

EXODUS

Lesson 13 - Chapters 15 and 16

At our introduction to the study of Exodus, we divided it up into 6 parts, simply for the sake of giving us a kind of structure to help us navigate through the various stages of Israel's redemption from Egypt, formation as a nation, and receiving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. Verse 21 of chapter 15 ends the first part, which I termed The Deliverance Narrative, and begins the next part called In The Wilderness. So, let's begin by reading verses 1 – 21.

READ CHAPTER 15:1 – 21

The first 21 verses of Chapter 15 are actually a song, often called the Song of Moses, sometimes called the Song at the Sea. In Hebrew this is ***Shirat Ha-Yam*** and for liturgical purposes it is simply known as the ***Shira***. And, when I say song, I mean song exactly as we would think of it: poetry set to music. In Hebrew, the words of the Song of Moses rhyme, and phrases are done in doublets and triplets, characteristic of ancient Hebrew song and poetry structure. Powerful and expressive words like shattered, smashed, shuddered, terrified, consumed, dread and anguish, are used.... typical of the highly charged emotions contained within poetry and particularly of military victory songs of that era. There would have been musical instruments playing, as the people sang these words.

Let's keep in mind that what we have here is a song created by man. That is, the exaggerations and prideful expressions and great joy over the death of thousands of Egyptian soldiers that are contained within this song are not necessarily God's thoughts: but rather man's spontaneous response to this great victory at the edge of the sea. I tell you this because it is important to recognize that various types of literature exists within the Bible, and because we have to be careful when to acknowledge something as written down concerning God's mind as versus man's mind. Some time back I mentioned that we will find many instances, in Scripture, of man not telling the truth; even ascribing something to God that is simply not so. We see David do it on more than one occasion. We see Peter lie about knowing Jesus, and there too many more instances to quote. The point is, what we are often reading is simply an accurate account of what happened and what was said; whether it is flattering to a particular person or not, or to the Israelites or not, even whether it would PLEASE God or not. The Bible shows us its characters warts and all.

The main theme expressed in this song is of Israel's tremendous pride at God's, Yehoveh's, victory over the Egyptians; jubilation over their escape from Pharaoh, and even some rather premature gloating over how the news of this victory must have stunned and worried the Canaanites and the Philistines was also included. But, there is another important idea expressed in that last section of the song; it is that God has created a nation, a theocracy; that

is, a nation whose king is God. This is the founding song of the nation of Israel.

So, while the Song of Moses is man's attempt at a recounting of all that had just happened concerning their deliverance from Egypt, it cannot carry the same weight as what we read in previous chapters of Exodus, because intermixed with the facts are ancient cultural traditions of just HOW one creates a victory song after a military victory.....which is largely the context that the Hebrews viewed what had just transpired. We needn't be alarmed at this: all of our Christian music has been created the same way. We express the best way we can, through lyrics and music, our understanding of Heavenly things and our interpretations of what it is we THINK we see God doing, and how we THINK God wants to be praised and honored, using tried and true traditional musical structures and methods of presentation familiar within our culture. That is all that is happening here, with the Song of Moses; only, of course, this is in the setting of ancient Israelite culture.

Now, without going through this song verse by verse (since there is no new information here), I would like to point out a couple of things of interest, that will be useful to help us understand the Hebrew's mindset at this point in history.

Note verse 11, the rhetorical question is asked: "Who is like you, O Adonai, among the mighty?" If you have other versions your bible might say Lord, instead of Adonai, or gods instead of 'the mighty'. So some of you may well have, "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?" And, this is pretty accurate. Substituting a couple of words in the original Hebrew it literally says "Who is like you, **Yehoveh**, among the **elim**". Elim means highest, or mightiest, of the gods. God, plural. You see, the general way the humans at that time looked at the spiritual world (and Israel was no different) was that not only was it composed of multiple gods, but that these gods were also in a celestial power structure. So, in their minds, there were lower gods that served mightier gods, and there were also all sorts of other gods in between. The Hebrew word Elim indicates those gods at the top end of the power structure....the mightier gods.

Perhaps its disturbing to hear that Israel, even after being rescued from Egypt, still thought of Yehoveh as just one of many gods; but think of it like this: just as baby Christians learn that Jesus is Lord, but don't know much else, so it was with Israel and their understanding of Yehoveh. New Christians begin with lots of preconceived notions that they take for granted are true, not realizing that most of what they think they know about God is false. And, so, on the one hand while Israel looked to Yehoveh as Israel's only god, on the other hand they did not see Him as the ONLY god that existed, but as the highest god among many gods.....the chief god....in this case mightier than Egypt's gods.

Dr. Robert McGee puts it this way: when we first come to God, we are full of deceptions that have filled us throughout our lives. Simply accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior does not set us free from these deceptions.....in fact, Jesus tells us that it is the "truth that will set you free". As we open ourselves to God, He reveals truth to us.....one truth, one step, at a time. And, each of these truths is given to us in order to destroy some of the deceptions that we had formerly believed. But, it's a slow, lifelong process.

This was Israel's condition. They left Egypt, their minds and souls thoroughly corrupted and full of false assumptions acquired there during their 400-year sojourn. At the point of their Exodus in terms of spiritual maturity they were the equivalent of baby Christians. Infant Israel now knew they had a God, and they knew His name, and they knew He was more powerful than the gods of Egypt. But, they didn't know much more than that and most of what they thought they knew was either so simplistic as to be nearly meaningless, or was outright false. So, just as we all do when first coming to the Lord, they viewed Yehoveh within the context of their education, culture and life experiences. For them, Yehoveh, was ***their*** god.....but other people and other nations had their own gods, too. This kind of thinking would lead them, throughout their history, into idol worship, which eventually resulted in bringing God's judgments upon them on a number of occasions.

Notice in verses 14 and 15 the mention of Philistia, Edom, Moab, and Canaan. It says that these nations trembled and were terrified when they heard what had happened to Egypt on account of Israel's god. Was this wishful thinking by the Hebrews? Perhaps boasting and bragging? As we discussed a couple of weeks ago, though news was not instantaneous then as it is today, people had great interest in what people in other nations were doing. A migration of 3 million people would have been big news within a few days of Israel leaving Egypt, and this knowledge would have been communicated very quickly throughout the region.

But, why would Philistia, Edom, Moab and Canaan in particular be concerned? Because it was common knowledge by that time that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob believed, correctly or incorrectly, that the territory those 4 nations inhabited would some day belong to Israel. And, these nations knew that if 3 million determined folks showed up.....along with this God, Yehoveh, that devastated Egypt and made mockery of Egypt's gods....and if Israel's purpose was taking those lands from them, they just might be able to do it. For the scores of tribal chieftains and kings that lorded over that territory, that would have meant losing their personal wealth and power. For the common folk, it meant either subjugation or expulsion at the hand of Israel. So, it is quite likely that those 4 nations mentioned displayed a very public concern about just where that vast Israelite mob was heading, and these Hebrews (who had been slaves for so long) really enjoyed it that now they were feared.

One final thought and we'll move on. Interestingly, this Song of Moses eventually became a standard part of Temple services that occurred on the Sabbath. In fact, the song of Moses was the closing hymn of every Shabbat service. The Song of Moses was divided into 3 stanzas (Ex. 15:2-5, 6-10, and 11-18), and one of these stanzas was chanted each Shabbat, in rotation. For the Hebrews, the Exodus is not just a distant historical curiosity. It was the establishment of the Israelite nation, and the ordination of the Law. And, the singing of this song reminded Israel that they will always be in the midst of hostile nations, yet Yehoveh will also be there to protect them. Just as He delivered them from Egypt, He will deliver them yet again from the hands of their future enemies. The Hebrews were, and still are, looking for the same final victory that the Church is. In our time, it's primarily an issue of whether the Messiah who comes to rescue God's followers has been here once before, or is coming for the first time, that separates us.

READ CHAPTER 15:22-27

We transition now from The Deliverance Narrative to the section concerning Israel's time In The Wilderness. So, let's take just a moment before we examine these 6 verses we just read, to set the stage for the "In the Wilderness" part of the book of Exodus.

First, it might surprise you to know that many of the details that we wished were contained in Exodus but aren't, are in fact provided in the book of Numbers. Numbers is very connected to Exodus. While I might pick some things out of Numbers to add to our Exodus study, we'll be studying Numbers in depth some months from now.

Second, what we are actually witnessing in the book of Exodus is a process; and in the Wilderness portion, we learn of Israel's passage from being an enslaved infant to a freed and redeemed problem child.

Third, three prominent themes are developed during the Wilderness section of Exodus: challenges in dealing with hostile neighbors, the development of an early form of government for Israel, and the recurring "grumbling" of the people against God and Moses.

What we also become witness to in Israel's time in the Wilderness, and hopefully learn from, is that true, meaningful, and lasting transformation usually **only** occurs in man during a time of personal wilderness experience. That time when whatever we might have described as normal, familiar, or comfortable existence ceases for us. When life is reduced to a day-by-day, if not hour-by-hour, state of nearly suspended animation. The wilderness experience is one of being betwixt and between; it's neither where you've come from, nor where you're going. Those of us that have lived long enough have experienced this. It is that time that God uses to mature us a notch or two, because we become the most tender and most teachable.

So, let's begin.

Right away, immediately after all the celebrating at their miraculous escape across the Red Sea, and the defeat of their former captives, the Egyptians, a life and death situation arises for Israel: they have run out of water. It says in verse 1 that Moses "caused" the Israelites to leave where they were and move on. If that sounds like an odd way to say that Moses led Israel away from the Red Sea, you're in good company: the Hebrew Sages saw it is strange as well. They generally agree that what was happening here is that the Hebrews were both celebrating and stripping the dead Egyptian soldiers of their valuables and were in no hurry to get moving, so Moses put his foot down and made them go before they were ready.

Verse 22 says they moved into the wilderness of Shur. Let me mention here, that what the Bible calls wilderness means desert. Shur is thought to mean "wall". Now, just to make some of these many names of places we have, and will, encounter a little more real to us, understand that MUCH of the time, that place had NO name, or had no name the Israelites were aware of; so the Israelites gave it a name. Their first stop, in the last Chapter, at Succoth is a good example; it was NOT called Succoth when they first stopped there. Moses didn't say, "hey, everybody, we're going to Succoth". No, it was a name they gave the place either during their short stay there, are not long after leaving it. So it is, probably, with Shur and most other names on their route to Canaan.

Next, in verse 23, it says they came to Mara, but couldn't drink the water because it was too bitter. Here we encounter the naming issue again; for Mara is Hebrew for "bitter". They certainly would NOT have intentionally gone to a place known for having water too bitter to drink in order to obtain drinking water. They only discovered that problem once they arrived. And, so, they gave it a suitable name: Mara, bitter. One can imagine how this all came about: Moses tells the people, take enough water for 3 days, because we're going to stop at this Oasis that will have water for us. The 3 days pass, they're running out of water, and they arrive; and, guess what, the water isn't drinkable. Tired and hot and thirsty, the Israelites react by "grumbling" as it says in verse 24. They blamed Moses. Moses, of course, turns to God and says, well this is a fine kettle of fish.....so now what? And, Yehoveh tells Moses to put a special kind of wood into the water that will remove whatever it is that makes it bitter. Of course, it worked, and now the people and animals can satisfy their thirst.

Now might be a good time to mention that wherever these various Oasis and wells were located when the Israelites stopped and camped, they had to supply enormous volumes of water, meaning there were but just a handful of water holes suitable for Israel's needs. For it has been calculated that to sustain 3 million people and all their herds and flocks, more than 10 million gallons of water per DAY would have been necessary. How much is 10 million gallons? Well, the Cocoa Water tower, the big one with the flag on it, is 1.5 million gallons. So, it would take 7 of those EVERY DAY to take care of Israel's needs. I think we can erase any mental picture of a quaint little water well with a goatskin bucket and a desert maiden pulling up a gallon or two of water a time, or of a typical desert oasis like in these pictures.

In verse 25, we're also told that there.....whether "there" refers specifically to the Oasis of Mara, or is simply a general referral to their being in the wilderness is not clear..... there God would impose law and judgment; or depending on your version it might say statute and ordinance, or laws and rules, or some such variation. Now, certainly it was NOT at Mara where the Torah was given. So what is being referred to here is something else; or perhaps we can look at it as the preamble to the Torah. The general Rabbinical thought is that a handful of general rules were given to Israel, here, but whatever it was has been lost through the ages.

Let's start to understand some of these legal terms because the nuances, though important, and typically buried or completely lost in our English translations. The words translated into laws and rules or (better) law and **judgments** are the Hebrew words **choq** and **mishpat**. And, they are not synonymous terms. **Choq** means a prescribed task, or a prescribed rule in the same sense of what today we would call a law. So, **choq** is a precise legal term most closely associated with what we would think of as a law or regulation. Choq is usually associated with the decree of king or a government that MUST be followed. Conversely, a **mishpat** is a judicial ruling. It's about a judge looking at a case and making a decision. So, if one is thought to have broken the law, then the case is brought before a judge, and it is ruled upon. The decision of the judge, the ruling, is the **mishpat**. A **Mishpat**, therefore, is often the result of a **choq** being violated.

So, what we see here is the beginning of the process of forming a government and establishing a practical system of laws. God is going to give Israel a kind of government that is based on laws that HE is going to establish AND judge. And, using this system of laws,

Yehoveh is going to test, or prove Israel. Now, just exactly what does that mean in verse 25, to “test them”? It would be good for us to understand this, because in several places in the Bible, including the New Testament, we’re told that as Believers, we will be tested by Yehoveh. Well, in Hebrew, the word is **nacha**. And, I’m not sure we have a good word in English to translate it. But, it is another judicial term, a legal term, not unlike the idea of trying a legal case in a court of law. That is, *nacha*, testing or proving, is not the law (*choq*) itself, nor is it the final verdict (*mishpat*); rather, it is the process of trying a case, the trial procedure itself, in order that a verdict can be determined and justice meted out. What God was doing was setting up the principle of His earthly government; it involved laws that would be clearly spelled out, what happened if one was thought to have broken one or more of the laws, and then the consequences if one was found guilty. The whole concept is very similar to our modern judicial system.

Now, so that we can have a better understanding of how Israel would operate, let’s consider that thought for a moment: in the US we have an overall system of government that is broken down into 3 branches with approximately equal, though different, powers that in theory oversee one another; the Executive, the Legislative, and the Judicial. The idea is that the Legislature, the Congress, makes, defines, and enacts the laws. This is completely separate from the Judicial Branch, our court system, which determines whether or not someone has broken those laws, and if so, what the consequences should be; and further in some cases it determines whether a law that Congress has made is of itself in accordance with our Constitution (our governing principles), and therefore, is a just law in the first place. And, the Executive Branch has powers to enact certain rules and regulations regarding trade, it controls the military, and it handles matters with foreign governments. Now, hear me, please: the concept behind the American government system, whereby governmental powers are divided up and somewhat independent of one another is NOTHING like the system of government God set up over Israel. Israel’s governmental system, which we could call a theocracy, a government ruled by God, most closely resembles the operation of our Judicial branch.

Next, in verse 25, we see that the governmental system God is imposing on Israel, the system that God will give Moses on Mt. Sinai, will come in the form of a covenant. But, this covenant will be totally unlike the covenant that Moses and the Hebrews had known before: the one given to Abraham. For that covenant was UN-conditional. It was unilateral promise from the Lord..... God would do all that was required.

But, here Yehoveh says: “IF..... you will hearken.....to My commandments.....and keep My laws”, then He will not put sicknesses upon His people. Rather, He will be their healer”. **If**. That little word holds such enormous repercussions. Of course, the word “if” is at the center of the judicial process, isn’t it? The entire judicial system is based on a whole series of “ifs”. Because there is no point to having laws if there is no one to accuse you of breaking them, and if there is no one to judge the matter, and if there is no one to determine a proper punishment, and if there is no one to enforce the sentence.

The Abrahamic covenant, made some 600 years before the time of the Exodus, didn’t say “if”; because that covenant was not a law, nor a judicial system, nor a type of government, imposed on the Hebrew people. That is, the covenant with Abraham was NOT conditional.

Rather it was a statement of fact, a promise, of what God was going to do. As we'll see in much later in our study of Torah, the covenant that Yehoveh made with Abraham was essentially a vow, an oath, that God made invoking His own name as the guarantor of the promises He made to Abraham. On the other hand, the covenant that was soon going to come to Moses on Mt. Sinai **was** a set of rules that said what ISRAEL must do, and not do. And, IF someone violated those rules, laws, what would happen to them. Let us also realize something else so VERY important about these covenants of God: each newer covenant was NOT a replacement of an older one. Let me say that another way: there were several different covenants from Yehoveh, each made for a different purpose. The Covenant with Abraham was not declared null and void, when God made the Covenant with Moses (the one made on Mt. Sinai). And, the Covenant with Moses, which is often referred to as the LAW, was not declared null and void, because of the Covenant of Yeshua.....what we call the New Covenant. They were each for different purposes, and each remains in effect and intact to this day. Now, certainly, as each covenant was instituted it had an effect on how the earlier covenant would manifest itself. But, if we can just grasp that every one of God's covenants that we read about in the Bible is still valid, none of them replaced or abolished, then we'll better be able to understand God's Word.

Now, some of you are probably squirming a little by what I just said, because it has been consistently implied, if not outright taught, in modern Christianity that when Jesus came He did away with all previous covenants, of which the Law is one. Oh, really?

Turn your Bibles to Matthew 5:17.

Here we see what Yeshua, Christ, said Himself concerning this subject, and note that it was within the context of the Sermon on the Mount. Here are our Savior's very own words concerning what we call the Law or the Old Testament: “ ***Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah (or what is often called the Law) or the Prophets (that is another section of the OT that includes most of those books we think of as the Major Prophets). I have come NOT to abolish but to fulfill***”. Some of your Bibles may say “complete” rather than fulfill.

So, what does that mean? Well, first, it means what it says. NONE of God's covenants have ever been voided or replaced. So, does that mean we're supposed to be following the 613 commands of the Law? A tough question that many of us are wrestling with. About ¼ of those 613 commands are about the sacrificial system. Well, since Yeshua was the sacrifice that is “once for all” then by worshipping Him, we ARE obeying those commands by depending on His sacrifice. But, how about the rest of them, the remaining 3/4ths? Well, modern Christians still hold up the first 10 of those 613, what we call the 10 Commandments. Yet, for some reason we have given ourselves permission to abolish the Sabbath, one of those 10 Commandments, and replace it with what is called “The Lord's Day”. Some say, no, we didn't abolish the Sabbath; we just changed which day we observe it. In any case, that is another source of controversy.

But, what is difficult for me to find any controversy at all in, is what Christ said in Matthew 5:17; pretty plain language isn't it? Yeshua says that the New Covenant, which is Himself, the

covenant we Christians all recognize and depend upon for our salvation, did NOT abolish NOR replace the older Covenant of Moses, nor the even older Covenant of Abraham.

Hopefully, as we work ourselves through the Torah, we'll come to better understand just how that all impacts us. It is my intention, as we get to the part of Exodus in a few weeks where the Torah, the Law, is given on Mt. Sinai, to explain WHY it is that the Law was not abolished at Christ's advent, and WHAT exactly it is that the Covenant on Mt. Sinai was meant to accomplish. And, when we've done that, I think Yeshua's words that He came to "fulfill" the Law and not to abolish it will become clearer.

Well, Chapter 15 ends by telling us that the Israelites moved on from Mara, and went to Elim....another place no one is quite sure of its location. And, there they camped for a time. The Israelites former life as city dwellers and suburbanites, laborers and craftsmen was officially over. Now, they lived as the Bedouins lived; they lived as desert nomads

Let's move on to chapter 16.

CHAPTER 16

READ CHAPTER 16:1 - 4

So, what we can now readily see is that God is going to use Israel's time in the desert wilderness to test them, or to prove them.....and this "testing", in Hebrew the word is NACHA, is in the judicial sense of being on trial before a judge. That is, Yehoveh has begun to lay down his rules and laws of government, which will culminate, soon, in the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. And, with these laws as the basis for Israel's government, God is going to have an ongoing judicial trial, if you would, to see if Israel will "hearken" to Him.....meaning, to listen and to obey. At the same time, God is teaching Israel how to live like a redeemed people.

The Israelites stayed for about a month at Elim (recall that elim means "gods"); God had taught them all He intended to from the circumstances at Mara, and then Elim, but now it was time they move on into the Wilderness of Seen. Notice I pronounced the name of that desert they moved into not as s-l-n (sin).....but rather as s-e-e-n (seen). Do not think that somehow how or another the name of that area of desert relates to what we in the Church think of when we speak the word "sin". In Hebrew, the word simply means "thorn". And, it is the root word for the word "Sinai"....like Mt. Sinai. In Hebrew, "Sinai" is pronounced see-nah'-ee, and it means "thorny".

When they arrived at the Wilderness of Seen, it marked about the 2-month point in their journey from Egypt. And, of course, the grumbling and complaining starts once again. And, whom did they grumble against and to? Moses and Aaron, their leaders. And, it is a repeat of the complaint we have heard before: things were better for us back in Egypt, so why have you brought us here.....just to starve?

But, in reality, their grumbling was against God; for Moses and Aaron were simply following His

instructions. And, this is a connection that the people still hadn't seemed to fully grasp. And, of course, since their grumbling is against Yehoveh, it is Yehoveh that responds; and notice the tone of His response. It is not one of anger or disgust with the people; for God is going to intentionally lead Israel from one difficulty, one challenge, to the next both to TEACH them and to put them on trial.

In verse 4 we get another of those great moments in Bible history that we learn of in our childhood days of Sunday School: the raining down of Manna from heaven. But, if we look closely, we see much more to this episode than simply a provision of food supplied by God. There is some law, and some important instruction, being laid out here. And, in this, God is going to put them on trial.

We'll continue with the story of Manna next week.