

November 2, 2014

Bread in the Desert

Exodus 16:1 – 36

We've been working our way through the book of Exodus these past few weeks and we've been getting a look at salvation – how God saves His people. If you want to know about salvation, if you want to see a picture of how God saves His people, there are few better places to look than the story of Exodus, and the life of Moses. In Exodus, God is revealed as the One who saves, the One who rescues. Salvation is God's liberating work in our lives to free us from all the stuff that would enslave us and kill us. If you build your life, your identity, on anything or anyone other than God, it will always deceive you, oppress you, enslave you and then kill you.

Last week we saw the triumph of God in salvation as He led His people through the chaos of the sea to joyful celebration on the other side. And that was great; that was tremendous and we heard them singing the song of salvation to the Lord. They had been rescued, they had been delivered from certain death; they were free; Pharaoh and his armies had been drowned in the sea; nobody was coming after them anymore. And then they came to the desert. And it is in the desert that we learn something more about salvation. We learn that salvation is more than just a Red Sea experience. That's great, that's freeing, but what does that mean practically? How does that work out in my life? How do I really live free? How does God's salvation work in our lives to free us? In this passage that we read this morning, we learn three things about that. We learn about desert training, desert supply and desert grace. Desert training, desert supply and desert grace.

Desert Training

The last few verses of chapter 15, which we didn't read, tell us that after the Red Sea triumph, the Israelites went out into the wilderness of Shur; and then in chapter 16 we read: *They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt.* In fact, they spend the next forty years in the wilderness – the desert. When the Bible talks about the wilderness it's talking about desert. A desert is a hard place, a dry place, a place of starving, a place where it is difficult to sustain life. And you want to ask, 'Why in the world are they in the desert? Why go there? They've been rescued from slavery – Pharaoh is dead – nobody's coming after them – why go into the desert?' And the simple answer is that God has led them there. The reason that they are in a place where there's no food, and next week, a place where there's no water; the reason they are in this hard, difficult, dangerous place is because God has led them there. It was His plan. When He mapped out their escape route from Egypt, He entered the coordinates for the wilderness of Shur and the wilderness of Sin, and said, 'This is good. This is the best route for you to get to Canaan'. The Israelites didn't understand however. And unless we understand something about the saving work of God in our lives, we won't understand our own wilderness journeys.

Verses two and three tell us that these guys didn't understand what was going on. *'And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."*' Their assessment of the situation was that they would rather have died in Egypt as slaves, rather than die in the desert as free men, because at least in Egypt they would have died on a full stomach. They are basically saying, 'We had it better in Egypt – we had a lot of food there – we don't have any out here'. Very quickly they had gotten nostalgic for the comforting shackles of slavery. They were indulging in a false memory of a past that didn't exist.

But it was worse than mere nostalgia. This is the language of addiction. They were in denial. When they were under the lash, they hated it, they were miserable, they wanted out. And now they're out and things are bad and they want back in. They have warm memories of being worked to death. 'Those taskmasters weren't so bad – they were just doing their job. Maybe they got a little enthusiastic with the whips and stuff, but at least we ate good.' In other words they were living in a dream world because the present reality was just too hard. Their thinking was delusional and they had screened out all the misery. They were in denial and that is the language of addiction. 'Things weren't all that bad'.

You see, they had been rescued, but they were still being saved. You can rescue people from slavery fairly quickly, dramatically even. But to get slavery out of the people takes a desert experience. Physically these guys were free – no more slavery. But their thinking hadn't caught up with their situation. At the first sign of trouble they want to jump on the train back to Egypt. They had to learn how to live free – how to incorporate their freedom into their lives. And that meant they had to go through the desert instead of along the coast. You see there was an easier road to Canaan – it was a lot shorter and they would have been there in two weeks. But they still would have been slaves in their thinking. God knew this, which is why He gave them the desert. Moses reminds them of this years later in Deuteronomy 8: *And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.*

In other words, Moses tells them that ***the reason they had to go through the desert was that they didn't know what was in their own hearts.*** They didn't understand the depth of their addiction. They were in denial. They didn't realize that although they had been freed from the physical shackles, their inner shackles still held them in bondage. The evidence of this runs through this story. They crossed the sea in triumph, and three days later they were grumbling at Moses because they were out of water. God gave them water to drink, and a few days later they were wishing they were back in Egypt. He gives them food in the desert and not too much later they are complaining that God was trying to kill them with thirst and they hadn't been thirsty in Egypt. You can take a person out of slavery in an instant – but it takes time in the desert to train the slavery out of the person.

