness lessons here this morning.

And the first is about attitude. So let's just look back again at a couple of verses from chapter 15. We read a lot of verses. I want to focus on these two for a moment. Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went in the desert of Shur and for three days they traveled in the desert without finding water and they came to Mara which they could not drink because it was bitter.
That's what Mara means. So the people grumbled. Grumbled against Moses. So just three days after watching God make a highway through a big sea, this amazing experience, already the people are grumbling.
grumbling. How could that be? How could it be? Just so fickle, right? How could they lose faith, lose hope so quickly? Then again, maybe it's not so surprising if we kind of know human nature and maybe even know ourselves a little bit.
It's not so hard to believe. I mean, being out there in the desert is kind of unpleasant, maybe very unpleasant and kind of uncertain and scary.
[13:41] those conditions don't always bring the best out of us. You think about a flock of sheep when they get annoyed and when they get uncomfortable and nervous, they act out and do dumb things, right?

And they need a good shepherd. Well, it's the same with us. We grumble and we act out and we get annoyed when things are not so great. God had proven himself to Israel in powerful ways but that trust in him that receded very quickly and Moses' inbox fills with complaints and so he goes to the Lord and the Lord listens to him and points him to a stick and Moses, he takes the stick and he

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throws it into the water and the water turns from bitter to sweets and it's this amazing thing.
The water becomes drinkable a few verses later the people grumble again and this time the Lord feeds them. He sends food. He sends manna. Just because God responds kindly though does not mean the grumbling was no big deal.
If we read the whole story we found that it was a big deal and actually we see that in Paul's wilderness lessons sermon too. It's there. He brings out another example of grumbling from Numbers 16 and there the people are grumbling again and their grumbling is met with discipline. God disciplines them. He couldn't just let their grumbling continue. He cared too much about his people to let it continue. He knows what grumbling can do to people's hearts.
[15:29] He knows what grumbling can do to communities of people when the grumbling kind of takes over and he cared too much about his people to just let that happen. He was patient and kind and he provided for them in the midst of their sinfulness but he couldn't let it go on either.

In Paul's sermon he actually puts grumbling in the same category as idolatry and in the same category as sexual immorality. It's sin. It frustrates God. It shows a lack of trust in God and it does real damage to hearts and lives and communities of people.
Instead of grumbling what the Bible does time and again is it calls us to do what we see Moses doing in his conversation with God throughout this book.
It calls us to do what the psalm writers often did and they're honest back and forth with God that we see throughout the book of Psalms.
When they're frustrated, scared, unhappy, they name it. In their frustration, in their fear, their need, they do the work of naming it and bringing it to the Lord.
[16:41] It's called lament. Very different than grumbling. It's called lament. They go to God and they talk it out and they also talk it out with others. Here in Exodus we find Moses doing that, talking things through with God and we'll find that more as we go on.

We also will find him talking things through with Aaron and Miriam and Jethro, sharing the load, seeking wisdom, together finding a constructive way forward.
It's very different than grumbling. It's more work than grumbling. It's hard work, but it's the way of our Lord, the good path. So that's lesson number one about our attitude.
Our next lesson is about God's priorities and God's timing. So I don't know if you realize this or not, but God, he could have gotten his people to the promised land much, much quicker.
Potentially even in just a few weeks' time. It actually wasn't all that far away to get there. They took the short route.
[17:55] Instead, God took them on a 40-year journey. Why? Well, Exodus 13 explains it to us, sheds some light on it for us.

It says, When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter, for God said, if they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.
So God led the people around by the desert road through the wilderness for quite a while. You see, they didn't know God well enough yet.
They didn't really trust him yet. They were kind of fickle. They were immature, so the short route wasn't an option. God needed some time with them, some exclusive time with them.
They had some wilderness lessons to learn, and God had some wilderness work to do on their hearts. rather than leading them via the way of the sea, the shorter route, God led them into the wilderness.
[19:00] And the lesson here is that our God is not in a hurry. His primary concern is not speed. That's often our concern, usually not God's concern.

God knew that where his people were going was not nearly as important as who they were becoming. Let me say that again. God knew that where his people were going, that the destination was not nearly as important as who they were becoming on the way.
Concern wasn't with speed, how fast the people would get to the promised land. Concern was really with what kind of people they'd be once they got there. And today, too, God's more concerned with who we're becoming than where we're going.
We tend to obsess about the condition of our homes and our church and our economy and fill in the blank. God's more concerned with the condition of our soul and our character.

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God's not in such a hurry. He's got things for us to learn along the way. He does. That's lesson number two. Our final lesson this morning is about God provide.
[20:20] In Exodus 16 here, this is the first time the Israelites eat manna. First time they are introduced to the manna. When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost appeared on the ground on the desert floor.

And the Israelites, when they saw it, they said to each other, what is it? For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, it's the bread the Lord has given you to eat, provided for you. Each morning, everyone gathered as much as he needed. When the sun grew hot, it melted away. It's the way God kept his people along with the quail. It's the way God kept his people alive for 40 years.
He fed them day after day. He gave them just what they needed. I find it really interesting here and different places in Exodus.
the contrast between God and Pharaoh. And just kind of the way it's written up, the way it's presented on the pages of Holy Scripture, we're meant to notice this contrast.
[21:22] So, for example, back in chapter 5, we find the Israelites, they're slaving away in Egypt. And you may remember Pharaoh, he got upset about something or other, and he was ticked off, and he takes away their straw for making the bricks.

That's what they were doing as slaves, had to make all these bricks, a certain quota each day, make all these bricks. And now they're going to have to make the same number of bricks, reach the same quota, without the straw provided.
So they got to go out and find straw, in addition to all the other things that they were doing, make the same number of bricks. It was cruel, it was almost impossible to do, but King Pharaoh, he insisted.
That was Exodus 5. Now we've got a new king. God here is calling the shots. Come to Exodus 16, and God's calling the shots.
He displaces Pharaoh. And the contrast couldn't be more clear, or really more beautiful, because God's got a quota too. God's got a quota too, but it's generous, and it's kind of like a reverse quota.
[22:31] Instead of demanding, he's giving to the people. The Lord, King Yahweh, he's working for his people. He's giving them manna each day.

So let's just look at those two verses in contrast a moment that kind of encapsulate this. So from Exodus 5, Pharaoh says, you are not to reduce the number of bricks required for you each day.
In the Hebrew, it's, the Lord, in Exodus 16, it's kind of the reverse. I will rain down bread from heaven for you.
I will serve you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. The bar, yom, yom, yom, yom, yom, yom, yom, this manna principle, then you're able to take things one day at a time.
You're not out there hoarding manna, not greedy, out there amassing, stockpiling things for yourself, and you're also not overcome with fear about the future, about what might happen.
[24:22] There's this daily kind of waiting on the Lord, resting in him, openly receiving from him, read from heaven. In Lamentations in chapter 3, there's a lot of lament.

As you can imagine, in the book of Lamentations, Lamentations 3 also has lots of lament. It talks about being trampled in the dust and downcast and beaten up and deprived, and some of our community members know what that's like, for sure.
But then still, there's this growing trust that we see there. It says, because of his great love, we're not consumed in his compassions.
They never fail. In fact, they are like that manna, new every morning. Great is your faithfulness, as Diane played for us.
Beautiful. Great is your faithfulness. In fact, that's what this meal here is all about.
[25:29] This meal. We know our God is our portion. He's our life. And so we take him in. We take him in to the very center of our being.

Sacramentally, we feed on the life of our Lord. We take him in. The life he gives us. He's our portion. Christ is the bread of heaven for us.
This meal, it drives home that fact. The fact that he came down from heaven for us and for our salvation. Like that man from the heavens, out there in the wilderness.

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Christ came down to us to save our lives in the midst of our wilderness. He did. And it's not just something in the past, either. God's mercies, they're new every morning.
That's what we testify. They're sufficient. His grace is sufficient for us each day. Everything God did in Sinai, wilderness there in Sinai, everything he did at Bethlehem and at Calvary, all of it points to the fact that we have a good king.
[26:36] It shows us our good king, the one that we can trust today with all that we are, that he's present, that he's faithful, giving us enough manna for each day that we can trust him. And I know with the tornado and other things going on, it's not been an easy time.

And I know some of you right now, for different reasons, are in a sort of wilderness yourself. So I just encourage you, as you take the bread this morning, to take it and eat it as if your life depends on it.
Because it really does. It really does. It's the life our Lord has given to us to save us and revive us, bread from heaven for us.
It's God's manna for the hungry. It's God's life-saving work for those who are in the wilderness. It's our good king making it really clear to us, in a very tangible way, really clear to us, that he'll give us what we need for each day.
He will. He's good. He's already given his life for us. So we keep coming back to that, to the cross, to what he's done, his great sacrifice for us, as a way of trusting that he will provide for us each day just what we need.
[27:51] He knows he will provide. He's our portion, the bread of life. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Let's pray together. Our Father, who art in heaven, give us this day our daily bread.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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