

05

SESSION FIVE

Tested In the Wilderness

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we obey the apostle Paul's admonition to learn from Israel's example in the wilderness. Like Israel, we too are sojourners who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, who have crossed over to the other side by grace, and are now on the way to the promised land. As we journey by faith through our own wilderness, God is sanctifying us and teaching us to trust Him, love Him, and follow Him.

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 17:1-7; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6

THE POINT

God's goodness is shown through His sustaining grace toward His people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

As Christians, there's a school that we all attend. God trains us, disciplines us, and sanctifies us in "Wilderness University." Charles Spurgeon called the wilderness "the Oxford and Cambridge for God's students." Speaking of the wilderness is a way of referring to Israel's sojourn from Egypt, through the wilderness, on to the promised land.

In Exodus 17, we pick up the story with Israel's wilderness experience. To set the context, realize that three consecutive stories in the wilderness journey concern food (Ex. 16) and water (Ex. 15:22-27; 17:1-7). Israel gets hungry and thirsty, and they complain. Their grumbling serves as a warning to us.

- **What are some ways we receive an education "informally," apart from schools and universities? What are some life experiences that teach us things we can't learn anywhere else?**
- **What has God taught you recently through a difficult experience or period of suffering?**

Option 2

Display a compass or use a compass app. Point out that the needle doesn't point in the direction you need to go; it points to true north. True north helps you decide which road to take to get where you're going. That's like the Holy Spirit's teaching. He gives you truth in His Word; truth helps you know the way to go.

- **When you find yourself in a difficult situation, not knowing which way to turn or what decision to make, are you more likely to complain first or do you go to God? Explain.**
- **Think of an area in your life where you need the Spirit to guide you. What expectations can you have of God regarding this? What expectations does God have of you in this?**

Direct students to write three things on an index card: something they need God to teach or help them with, a temptation they often face, and a step they will take to seek God's help in the days ahead.

Point out that oftentimes, people don't look for God's help until they have a problem; instead, they complain or grumble to other people. Pray that God will help you grow every day so that when those problems come, you're ready to face them with the confidence that God will guide you in the direction He wants you to go.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God's goodness is shown through His sustaining grace toward His people.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Moses:** biblical patriarch; chosen by God to lead His people out of captivity and to the promised land

PLOT

By this point in the story, the people of God have witnessed some miraculous defeats against the bondage and strength of Pharaoh and his armies. With all of that now behind them, the people find themselves in a period and place in time waiting to take possession of the land promised to their forefathers. Yet in this period of waiting, God still has some things He wants to teach His people, things that will continually shape them into the type of people God is calling them to be.

TIMELINE

THE WILDERNESS

Israel is to walk in faith and follow after God on their way to the promised land.

THE GOLDEN CALF

Israel commits idolatry against God.

THE COMMANDMENTS (PART I)

God gives Israel instructions on how to relate to Him.

GOD'S PEOPLE COMPLAIN

The entire Israelite community left the Wilderness of Sin, moving from one place to the next according to the LORD's command. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So the people complained to Moses, "Give us water to drink." "Why are you complaining to me?" Moses replied to them. "Why are you testing the LORD?" (Ex. 17:1-2)

As the Israelites move on, this time at "Rephidim," they have no water. But instead of trusting and seeking God, they "complain" and "grumble" against Moses (Ex. 17:2-3). Because of this, Moses named the place "Massah and Meribah," which means testing and quarreling. (See also Ps. 95.) Instead of trusting God, they were testing God.

This sinful entitlement attitude was expressed in two ways. First, they demanded water. "Give us water to drink," Israel said (v. 2a). The text highlights their attitude. They weren't coming in humility asking for water, but were acting like spoiled kids.

Israel also expressed their entitlement by complaining about God's provision. "Why are you complaining?" Moses asked (v. 2b).

This was a sad pattern for Israel. They grumbled under Pharaoh (Ex. 2:23). They grumbled at the Red Sea (14:11-12). They grumbled at Marah (15:23-24). They grumbled about their leaders (16:2-3; 17:3-4; also Num. 11). God had just turned bitter water into sweet water and had sent bread from heaven, yet they still complain here at Rephidim.