You see **the desert is a place of training.** When the people complain about the lack of food, the Lord's response is: *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 test them, whether they will walk in My law or not.* The training is all about trusting God, trusting God's word. Alec Motyer puts it like this: ***God brings us into situations which call for trust and the endurance and obedience that proves our trust is real, so that by the exercise of faith in new challenges our trust in Him can develop and mature, until we can come to see that everything that happens to us is under divine supervision and is brimful of divine purposes for good.*** That can only happen in the desert. When we come to Christ, our slavery to sin is broken in an instant: *For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.* Romans 8:2 Period. Objective fact. But the objective fact in our head has not yet been worked out fully in our lives in the way we feel or the way we act or the way we actually live.

That takes some desert training. It happens when things go wrong; when there's no water and no food. It is in the challenges and sufferings of life that we finally access with our hearts what is in our heads. It is there where we actually take hold of the truths we know intellectually and they become reality in our lives. It is there in the desert where we begin to say, 'If what I believe is true then I should be acting like this, looking like this, living like this'. Some years ago my wife and I memorized the book of James and I was always staggered by the second verse: *Consider it all joy my brethren when you encounter various trials...* Joy? Trials? That was an unhappy connection. Intellectually I knew that James was trying to tell me something important here, but practically it didn't make sense.

It especially doesn't make sense in our culture. Everything in our culture is bent toward avoiding trouble, avoiding trials, reducing our exposure to suffering. It only makes sense in the desert. Most of us don't realize that suffering and joy run together. When we try to insulate ourselves from suffering, we actually cut ourselves off from joy. Oswald Chambers said: ***"The things we try to avoid and fight against - tribulation, suffering and persecution - are the very things that produce abundant joy in us. Huge waves that would frighten the ordinary swimmer produce a tremendous thrill for the surfer who has ridden them. "We are more than conquerors through Him" IN all these things - not in spite of them, but in the midst of them. A saint doesn't know the joy of the Lord in spite of tribulation, but because of it. Paul said "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation".***

You see the desert is a place of training ***where the truth of who God is and what He has done is worked into us.*** Our problem is that we just want to be zapped. We just want to take a pill and it will all be over. 'Lord give me patience, now! Lord make me wise and loving and giving. I'll just close my eyes and you zap me with what I need.' God says, 'No son, it doesn't work like that. But I tell you what, how about you come into the desert here with Me for a bit of training'.

Desert Supply

But God doesn't lead you into the desert and say 'Good luck with that'. With the desert training comes the desert supply. God tells Moses that He's going to rain bread from heaven and all they have to do is gather it up. In the desert, God supplies the food and tells you how to get it. *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.* God is not a mother bird who flies to the nest with worms and stuffs them down the baby bird's throat – He rains down bread and tells you how to get it. Even though there is bread in the desert, you can still die if you don't know how to get it.

But bread in the desert is an anomaly – it's extraordinary – it shouldn't happen. But look at the contrast. They came from the most fertile region in the world, the Nile valley. They had lots of food there. In fact when times got hard in the desert the Israelites dreamed about the food there. But because of the plagues, where there should have been food, there wasn't. All the crops were destroyed by swarms of locusts and devastating hail storms. But here in the barren wasteland – the wilderness, the desert – where there shouldn't have been bread, there was. Which tells us that **without** the presence of God, the very best circumstances, the most abundant places, are places of leanness and poverty and death. And the very worst places **with** the presence of God are places of abundance and prosperity and life.

