

*Daily Strength*  
8-20-17 Exodus 16:1-35  
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We started our journey with Abram in Genesis 12 back in June, eventually following his family into Egypt, and then seeing how 400-years later his descendants were led to freedom by Moses.

But while we're in the middle of this long, unfolding story, it's easy to miss the forest for the trees - so I want to take a moment to step back and remind ourselves of the big picture of what's going on.

Why?

Because it's easy to forget that these familiar stories changed the course of human history.

These narratives of Abraham and Moses brought a total upheaval of all that had been assumed since the dawn of time about the divine, about human nature, and even about the meaning of time itself.

Let's remember why.

**First** off, this is the account of the Creator of Heaven and Earth intervening in the lives of a small, inconsequential Semitic tribe.

This tribe was so small and insignificant that they were all but ignored in the histories of their neighbors.

While there is extensive literature left by the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, they contain no obvious reference to the Israelites.

These were the “nobodies” of the Ancient Near East.

They didn't have elaborate temples or formalized orders of priests.

They didn't have power, wealth or influence.

They were migrants, nomads and slaves, yet God came to them.

Think about what that says about God's priorities, because we live in the modern manifestation of the super powers Mesopotamia and Egypt.

We are obliged to ask ourselves if there are small, insignificant or exploited groups that we are blind to ... but that just might be God's special concern.

**Second**, this tribe broke with history by no longer seeing the divine as a pantheon of distant, self-absorbed deities who were unaware or unconcerned about the humans living in the world they ruled.

The Israelites experienced firsthand how God could be personal and could care enough to reach-out to them, to announce a plan for a blessed future, and to intervene in their time of suffering.

So, remember that when you feel that you don't count in this society that reserves its spotlight for the beautiful, the successful, the healthy – remember that God doesn't seem to give a damn all that.

Rather, God especially makes Himself present to those who feel left out, who feel shame that they don't measure-up, who are disenfranchised and alienated.

**Third**, up to this point, all the great myths had a “once upon a time, in a place far away” feel to them because they were unconnected to time and everyday human life.

For example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* – that was composed in the culture that Abram migrated from, and that many consider the first great work of literature – is about a demigod of superhuman strength who struggles with gods and monsters.

But our biblical narratives are different.

The writers of Genesis, Exodus and other biblical books went to great lengths to show their account is about real people, living in real places, at specific times.

For example. the books give careful genealogies and they even include normally unimportant people like women, points that were important to nail down history but would not have occurred to story tellers of that culture.

To give another example, today's passage, doesn't just say that the Israelites rejuvenated in under the palms of some great oasis.

It says they got water and rest at a specific place, Elim, and then moved on after two months and fifteen days.

These stories were passed along for many generations through an oral tradition among people scattered throughout the region, and so centuries later when they were being committed to writing, the editors had a jumble of versions to sew together, and they inevitably made some errors.

After all, authors didn't have the kinds of resources we take for granted for research and fact checking.

But what's important is that these people, both through centuries of oral tradition and then when actually writing them, were concerned with anchoring their experiences with God in real history.

**Fourth**, it's hard to get our head around this because we come from such a different mindset, but before God's intervention with Abraham, life was assumed to be a recurring cycle only interrupted by an occasional disaster.

Life was repetitive, predictable, and unchangeable.

The Babylonians symbolized time a wheel endlessly turning around and around.

The life you lived this year, you would live next year ... just as all your ancestors had, and as all your descendants would.

But all that changed with Abraham and Moses.

The early pages of the Bible are a revolutionary break from the ancient myths that were presented as outside of time and place, and from life being a predictively repeating cycle.

Now, God is present in real life, for real people, in real places.

Now, the future is not an endless replay, but is affected by God and by us.

Now, people can dream of a better future.

So, through this seemingly insignificant Semitic tribe, humankind is invited to an entirely new kind of faith journey than people had ever envisioned.

Last week, we saw the freed slaves singing and dancing after their "by the skin of their teeth" escape from Pharaoh's chariots – but slowly the realities of a wilderness began to set in, and before long fear displaced exuberance.

*Exodus 16:3 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, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."*

Facing the unknown, their hunger and their fear lead them to willful forgetfulness.

This is a common reaction to change and uncertainty – something we witness today as new rights for minorities, automation, changing technologies, and globalization shake-up our society.

Someone recently said that our current political divide can be summarized as fear fueling conflict between those who want to reclaim a past that never was and those who want a future that never can be.

True, the Israelites complain seven times in just 14 verses, but let's give them a break.

Stranded in a vast, blistering hot wilderness they've never seen, they are forced into survival mode.

If you ever watched the reality television series "Survivor", you know what happens to groups of people forced to survive difficult conditions together.

They predictably turn on one another, especially if they're hungry and thirsty.

And they do a good bit of complaining.

Sure, God showed great power when freeing them from their Egyptian slave masters, but, then again, He took his sweet time about it, waiting 400 years to do so.

Honestly, God hadn't yet established a great track record with them.

So, we're missing the point if we reduce this story to Israelites being a bunch of ungrateful whiners.

Now, later on, in Numbers 11-21, the writers will cast judgment on Israel's chronic grumbling, but that is after they've had more experience with God, and after they'd made the covenant with God at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 20.

As time passes, they will be expected to trust more, but in these pre-Sinai narratives, the focus is on God's response to their needs.

But God does not just indulge their human desire to have everything they want immediately when they want it.

The newly freed slaves must learn that freedom requires risk and sacrifice.

Mature faith requires trust and discipline ... and so God uses their complaints to teach them about what their relationship will be.

As humans, we live in the moment between desire and fulfillment.

It is natural to desire better lives, better relationships, better jobs.

But if we stay stuck in desire, if we feel powerless to move forward, or undeserving of what others seem to have, then we become hopeless and depressed.

On the other hand, if we get what we had wanted but find it empty and unfulfilling once we have it, then we become melancholy and despondent.

Depression is desiring something you don't think you can have.

Melancholy is having something you no longer desire.

God wants these people to feel empowered to move toward the Promised Land, but also to be able to appreciate the gift after they arrive.

As we mature in faith, we learn to relax and enjoy the moment between desire and fulfillment – even when life is not perfect – because we know that in one way or another, God will provide.

Our wilderness journeys can be hard, but along the way they can be joyful and life-giving.

If God had just teleported the Israelites to the Promised Land, they would not have had the experiences that would forge the community and traditions that would endure for thousands of years.

If God had indulged them, they would have felt entitled but not happy.

There was a 1960 episode of the Twilight Zone about a hoodlum named Rocky Valentine.

He had a long history of crime, starting with hurting animals and stealing toys as a child, forming a street gang as a teen, and finally killing a bank manager right before he was shot and killed as he ran from a police officer.

He's awakened by an angel who shows him around his new, eternal home, which is filled with the finest furniture, artwork, and scotch.

He is accompanied to the casino by beautiful women where he wins every hand of poker, every spin of the roulette wheel, and every pull of a slot machine.

At first, he is thrilled, but eventually becomes bored with always instantly having whatever he desires.

After a few days, he tells his angel that he's very grateful that God granted him a place in heaven, but this isn't for him.

That's when the angel bursts into a cruel laugh and says, "What made you think this was heaven? Oh, no. This is the other place."

God's answer to the grumbling Israelites was to provide enough for the day.

God wants His people to develop trust in Him and resilience in themselves, not a sense of entitlement, so God provides a daily ration of bread and meat that the people have to gather themselves, but cannot store up in over abundance.

*Exodus 16:4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. 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 will follow my instructions."*

Over time, the distorted memories of Pharaoh's food will be replaced by the genuine memories of God's provision of manna, and the endless, back-breaking days under the Egyptian sun will be replaced by Sabbath rest and renewal.

But notice that this gift is presented as a test that is multilayered.

On the surface, it enables God to know the people's response to the gift of manna: will they follow God's instructions and gather only their daily need?

And, will they respect the Sabbath?

But the test also serves a more important purpose:

The gathering of manna in the morning, and the gift of Sabbath each week establish a rhythm and structure to carry them through the uncertainty and turmoil of their wilderness wandering.

The promise of God's provision and rest can reassure us today.

These biblical narratives are not just histories, they are more than literature, and have meaning way beyond a set of rules.

Rather, the Bible is an invitation to the journey.

The Bible is "the living word of God" only when we live it.

We are invited to be part of the wilderness journey given to save us from a life of drudgery and hardship.

We are invited to remember who we are and why we are here.

There's a marvelous apocryphal story about a sage named Aveeka who many years ago was walking from the monastery to his home when a tremendous storm descended upon the land.

The roads grew muddy and the rain poured so hard that he lost his way.

So when he came to a fork in the road he was disoriented and went the wrong way, suddenly finding himself approaching a Roman outpost.

A brutal voice from the guard station demanded, "Who are you, and where are you going?"

Aveeka replied by asking, "How much do they pay you?"

"What? What do you mean?" answered the confused guard.

"I mean just that. How much do they pay you?"

He hesitated before saying, "Ten denarii a week."

“Ah,” said Aveeka.

“I’ll double that – twenty denarii a week – if you’ll come home with me and ask me that every morning.”

Who are you, and where are you going?

Through God, the wilderness that had felt like such a threat to the newly freed slaves, became a nurturing place filled with God’s glory.

You are invited to enter your journey to re-discover who you are, why you are here, and where you are going.

Yes, you will face wilderness ahead, but if you understand this as your stepping into the Bible’s narrative then you will begin to see your wilderness with eyes of faith, open to God.

You will see that what you had feared will be filled with God’s glory and provision.