But God reacts to the Israelites with mercy. He continues to provide for them in spite of their ingratitude.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Complaining is a serious sin, more serious than you might think. (See 1 Cor. 10:1-12. Notice the sins mentioned there.) Paul told the church in Philippi these important words: "Do everything without grumbling and arguing, so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world" (Phil. 2:14-15). Notice that Paul says one of the ways we shine in a dark world is by not complaining. You will stand apart from the world if you pepper your day with words of gratitude rather than words of complaint.

For the Christian, this life is as bad as it's ever going to be. This is our wilderness. The promised land is coming. And even in this difficult wilderness journey, we have a God who cares for His children. So avoid the culture's language of complaining, and instead let thanksgiving flow from your lips—to the God who parts seas and raises the dead.

GOD'S PEOPLE QUESTION HIS GOODNESS

But the people thirsted there for water, and grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you ever bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “What should I do with these people? In a little while they will stone me!” (Ex. 17:3-4)

Next, we see Israel questioning God's goodness (Ex. 17:3). “Why did you ever bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” they asked. They were beginning to question their entire deliverance from Egypt. Was the purpose of their liberation for death in a wilderness? Of course not! There was no need to question God's provision.

Following the people's grumbling, Moses cried out to the Lord. “What should I do with these people? In a little while they will stone me!” (v. 4). Moses sensed that this complaint was serious.

God didn't redeem Israel to then forsake them. God redeems, and God provides. As believers, we should remember that God has brought us through a greater exodus. And if God would provide the solution for our greatest problem (through Christ's death and resurrection), then we have no reason to question His goodness or doubt His faithfulness when facing our day-to-day problems. God is good. Believe it.

- **Have you ever questioned God's goodness? Explain.** (*p. 35, PSG*)

Invite students to read Psalm 73. Draw attention to how the psalmist spends several verses perplexed at how the wicked are comfortable, well-fed, pain free, and so forth. Then, after some clear thinking, he writes this: “When I tried to understand all this, it seemed hopeless until I entered God's sanctuary. Then I understood their destiny” (vv. 16-17).

The psalmist began to look at things with an eternal perspective, which caused him to see that the wicked prosper for only a short time. Their terrible end is coming. As he sees things more properly, lament gives way to praise to God for His faithfulness, His presence, and His goodness. So yes, trials will come. But you need not doubt God's goodness—just look at the cross, and remember that you're greatest problem has already been solved. God is good.

- **We all grumble and complain. How does adding the words “against the Lord” after “grumble” or “complain” change our view of this attitude?** (*p. 35, PSG*)
- **What does grumbling about our circumstances say about our heart's posture toward God?** (*p. 35, PSG*)

GOD HAS MERCY AND PROVIDES FOR HIS PEOPLE

The presence of God is a major theme in the book of Exodus: God heard Israel's cry in Egypt. God was with His people at the Red Sea. God journeyed with them in the wilderness. God's presence appeared majestically at Sinai. God's presence was manifested in the Tabernacle.

Moses knew that what made Israel distinct was God's presence among them. Moses proclaimed that they could not move one step without God. What distinguished Israel wasn't their land (they didn't have it yet). It wasn't their wealth (they had been slaves). It wasn't their culture (it wasn't fully developed yet). What distinguished them? It was that God was with them.

Once again, God's presence was manifested to the people in a remarkable way. Look at how God solved this particular water problem.

The LORD answered Moses, "Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you. Take the staff you struck the Nile with in your hand and go. I am going to stand there in front of you on the rock at Horeb; when you hit the rock, water will come out of it and the people will drink." Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. He named the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites complained, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" (Ex. 17:5-7)

By the end of this story, we see how Israel doubted God's presence. "Is the LORD among us or not?" they asked (v. 7). They doubted God was with them. But after Moses prayed, God provided water from a rock (vv. 4-6).

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Sin as Missing the Mark

One aspect of sin is missing the mark of God's standards set for humanity. Missing the mark isn't simply making a mistake, but consciously choosing to sin and falling short of God's glory as a result. We may refer to sin as a failure on the part of humans to live according to God's standards, but we must recognize this failure is intentional. We miss the mark when we deliberately choose to cast aside God's purpose for us.

TIMELINE

THE COMMANDMENTS (PART II)

God gives Israel instructions on how to relate to others.

THE TABERNACLE

The tabernacle is built so that God may dwell among His people.

ATONEMENT SACRIFICES (PART I)

The burnt, grain, and fellowship offerings are explained.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul reflects on this episode in the wilderness as he exhorts the church in Corinth:

Now I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ. But God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the wilderness. Now these things became examples for us, so that we will not desire evil things as they did. (1 Cor. 10:1-6)

There are a number of connections to Christ as you study the wilderness experience. Regarding baptism, Paul compares Israel's escape through the waters, through their identity with Moses, to being baptized into Christ (1 Cor. 10:1-2; Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27). He then states that God nourished the people just as He nourishes us spiritually (1 Cor. 10:3-4).

In this "rock experience," Paul says that this story points to Christ who is the Rock that was stricken for our salvation. When Paul says, "that rock was Christ" (v. 4), I take this to mean that the rock was a type of Christ. Moses struck the rock instead of striking the people, and water flowed to save people. Jesus, the Rock, was stricken for our salvation. Instead of striking us, God struck the Son. Like the rock, when He was stricken water flowed from His side (John 19:34). He died the death we deserved to die. Now, we drink from the water of life for eternal life (John 7:37-38). By believing in Jesus, we drink from the ultimate saving water.

The stories in Exodus instruct and encourage us, but they also serve as a warning to us. Paul used these stories as a warning to the Corinthian church. Despite seeing the signs and hearing God's Word, the Israelite generation that experienced God's miraculous deliverance from Egypt and His provision in the wilderness didn't get to see the promised land (1 Cor. 10:5; see Num. 14:22-23,29,37; 26:64-65). Despite these wonderful provisions, only a few had real faith in God (Heb. 3:16-19; 4:2).

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **When was the last time you grumbled about a situation you were in? How is grumbling related to a sense of entitlement?** *Answers to this question will vary, but the second part refers to the mind-set that we oftentimes think we deserve this or that, and when we don't get said thing, we complain.*
- **Do difficult circumstances cause us to have wrong attitudes and actions, or do they merely reveal wrong attitudes of the heart? Explain.** *They reveal wrong attitudes of the heart and can show us where desires (even good desires) have turned into demands within our lives.*
- **God intended to train and form His people during their years in the wilderness. In what ways might God be training you as you walk through difficult times?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **Can you think of a parallel between God's provision of water for complaining Israel and a specific provision He has made for you when you were grumbling? How did God's provision affect your attitude?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

When most people question God's goodness, it is oftentimes the result of a difficult time in their life. However, Christians, knowing that God is good and is working for our ultimate joy in Him, rest in the fact that God is shaping us into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28-29), and this process often involves trying times (Jas. 1:3; Rom. 5:3-4). God knows exactly what it will take for us to become more like Jesus in the way we live.

- **How can Jesus' suffering and death on the cross encourage you during difficult times?** *Jesus' sufferings demonstrate that: 1) even when we suffer, God has not left us; 2) even when we suffer, God can turn it for something good; and 3) change often takes place through suffering.*
- **What is the greatest thing God could ever do for us?** *Some people might say that the greatest thing God could do for them would be to prevent difficulties and hard times, keep themselves and their loved ones healthy, let them live prosperous lives, and so forth. None of those are correct, however, since the greatest thing God could ever do for someone is the very thing He has already done—give Himself to us. When viewed through the lens of the cross, suffering takes on a different perspective.*



HEART

Grumbling and complaining are symptoms of a deeper problem taking place within the heart. When desires run rampant and turn into demands within our hearts, sin takes root and begins to produce grumbling behavior within our lives (Jas. 4:1)

- **Think about the last time you grumbled and complained. What demands have you created in your heart to cause you to respond that way?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How has this session challenged you to address the grumbling in your own life?** *Answers to this question will vary.*



HANDS

The Rock, Jesus, was stricken for our salvation, but we can't keep this good news to ourselves. We must tell everyone about the Living Water. We can offer a lot of good things to the world, and so we should. The world needs clean water, food, and clothing. And while we offer these things, let's also make sure we are offering the gospel, the good news of the Savior who was crushed so that those who place their faith and trust in Him may live forever.

- **In what ways can Christians be a stream of living water to the lost around us?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How does being the recipient of God's mercy impact the way you show mercy to others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, point out item #7 to the students, which contains a map of the people's departure from Egypt on their way to the promised land.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/storystart15)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject