

# First Steps in the Wilderness and a Water Crisis (Exodus 15)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

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## I. Review from Previous Lessons

- a. After striking Egypt with the Ten Plagues, Pharaoh orders the Israelites to depart Egypt, taking their possessions with them.
- b. Pharaoh and the Egyptians then change their minds; the Egyptian army pursues Israel.
- c. With Israel trapped by the edge of the Red Sea, the Lord sends a wind to divide the Sea. Israel crosses on dry ground, with a wall of water on each side.
- d. After the Egyptian army follows, the Lord returns the Sea to its normal condition, and the Egyptian army is drowned as a result. Israel has successfully escaped from bondage in Egypt!
  - i. The Israelites, having escaped Egypt and now in the Wilderness, look back upon the Red Sea and see the dead bodies of the Egyptians washed up on the shore.
  - ii. **Exodus chapter 14** closes with: “So the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Thus Israel saw the Lord’s mighty hand and the things He did to the Egyptians; therefore, the people feared the Lord and believed God and His servant Moses.” (**Exodus 14:30-31**, LXX, OSB)

## II. Song and Dance to Celebrate the Great Victory

- a. Read **Exodus 15:1-21**.
- b. The Israelites sing a song of praise to God for this mighty deliverance.
- c. A few things I notice in this ‘song’.
  - i. The Spirit of God is mentioned twice here, both times in connection with the water.
    1. “By the *Spirit of Your anger* the waters were gathered together” (**Exodus 15:8**).
      - a. Recall that one of the characteristics of the Holy Spirit (the last one listed) in **Isaiah 11:1-3** is “the Spirit of the *fear of God*”.

2. “You sent forth *Your Spirit*: the sea covered them” (**Exodus 15:10**)
  - ii. The other nations heard about this mighty working of the Lord and were terrified; especially those nations who were living in the land promised to Israel as inheritance.
    1. Read **Exodus 15:14-16**.
    2. Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, as well as all the inhabitants of the land of Canaan (the inheritance of Israel) were dismayed.
    3. This is exactly what Rahab recounts 40 years later to the two Israelite spies who had been sent to the walled city of Jericho.
      - a. Read **Joshua 2:8-14**.
      - b. All the people of Jericho had heard about the Red Sea crossing story, in which the Lord destroyed the Egyptian army.
        - i. The king of Jericho feared Israel and their God (and therefore wanted to kill the spies).
        - ii. Rahab also feared the God of Israel; however, that fear led her to risk her life to spare the two spies, in return for mercy when Israel conquered the city.
    - iii. The song closes with a call for the Lord to finish the job by planting Israel in the land of their inheritance.
    - iv. Then Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, takes a timbrel in hand and leads the women in a dance, singing (at least) the first few lines of the song that Moses and the people had just sung.
  - d. It speaks of this song in **Wisdom of Solomon chapter 10**.
    - i. Read Wisdom of **Solomon 10:15-21**.
    - ii. Keep in mind from **Isaiah 11** that the Holy Spirit is described in **Isaiah 11:1-3** (first characteristic) as “the spirit of wisdom”.
    - iii. The Holy Spirit is also called “the Spirit of Christ” (**1 Peter 1:11** and **Romans 8:9**).
    - iv. It says that wisdom did the following:
      1. It entered the soul of Moses.

2. It produced signs and wonders.
3. It guided the people via a pillar of cloud by day and by “a flame of stars” at night.
  - a. Recall that Paul said regarding the cloud: “...all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were *baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,*” (**1 Corinthians 10:1-2**, NKJV)
  - b. This event of Israel crossing the Red Sea foreshadowed Christian baptism. In this phrase, “baptized...in the cloud and the sea” I think of what Jesus said in **John 3:3-5**, that we must be born again “of water and the spirit”. With that in view, the Red Sea would have foreshadowed the *water*, and the cloud foreshadowed the *Holy Spirit*.
4. Led them through the water but drowned their enemies
5. Opened the mouths of the people to sing the inspired song, praising God’s deliverance.

### III. Let Us Take One Last Look Back at Egypt

- a. A song to remember God’s deliverance.
  - i. Songs tend to *stick with us much longer* than just words; sometimes even decades later we can recall both the tune and the words of a song.
    1. Keep in mind that the psalms were written as songs that were intended to be *sung* by the God’s people.
    2. The people would recall the song and (hopefully) remember the great deliverance of God. That would be especially helpful when facing intimidating challenges and enemies in the future.
    3. This would remind them in the future that even their future foes (Philistines, Moabites, Canaanites, etc.) would fear the God of the Jews.
  - ii. **Question:** Do you have a favorite Bible story or incident from your own life that you need to recall when you are facing your own intimidating challenges or enemies?
- b. Many people, like the Israelites, tend to be fickle and faithless when they face unforeseen challenges. Most of the Israelites showed faithlessness

when confronted by the Egyptians or by challenges along the Wilderness journey (in contrast to heroes of faith like Moses, Joshua and Caleb).

- i. **Question/Challenge:** Will you be like Moses, Joshua, and Caleb when facing difficult challenges on your own spiritual journey, or will you be more like the *rest of the Israelites*?
- c. We just need to do our part (what God tells us to do), and He will *somehow see us through it*.
- i. The people complained when they saw the Egyptians coming. Moses cried out to God and believed God would save them somehow.
  - ii. Moses just did what God told him (lift up his rod, stretch out his hands over the sea). God did the rest (actually sending wind, dividing the sea, causing the Egyptian chariots to get stuck, returning the sea to drown the Egyptians).
    1. This should settle the “faith vs. works” debate. If we do the small thing God asks us to do, He will take care of the heavy lifting.
    2. We just need to do our part. If we do, He will do the “heavy lifting” and take care of the rest.
    3. “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”  
(**Matthew 6:31–33**, NKJV)
- d. **Question:** What should we do when *the government* is giving us a hard time?
- i. This is a controversial subject today, but on the minds of many Christians especially relating to recent government edits associated with the Coronavirus pandemic.
  - ii. Fortunately, the Bible says a lot about relations between God’s people struggling under challenging government rule. Consider the relationship between Moses and Pharaoh.
    1. The Egyptian Pharaohs in the Exodus story were unjust tyrants, enslaving people, breaking promises and lying.
    2. They were more concerned with their own agendas than with justice and righteousness.

3. They were involved in the occult, in following other gods.
  4. After finally allowing Moses and Israel to depart, Pharaoh changes his mind and pursues Israel.
  5. Moses is respectful toward Pharaoh, but *he obeys God rather than Pharaoh* when the Lord's commands contradict those of Pharaoh.
  6. He leaves it to God to deal with Pharaoh.
- iii. In our own day, at the present time, we are facing lockdowns due to the Coronavirus health concern. In most US states, church assemblies have been banned. This has been going on for a few weeks, but there is no way to know *how long this will last*. I hear (at least) two perspectives from Christians who are struggling with this situation.
1. One perspective: go along with direction from the governing authorities. Guiding principles include:
    - a. **Romans 13:1-7**. Submit to the governing authorities.
      - i. Be subject to the governing authorities.
      - ii. The ruler's authority comes from God.
      - iii. Only disobey when the edict goes against a direct command of God.
    - b. **Romans 13:8-10**. Show love for others; don't just be concerned about our own "rights". Wear masks and observe rules of isolation to protect the health of others who may be more vulnerable.
  2. Another perspective held by some Christians: This is an over-reach by government (especially in the US), which is encroaching into areas set aside by God.
    - a. In the US the form of government we currently find ourselves under is a constitutional republic, not a dictatorship.
    - b. The governing officials take an oath to follow the US Constitution. It is a well-established principle of US law that an unconstitutional law or edict is null and void and does not need to be followed by anyone. Whereas Caesar was the ultimate authority in Rome, the Constitution is the final authority in the US.

- c. In the New Testament, the church is described as the body of Christ here on earth. We are admonished to meet together regularly, share the Lord's Supper with one another, greet one another with a holy kiss, and have the elders lay hands on the sick. (**Hebrews 10:25, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, James 5:13-15**)
  - d. As Paul appealed to his rights as a Roman citizen in **Acts 22:22-29** when the centurion was about to flog him. He later appealed his case to Caesar, in **Acts 25:10-12**.
    - i. As US citizens we have a right to freedom of religion and freedom to assemble, under the US Constitution. The Constitution has no exception for illness.
  - e. Regarding following rules to self-quarantine to limit the spread of the flu, that is a medical question (to what extent is this necessary, and how harmful is it).
    - i. The early data on Covid-19 was very incomplete, since this appeared as a brand-new disease. So unclear how contagious it is, and especially how lethal it is.
    - ii. It may be much more contagious (and much less lethal) than early estimates suggested. There may be a lot more people who have contracted this, but are asymptomatic.
    - iii. Certainly isolating ourselves, not gathering in large assemblies, not shaking hands nor sharing holy kiss, etc. will reduce the spread of any flus or other communicable diseases.
    - iv. Isolating is intended to "flatten the curve", so that hospitals do not get overwhelmed with everyone at once. It can only be a temporary measure, after which there will continue to be people at risk getting exposed.
3. Regardless of the attitude you personally have on this issue, I believe there are a few things we should all keep in mind:
- a. We need to respect the governing authorities. No room for bad-mouthing government leaders

- i. “Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.” (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV).
    - ii. Regardless of who occupies the office of president, governor, mayor or health commissioner, Christians are called to treat governing officials *with honor*.
  - b. We need to strive to be unified with other Christians who may see things differently than we do.
    - i. “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.” (**John 17:20–23**, NKJV)
  - c. Let us seek great wisdom from God as we watch the events of the world unfolding, and to understand how to live in these unusual times.
    - i. “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” (**Matthew 10:16**, NKJV)
    - ii. Pray as Jesus said, “...do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one.” (**Luke 11:4**, NKJV)
- e. Don’t go back to Egypt (= the old pre-Christian life). Let us always see the old life, without God, as the *enslavement and bondage* that it was.
  - i. **Deuteronomy 17:14-16**
    1. The Lord said to the Jews, after leaving Egypt, “*You shall not return that way again.*”
    2. A very important lesson for us, as well!
  - ii. Solomon’s mistakes, violating the commands for kings in **Deuteronomy 17** included:

1. marrying Pharaoh's daughter (**1 Kings 7:8**; or **3 Kingdoms 7:45** in the LXX); and
  2. going back to Egypt for horses (**1 Kings 10:28-29**; or **3 Kingdoms 10:32-33** in the LXX).
- iii. Recall how Paul pointed out in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13** that the elements of the exodus journey foreshadow and correspond to important phases of *our own spiritual journey*.
1. Crossing the Red Sea corresponds to our baptism (going through the water, marking transition from slavery to freedom).
  2. The 40-years of wandering in the Wilderness correspond to the Christian life, our own time of testing.
  3. The Promised Land refers to our final destination, eternal life with the Lord.
  4. It naturally follows that *Egypt foreshadows the old life of spiritual bondage*, with Pharaoh representing Satan (the oppressive ruler of that dark kingdom, a liar and murder who does not want to let his captives go).
- iv. Along their journey, the Israelites would look back on their time in Egypt wistfully, recalling the tasty food and pleasures of the flesh they enjoyed back there. However, God sternly warned them (and us) that *no matter what, we must NEVER GO BACK THERE!*

#### IV. Making the Bitter Water Drinkable

- a. Read **Exodus 15:22-27**.
- b. Summary of storyline:
  - i. Three days into the journey, the people are running out of water and getting thirsty.
  - ii. The only water they find is "bitter", unfit for drinking.
  - iii. The people complain (= *grumble*) to Moses.
  - iv. Moses cries out to the Lord, Who provides him with "a tree". When Moses casts it into the water, the bitter water becomes "sweet" and drinkable.
- c. The word rendered "tree" here is ξύλον (= xulon) in the Greek of the LXX. That word means either "tree" or "wood".

- i. For example, when giving instructions for how to make the ark, the table and poles later in the story, in **Exodus 35-37**, this is the word used (where, in context, it clearly means “wood” as opposed to “tree”). Similarly, this same word is used in **Leviticus 1** when it says to put “wood” on the fire where the offerings are made.
- ii. Therefore, the Lord may have shown Moses a *piece of wood*, which he then threw into the water, thereby making the bitter water drinkable.
- d. The people complained, *just three days after* singing and dancing with the wonderful song about God’s deliverance.
  - i. **Question:** When did the people complain?
    1. **Answer:** Every time they faced hardship or trials.
      - a. When Pharaoh’s men increased their workload, insisting that they meet their quotas, now making “bricks without straw”.
      - b. When Pharaoh’s army pursued them and trapped them by the edge of the Red Sea.
      - c. Three days into the journey, they grumbled about what they would drink.
    - ii. Read **1 Corinthians 10:1-6** and **10:10-11**
      1. Paul admonishes the Christians in Corinth to learn from the example of Israel in the Wilderness: to avoid the four sins that disqualified them from entering the Promised Land.
      2. One of the four sins was that the people *complained*; and were destroyed by the destroyer.
      3. We may not think of complaining as a major sin (in the same league with idolatry nor sexual immorality). However, it is a very serious sin in God’s eyes, a major expression of unfaithfulness.
      4. This is a warning *for us!*
    - iii. One of the hardest passages of Scripture to obey, for many:
      1. “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may

become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ *that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.*" (**Philippians 2:12-16**, NKJV)

- iv. James reminded us of how difficult it is to control our tongues.
  1. "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But *no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*" (**James 3:5-8**, NKJV)
- v. Things that some of us can complain about:
  1. Government or other people's response to COVID crisis.
  2. Inconveniences that we face at the stores.
  3. How am I going to pay the bills? Challenges related to our jobs and businesses (or unemployment).
  4. Government rulers making decisions and policies we do not like, or even consider to be corrupt or wicked, advancing an evil agenda.
  5. Decisions or flaws in church leaders.
  6. Irritations with others we are "cooped up" with. Minor inconveniences. Family members.
  7. Let's face it: the things we complain about are *much less critical* than the challenges facing Israel in the Wilderness: *no water to drink, in the desert, and for three days!* There, the Lord rebuked them for faithlessness and their complaining.
- vi. Things we should remember when we are *tempted to complain*:
  1. Call to mind the many things we can be grateful for, and God's past deliverance.
  2. Keep in view the *eternal reward* we look forward to, versus the "light and momentary afflictions" (**2 Corinthians 4:17**) we may be facing in this life.

3. Never forget the example of what happened to the Israelites who complained in the Wilderness, as Paul warned us in **1 Corinthians 10**.
  4. Remember the command of Paul in **Philippians 2**, to “do all things without complaining”.
  5. And finally, imitate the example of Jesus, who did not open his mouth to complain when betrayed and suffering on the cross (**1 Peter 2:21-25, Isaiah 53:9**).
- e. As a civil/environmental engineer who designed drinking water treatment plants, I have a few more thoughts about this story of the bitter water that was transformed into drinking water.
- i. While clean drinking water is something most of us take for granted, it is the most critical thing for life. We can survive only a few days without water.
    1. Also, polluted or contaminated drinking water is still one of the top causes of death.
    2. Estimates (UN and WASH) range from 800,000-1.6 million deaths around the world annually for children under the age of five due to diarrheal diseases from polluted water.
      - a. This does not include the impact of other water-related diseases like cholera, typhoid, parasitic diseases and chemical pollution.
  - ii. I am familiar with all kinds of technologies used to treat water (physical separation, DAF floating, chemical coagulation and settling, sand filtration, membrane technologies such as RO for desalination, ion exchange, pH adjustment, microbiological, chemical disinfection such as with chlorine or ozone, UV light disinfection, etc.).
  - iii. With the right combination of technologies and enough money and energy, we can design a treatment process to make any water drinkable, including seawater and domestic wastewater.
  - iv. However, throwing a piece of wood into a lake *does not make undrinkable water potable* (= drinkable) by any normal physical, chemical or biological process. I don't care *what kind of tree* the wood came from! This transformation was a miracle of God.
    1. Why the Lord showed Moses the piece of wood, for him to throw the wood into the water, is another matter.

- f. **Question:** Why do you think the Lord used *wood* here to transform the properties of the water?
- i. Read **Sirach 38:1-8**.
1. This is a beautiful picture of a physician, a man in a healing profession.
  2. It says the Lord made medicines from the earth. God in His wisdom created all the plants and herbs to provide what we need when we are ill, to heal our bodies.
    - a. (Do man-made pharmaceuticals, drugs, antibiotics and even vaccines come under this umbrella or are they outside of it? There are different opinions about that one!)
  3. The rhetorical question, “Is not water made sweet by wood that its strength might be known?” (**Wisdom of Sirach 38:5**, LXX, OSB) points back to this story from **Exodus 15**.
    - a. Let’s slow down and ponder that last statement. Something important was being communicated in the story of **Exodus 15**. The *strength and power of wood was revealed* in its ability to transform bitter water, making it sweet.
- ii. From Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho, Justin explains to Trypho how constant references to wood in the Old Testament foreshadowed the cross of Christ. This is “the wood that makes the water (foreshadowing baptism) sweet”.
1. “CHAPTER 86 - THERE ARE VARIOUS FIGURES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT OF THE WOOD OF THE CROSS BY WHICH CHRIST REIGNED.
  2. “...Hear, then, how this Man, of whom the Scriptures declare that He will come again in glory after His crucifixion, was symbolized both by the tree of life, which was said to have been planted in paradise (**Genesis 2**), and by those events which should happen to all the just. Moses was sent with a rod to effect the redemption of the people (**Exodus 4**); and with this in his hands at the head of the people, he divided the sea (**Exodus 14**). By this he saw the water gushing out of the rock (**Exodus 17**); and when he cast a tree (or wood – CP) into the waters of Marah, which were bitter, he made them sweet (Exodus 15).

3. “Jacob, by putting rods into the water-troughs, caused the sheep of his uncle to conceive, so that he should obtain their young (**Genesis 30**). With his rod the same Jacob boasts that he had crossed the river (**Genesis 32:10**). He said he had seen a ladder, and the Scripture has declared that God stood above it. (**Genesis 28**) But that this was not the Father, we have proved from the Scriptures.
  4. “...Aaron’s rod, which blossomed, declared him to be the high priest (**Numbers 17**). Isaiah prophesied that a rod would come forth from the root of Jesse, [and this was] Christ (**Isaiah 11**). And David says that the righteous man is ‘like the tree that is planted by the channels of waters, which should yield its fruit in its season, and whose leaf should not fade.’ (**Psalms 1**) Again, the righteous is said to flourish like the palm-tree. God appeared from a tree to Abraham, as it is written, near the oak in Mamre (**Genesis 18**). The people found seventy willows and twelve springs after crossing the Jordan. (*Perhaps Justin instead meant after crossing the Red Sea instead, **Exodus 15:27?** -CP*)
  5. “David affirms that God comforted him with a rod and staff. Elisha, by casting a stick into the river Jordan, recovered the iron part of the axe with which the sons of the prophets had gone to cut down trees to build the house in which they wished to read and study the law and commandments of God (**2 Kings 6**); even as our Christ, by being crucified on the tree, and by purifying [us] with water, has redeemed us, though plunged in the direst offences which we have committed, and has made [us] a house of prayer and adoration. Moreover, it was a rod that pointed out Judah to be the father of Tamar’s sons by a great mystery. (**Genesis 38**)”
  6. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew*, chapter 86; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 242)
- iii. Whenever we see something extraordinary happening to or being spoken about a piece of wood or a tree, let us pay attention.
1. Especially when the wood and water are mentioned together, and the wood changes the properties of the water. Examples:
    - a. Wood of staff held over the river changing water to blood (changing the laws of chemistry).
    - b. Wood of the staff raised over the Red Sea and dividing the water (changing the laws of physics).

- c. Wood rods peeled and placed into watering troughs, resulting in changes to markings on the sheep and goats that mate nearby (changing the laws of biology and genetics)
  - d. Wood thrown into bitter water, making it sweet (changing the laws of drinking water treatment).
2. The importance for us: It is the wood of the cross of Christ, the crucifixion of Jesus, that changes what the water is able to do for us in baptism (changing the spiritual laws of justice).
  - a. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.” (1 Peter 3:18–22, NKJV)
3. The wood (of the cross of Christ) still does “make the water sweet” for us, today!