The other thing is that this doesn't happen automatically – you have to go get it. There were some rules about the manna – you had to go every day, you couldn't gather on the Sabbath, you had to share it. There were guidelines for gathering. You had to do something. This is not like their initial liberation. They were passive recipients in that. It was God who brought the plagues; God opened the sea; God destroyed their enemy. All they had to do was follow the leader. But in the desert they had to go get the manna. And if they didn't bother to go get it they would die. Liberation happens in an instant – but in the desert you have to go after the supply. It's there, God brings it every morning – but you have to go get it.

Desert experiences can have one of two outcomes. Either they make you a stronger person, a wiser person, a humbler person, a more loving person; or they can break you, make you weak, make you an angry and bitter person. The problems you face in the desert will either defeat you or develop you – tear you down or build you up. You will be a better person for it, or you'll be a worse one – it all depends on your response. And the thing is, everybody goes through troubles, everybody has trials. But not everybody gets the manna. God provides that only for His own. It is in the desert places that God supplies the greatest feasts. You don't get this in the easy places. You have to go after the manna.

So what is this manna? Of course for the Israelites it was physical food. They had to have it to live. But Moses later tells the Israelites, and us, what this pointed to, again in Deuteronomy 8: *And He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.* Moses is saying that manna in the desert represented the very **word of God** – every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. In other words, in the desert you are going to die physically unless you eat the manna. And you're going to die spiritually if you don't eat the word of God.

The word of God is essential if you are going to survive the desert. Whatever desert you are wandering in, whatever wilderness experience you are going through right now, what you've got to do is gather the manna and eat it. Every day – twice as much on the sixth day. **You've got to learn to turn the truth of every word of God into bread.** God Himself says that it is by every word from His mouth that we live. His word has to be gathered; it has to be chewed; it has to be tasted and savored and swallowed and digested. We need to do what Jeremiah did: *Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by Your name, O LORD, God of hosts.* Jeremiah 15:16

How does the word become a joy and delight to our hearts? It happens when we chew it over, meditate on the implications, ponder its significance, think about its meaning. We have to let it percolate in our thinking. What you are supposed to do in the desert, in the places of trials and sufferings, is take the word of God, take the promises of God, take the truth of God, and chew on it, savor it, digest it – just like we would eat a meal. The Lord tells Joshua what to do with the word: *This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.* Joshua 1:8

The word meditate there has an interesting meaning. Literally it means to moan, growl, utter, muse, mutter, meditate, speak. It is used of lions to describe their growling over their prey. As they are eating they're growling over it. In other words, **we are to take the word of God and turn it into prayer to God**. You see this if you go to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Hundreds of people are lined up facing the wall with their copy of the scriptures, meditating over them by praying them back to God. There is a considerable noisy din. These are not silent, unspoken requests. These guys are swaying back and forth, reading and speaking the word of God in prayer to God. They are eating the word – meditating on the word – taking the truth of God's word and turning it into bread.

When you find yourself in the desert places, the desolate places, the hard and difficult places, and you feel despondent and discouraged and depressed and you want to go back to Egypt – you haven't been gathering the manna, you haven't been eating the word. You're not thinking about the truth of God's word – you're not savoring the rich feast He's laid out for you in the desert. When you really meditate on and digest the word of God, it inspires prayer to God, bringing the truth of God to bear on your situation and circumstance. This is why Paul says, 'Don't worry about anything, pray about everything'. The word inspires prayer and it informs prayer. It tells us what to pray and becomes the substance of our prayer. And we turn the truth of God into bread.

But manna is more than just our necessary food in the desert. Manna points to a **living relationship** with the One who is the bread of life. In John 6, the Pharisees pointed to the manna that fell in the desert and said, 'That was a miracle from God – what miracle can you do to prove you're the Son of God?' And Jesus replied, 'That manna that came down from heaven? That was pointing to Me. I am that bread of life. Your fathers ate that manna and they still died. But if you eat this bread, if you get into a relationship with Me, you'll live forever.' Look at what they had to do – they had to go out everyday to get the manna. I'm sure Jesus had this in mind when He taught His disciples how to pray – 'Pray this way...Give us today our daily bread'. What He had in mind was **a moment by moment, daily, dependent relationship with God**. What we need in the desert is not some sort of how-to manual, or a miraculous zap from God – we need a moment by moment communion with Christ.

When we're in the desert, we want some miracle to zap us; we want a magic pill to take away the problem; we want God to wave a wand and transport us to Canaan. But the desert is God's design to teach us that we do not go to God simply to supply us with what we need, but that God Himself **is** our supply. In other words we do not go to God simply **for** our need but we go to Him **as** the very thing we need. The desert is the place where all the other sources of our happiness and joy, our significance and security are dried up; and it is only there where we realize that God is all we need. To say that another way, **you don't realize that God is all you need until God is all you have**. The desert is the place where our dependence is tested. What are we depending on? In what have we placed our confidence? What are we hoping in? And in the desert, God is taking away those false supports and replacing them with Himself. You'll never know that God is all you need until God is all you have.

One more thing about the manna. **It's a community thing**. Look again at the Lord's instructions: '*Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.*' And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat. Exodus 16:16-18 The Lord was saying, 'This is not just for personal growth. You don't just go out and get the manna for yourself. You go out and gather it up and share it out among yourselves'. Although each one personally gathered the manna, they brought it together and it was distributed throughout the community.

God doesn't lead us out into the desert to become spiritual giants. So many people have the idea that God is all about making me personally into a better person. People come to Christ and they begin learning some things that help them and change them and give them hope and future. They'll listen to the sermon on Sunday and maybe even see how it applies in their lives; but they're focused on themselves – how does this help me? How can this benefit me? What does this mean for me? They are glad to come on Sundays, but don't ask them to join a community group. And they'll starve in the wilderness – because manna is distributed in community.

Community is where the desert experience is worked out. You'll notice from the text that everybody went through the desert. They were all in this thing together. And to a degree, it can be said that our life down here is altogether a desert experience – at times more intense than at others. But they were in community there. And that's how it's worked out. You get together with others who are on the same journey, experiencing the same kinds of things, or have experienced the same issues, the same kinds of struggles, the same failures, the same triumphs or the same tragedies. You talk about it, you remind each other of the truth, you lift up those who have fallen and you support each other. You also help correct one another when you see someone going off the track; you admonish and rebuke, in love – so that you reach the destination together. You will die in the desert unless you jump in and get involved in deep community with one another.

Desert Grace

It is in the desert that we get trained. That's where we learn what is really in our hearts, and the truth of who God is and what He has done is worked into our being. The desert is the place where we begin to understand that God is all we need when He is all we have. And the desert is the place where we learn to savor the depths of God's grace. Look at verse 22: *'On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers each.'* Then in verse 26: *'Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none.'* In other words, they had to go out every day to gather the manna, but on Friday they would gather twice as much so they wouldn't have to go out on the seventh day, which was a day of rest.

We're not going to get into a discussion on the significance of the Sabbath right now, we'll get to that in chapter 20. But we need to recognize that one of the significant things about the Sabbath was the recognition of God as the ultimate source of life, and not gathering on the Sabbath was to honor Him as such. That's why He gave them twice as much on Friday. But the unusual thing here is that this was still a test. Remember back in verse four the Lord says, *'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 test them, whether they will walk in My law or not.'* It was a test. But they fail the test. Look at verse 27: *'On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none.'* They blew the test.

So what does God do? He feeds them for the next forty years. *'The people of Israel ate the manna forty years, till they came to a habitable land. They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan.'* I don't know about you, but that's not how the tests I took in school went. My professors never said, 'Oh dear, you failed the test – how about you take it again? And again. And again. Until you pass. Mostly they just gave you a big fat 'F' and said 'Too bad for you'. But that's not what happens here – He keeps giving them manna. 'Let's try again in the morning'. What's going on here? What is going on is what Moses tells us in Deuteronomy as he recounts the desert experience: *'You also saw how the LORD your God brought you through the desert. He carried you everywhere you went, just as a father carries his son. And now you have arrived here.'* And then in chapter 8 he explains: *'Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you.'*

What is going on, Moses says, is discipline. But that's not grace, you say. I thought we were talking about desert grace. And we are. Look, Moses says that God brought them through the desert and in the desert He disciplined them, as a father disciplines his son. But He also says that the Lord carried them, as a father carries his son. So you have these two images – discipline, carrying. How does a father discipline his son? Or rather, what is the point of the discipline? Hopefully the point is not punitive but educational. It's to teach, not merely to inflict pain. The pain is there to remind us of which way not to go. There are certain things you want to teach your child when you are a father. But they don't always get it right away. So you keep at it. You carry them along until they can walk on their own. You keep giving them lessons in obedience until you don't have to carry them. You give them grace and the grace is that you don't obliterate them when they disobey, you carry them.

In the desert, it is not a kind of eye for an eye punishment. That's not the way it works with fathers. The father says to his child, 'Son, because you disobeyed me, you need some correction in order to learn that it is better to obey so I'll have to bring a little pain into your life'. But it isn't like 'You've broken the law and now you go to jail'. Father's bring pain into the child's life in order to teach them something – not to pay them back. He does it so that they learn not to lie or cheat or steal, he does it so that they learn and grow and mature.

Moses tells the people, 'The tough things you experienced in the desert, the hard times, were not retribution, but God has simply carried you along trying to grow you, trying to change you, and no matter how often you failed, He continued to work with you.' That is grace. The writer of Hebrews was always bringing things back to the desert experience for his readers. Time and time again he would remind them of what God was doing there. In chapter 12 he says, *"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."* Hebrews 12:5 And then he wraps up talking about discipline by saying: *See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.* Hebrews 12:15

The Lord's discipline is the Lord's grace. He doesn't just say, 'Do this and don't do that' and stand back with folded arms waiting for us to mess up. He actively engages with us to lovingly discipline us as the sons whom He dearly loves. He even gives us what we need to succeed – He gives us the double portion. The extra bit of manna gathered on the sixth day, was intended to give them the ability to carry out the command of the Lord for the seventh day – Don't gather any on this day. With His commands always comes the grace to obey them. Our desert experience will either work in our soul more humility, more wisdom, more strength, more love; or it will leave us bitter and angry and hurting. When the writer says *'See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God'* he's saying, 'Help one another to understand what this desert experience is all about'.

If you don't understand that God leads you into the desert to strip away all your supports and to look to Him as your supply, you'll be crushed by the experience.' You will either look at yourself and say 'What a failure – I hate myself'; or you'll look at God and say, 'You never come through for Me – I hate you'. It will become a root of bitterness that grows and grows until it poisons your life and you die out there. Grace is the active work of God in our lives to produce the character of God in us. And it happens through His loving discipline. *For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* Hebrews 12:11

God deals with us as with sons – He loves us more than we can ever know. He takes us by the hand and leads us into the places of dryness, hunger, want, hardship; He exposes what is in our hearts until we begin to see that everything in our lives is in His hands and under His control and is brimming over with good for us. He takes us out into the desert where there is nothing, no food, no water, until when God is all we have we finally realize that God is all we need. And like a loving Father, He is patient with us, feeding us even when we don't deserve it, supplying all we need to make it through the desert, until we reach the other side. Jesus said, *'I am the Bread of Life – he that eats Me shall live forever. And unless you eat My flesh and drink My blood you have no life in you.'*

Our gracious and loving Father,

We thank You for the desert places into which You lead us by Your sovereign hand. Grant that we would believe, and rest, and trust in Your wisdom, Your guidance, Your generosity, Your purposes for our lives. Teach us that the trials we fear are the very things that produce abundant joy in us. Break our addiction to the meat pots of Egypt. Humble our hearts and remove our distrust of Your gracious provision. Help us turn the truth of Your word into bread for our souls; and let us welcome Your loving discipline that is the grace that You reserve for those You love; and teach us that You are all we need, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord.