

Exodus 15:22-17:7

I wonder if any of us can remember quite a forgettable song back in 1998, which reached the heady heights of number 3 in the UK charts.

The track was called, 'If you buy this record your life will be better.'

And that line makes up about half the song.

It sounds too good to be true and of course it is but how often we forget that.

So we begin to think 'My life would be better if...'

We're all tempted, aren't we, to think my life would be better if... I had a pay rise, had more time, wasn't ill, and so on.

But we're going to see this evening, God graciously puts his people in situations where they have the choice to trust him or test him.

You'll see on the outline that's where we're going.

But it's worth reminding ourselves where we've just come from in Exodus.

We're coming straight off the back of the greatest rescue ever for Israel.

Over the last few weeks, we've seen how the LORD finishes off the plagues with a devastating blow for the Egyptians as all their firstborn sons were killed.

And then as Pharaoh changes his mind about letting Israel go, he chases off after them, and he and his army are drowned under the waters of the Red Sea after God's people have passed safely through. They're a saved people.

And they're a lesson for us to learn from.

'these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction.'

We're in the same place as them.

We too can look back on a finished work of salvation but we also have yet to enter the Promised Land.

We'll see the Israelites were learning lessons as they went through the desert but there's also a very real sense in which they went through this for us.

And that brings us onto our first point this evening: **THE LORD TESTS HIS PEOPLE.**

They've just been saved but how will they respond to such a great rescue?

They start off well with a song of praise in chapter 15, singing how amazing the LORD is.

But within three days they're beginning to complain.

Just look down to verse 22 of chapter 15,

'Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"'

It's not a great start, is it?

Perhaps we think it's a bit unfair of God to lead them straight out of Egypt to a place with bitter water. After all they've arrived at this place by obedience not disobedience.

But Moses or rather, the LORD, steps in and we read on in verse 25,

‘And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them...’

And we get the idea of testing again in the next episode in 16 verse 4,

‘Then the LORD said to Moses, “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.’

You see, it’s these situations; the withholding of water and food, their subsequent provision and the accompanying commands that serve as a test of Israel’s faith and obedience.

Now as I was preparing this talk I was struck by that fact that in 16:9 there is no hint of judgement. Later on in the wilderness journeys, Israel grumble at their misfortune in Numbers 11 and 14 and God’s judgement is swift and decisive.

But the lack of judgement here helps us see the purpose of this testing.

First of all we need to get clear on what testing doesn’t mean.

It’s not like the LORD is setting Israel an exam to see whether they pass or fail.

If they do really well then he’ll save them but otherwise it’s curtains.

No – he’s already rescued them from Egypt.

It’s not like having an eye test to see how well it’s working.

So what does it mean for the LORD to test his people?

No, this testing serves to train, strengthen and grow God’s people for his purposes.

It’s like a boot camp for Israel.

The shortage of water and food is incidental: if it hadn’t been that it would have been something else.

But somehow they had to learn that God’s instructions are for their good,

to learn to submit to his commands,

to trust that he will provide for our every need despite our circumstances and how things look.

It’s been said that it only took God one single night to get Israel out of Egypt; but it’s going to take Him 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel, to teach them to trust Him and not themselves.

And this testing is how he does it.

And God still works with his people in the same way now.

He tests us by putting us in situations that grow us.

For the Israelites, the provision did not precede the problem, but came when it was needed and was sufficient.

And it also came with commands.

‘This is what the LORD has commanded’ is repeated again and again in the second half of chapter 16.

It’s not just how we respond to situations but also being obedient in them.

We can’t learn to trust someone and depend on them in the classroom or through a power point presentation – it needs to be worked out in real life.

A little later in chapter 20 verse 20 we get a clearer explanation where Moses says to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”

The Israelites see the lack of water and food as a disaster in 16:3.
They think God's abandoned them to die in the desert.
And by 17:7, they question whether God's with them or not.
But in reality, God's with them in a way far beyond their comprehension.
What first appeared to be an indication of God's absence proves to be an illustration of his presence and provision.

God tests us for our benefit not his.
So in 16:6, as they see God's provision, how were they to respond?
'you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt.'
And again in verse 12, 'Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'
He wants to produce a deepening relationship.

When Moses looks back on this incident in Deuteronomy 8 he says this,
'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.
And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna... that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but... by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.'
The LORD God 'fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end.'

The LORD tests his people for their good but how are we going to respond to God's testing?
And that brings us onto our second point.

But before we look at that we're going to go into breakout groups for a few minutes.

Discussion Questions:

- When do we find it hard to remember the Lord's goodness?
- What do we grumble about?
- How does Hebrews 12:3-11 help?

God is seeking to train and grow his people but they're blind to it.
Just look at verse 2,
'And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness...'

It doesn't take long for their grumbling stomachs to become grumbling lips.
By 16:12 grumbling has come 9 times.

I guess if we were really hungry we would begin to sympathise with the Israelites.
Just imagine if you've been on the move for a month and a half and meals have been sporadic at best.
It's understandable why they were tempted to grumble, or rather, it's very close to home, isn't it?
We also test God by grumbling and hardening our hearts, by asking if God is really with us.
There's a great difference between singing hymns and choruses of triumph and living the life of faith.
But **TRUSTING NOT TESTING IS THE RIGHT RESPONSE.**
And that's the second big idea we're considering.

It's a very different thing for people to test God, to put the LORD to the proof, than it is for God to test us and to prove us.

In 15:24 and 17:2 they're concerned with what they're going to drink and it seems ridiculous given all they've just been singing about – the LORD's control over water of all things.

Look again at 17:2, 'Therefore the people quarrelled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"' And in verse 7, 'they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"'

God had led them to a place of testing and their response is to test the LORD. First of all they seem to be blaming Moses but actually they're blaming God. Did you notice they think the worst of Moses: 16:3, 'you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger' and then 17:3, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?' He's not just incompetent, according to them, he is positively homicidal, indeed genocidal – like the cross-eyed javelin thrower who never broke many records but certainly kept the crowds on their feet.

3 times in 16:7-8 we see the root problem; their grumbling is not against Moses but the LORD. And this is testing him. The people had forgotten it was God who was leading them. Their grumbling was a protest against God's leadership. Just look at 16:7, 'he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?'" And the second half of 8, 'the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him – what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.'

It's worth just highlighting the nature of their grumbling before we move on because it's a diagnosis for our own.

Their grumbling is a problem of perception. Their grumbling results from a difference between the way they perceive things to be and the way they think they should be. "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us?" Our problem is that when we grumble our perception of how things are is distorted. Israel greatly exaggerated the benefits of Egypt: '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.' It's a load of rubbish, isn't it? Are they really saying they would rather be the victims of ethnic cleansing back in Egypt than this? But when life gets difficult, self-pity wells up very quickly in the human heart. And it's very easy to lose perspective. There's a story of a vicar out visiting and he comes across someone who says, "You cannot know how I feel. You have never suffered as I am suffering at the moment." The vicar says, "Tell me about it." The young lady replies, "I've just failed my driving test!"

Secondly, their grumbling is a problem of expectations: Israel grumble because they think they should experience pleasure rather than pain, affluence and ease rather than adversity and deprivation.

Grumbling occurs when we can't control our situation.

Grumbling is allowing our present circumstances to nullify our confidence in God's sovereign purposes and promises.

And finally, and ultimately, grumbling is a failure of faith.

Grumbling is a sin, but it's a symptomatic sin.

It reveals a lack of faith.

The Israelites do not remember and doubt God's goodness, they refuse to accept the difficulty, and see disaster rather than blessing as the outcome of their circumstances.

Despite witnessing the ten plagues, the pillar of cloud and fire, the opening and shutting of the Red Sea, they test the Lord by saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

In 16:3, they wish God hadn't saved them.

We might think this is extraordinary but when we think of it, we so easily think this way too.

We wonder if we're really better off as Christians.

We look back to Egypt and we long for it.

How much easier life would be or how much better my career would be going if I wasn't following Jesus.

We fail to remember what God has done for us in forgiving sin.

How quickly and easily our hearts go back to Egypt, and we start to grumble.

You see, God is not actually there for my comfort and convenience.

To grumble is to test God but so also is failing to obey his commands.

Chapter 16 takes us through it: the manna came a day at a time in verse 4.

It was not to be stored overnight.

But in verses 19 and 20 some wouldn't listen.

In spite of God's command, some of the Israelites tried to make God's loving provision for today last until tomorrow.

They want to substitute their own resources for God's; to walk by sight rather than by faith.

Their greed, like mine, and yours, was shown in their attempt to hoard a surplus supply of manna, so that they could feel secure about the future.

In being tested, Israel is growing up into a fitting son for God.

But Israel as God's son, are flunking in the wilderness.

They don't trust God.

They grumble.

And on our own we would fare no better.

The exile proves that.

If Exodus is written to those during the exile it underlines the point God's people can't do it.

No, we need a true, perfect Son of God in our place.

One who will go into the wilderness and face hunger but keep trusting God.

One who will never grumble.

The New Testament shows us Jesus is the true Israel, the true Son, and we see this time of testing reflected in Matthew 4.

Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days to be tested and it involves food and hunger.

Except Jesus is tested and in return does not test God.

Quoting Deuteronomy 6, referring to this passage, he says, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'

So if the wrong response is testing God what is the right response to God's testing?

Surely it is to trust the LORD who graciously provides.

We've mentioned God's already rescued his people but in all the episodes we're dealing with we see God's bountiful and completely undeserved provision.

They should have looked back to their rescue, to the Passover and the Red Sea in the same way that we should look back to the cross.

But, not only does God rescue his people he also provides everything we need even when we don't deserve it.

So the Israelites begin to whinge at Marah, but God makes the water sweet and then takes them to Elim in 15:27, 'where there were *twelve* springs of water and *seventy* palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.'

They grumble at having no food and how does the LORD respond?

Verse 12, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread.'

And God wasn't stingy.

Look at verse 18, 'whoever gathered little had no lack.'

Each of them gathered as much as he could eat.'

The manna was miraculously provided - it was rained down from heaven.

And it lasted as long as they needed it, in verse 35.

It was such an important lesson to be learned and remembered that some of the manna was miraculously preserved, as a memorial of God's provision for future generations.

It doesn't just show God's power but also his goodness.

Did you notice how everything God does in this passage is good for his people?

God provides absolutely everything we need.

And the response must be to trust in God himself not his gifts and not ourselves.

In the Israelites we see both worked out.

So 16:17, 'And the people of Israel did so' and again in verse 30, 'So the people rested on the seventh day.'

But some trust in the gift and themselves by hoarding the manna.

God's gracious provisions come on God's terms and flow out of an ongoing trust in him.

I don't know if you've had any bells ringing as we've been working through these verses but it should come as no surprise to us that we see God's ultimate gracious provision in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It all points to Jesus.

So Paul says in 1 Corinthians, that the Israelites 'all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink.'

For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.'

It's like a huge arrow pointing to Jesus as the one who provides for all our needs even when we don't deserve it.

He is the Rock who was struck in our place that we might have life.

Out of his side poured water at the cross.
And through his death, through being struck, he gives the rivers of living water of the Holy Spirit.

But the most comprehensive example comes in John 6, where Jesus feeds the 5000 and claims to be the bread of life.

If we had more time we could work through John 6 but again we see Jesus testing his disciples,
We have more grumbling,

‘So the Jews grumbled about Jesus’ and ‘his disciples were grumbling.’

The crowd think Jesus is the prophet like Moses and Peter rightly responds to testing by saying,
“Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.”

And Jesus claims to be what the manna was pointing to,

‘Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you...

the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’

And again later, ‘I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.’

For the Christian here our satisfaction should be found in Jesus not our circumstances.

The Christian never says ‘satisfied’ but ‘He satisfies.’

The crunch issue is are we going to trust God when we’ve just lost our job,

or our grades are much worse than we expected

or our engagement breaks up

or we’re near death?

We’ve seen how gracious, generous and faithful God is.

Despite all their whingeing God abundantly provides for his people.

Despite our wayward hearts God has abundantly provided for us in Jesus.

When we fail, Jesus hasn’t.

Did you notice that the Israelites were to keep depending and trusting in the LORD until they reached the promised land – verse 35, ‘They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan.’

And it’s the same with us.

It’s no good trusting God half the way and then stopping – we need to keep going.

So often I find myself thinking, ‘My life would be better if...’

And each one of us can finish that sentence in a different way.

My life would be better if we had a bigger house.

My life would be better if my boss appreciated my work.

My children were more obedient, and so on.

But Exodus 15 to 17 challenges us to think the opposite way,

My life would be better if... I remembered that God is graciously testing me to help me grow more like Jesus.

My life would be better if... I remembered my salvation more clearly and God's goodness in all situations he puts me in.

This doesn't mean we're expected to shut our eyes and grit our teeth and pretend suffering isn't there. The people of God aren't Stoics or just needing a stiff upper lip.

Hardship and suffering will be part of life – the Bible is clear on that.

But this passage tells us it's what we do with our suffering that matters.

The Christian life is a dynamic relationship with the living God who's not content with us as we are, but who is longing to mould us, to change us, during our life here on earth to get us ready for life with Him in heaven.

God's testing doesn't mean a bed of fluffy roses but he'll lead us into situations that are tough.

But in these situations he has provided all we need in Jesus.

He doesn't promise health or riches or comfort but growth, strengthening and a deeper trust and relationship.

So as we finish, how do we learn to trust and not test God – the answer must be to look to Jesus who perfectly obeyed God and didn't test him when being tested and in whom God has provided for our every need; in him we have every spiritual blessing.

The LORD graciously tests and provides for his people so trust him don't test him.

Discussion Questions:

- How is God's provision of Jesus the antidote to all our grumbling?
- How is Jesus' perfect obedience as God's Son such a reassurance and also motivation to keep trusting? (Look up Matthew 4:1-4, Hebrews 2:18 & 4:15 if you have time.)
- Spend some time praying about these truths.