

3. Preparation for Sinai – The Testing of Israel’s Faith

From their miraculous triumph at the Red Sea, the sons of Israel set out toward Mount Sinai and their appointed encounter with their Redeemer-God. Israel would not enter Yahweh’s rest in Canaan until it had been brought into formal relationship with Him through the covenant at Sinai. God’s elect “son” must be formally joined to Him in covenant union, but before Israel reached Sinai it was confronted with five tests of faith, all of which openly established the son’s unbelief and unworthiness (15:25-18:27). As He had demonstrated while Israel was still in Egypt, the Lord’s continuing faithfulness to His promises to Abraham was grounded solely in His own integrity and commitment.

The first three tests implicated Israel’s faith in God’s *provision*. Yahweh had delivered His covenant son from Egypt; would He now provide for his physical needs? To set the context for these tests the Lord led Israel from the Red Sea into the wilderness of Shur.

- a. Only three days removed from God’s spectacular deliverance at the Red Sea, the Israelites’ jubilation and exultant praise had already turned to disbelief and grumbling as they thirsted and arrived at the bitter waters of Marah (15:22-27). By juxtaposing this account with the Song of Moses the narrator set the people’s disingenuous “faith” in sharp relief. When God acted on their behalf Israel rejoiced and sang His praises, but let a few days pass and they had again slipped into what would prove to be their normative pattern of doubt and accusation.

Arriving at Marah and taking note that the waters there were not potable, the Israelites complained to Moses that they were dying of thirst. God responded with a miraculous purification of the water, which action was to serve as a foundational statute for Israel: Israel’s obligation of obedience to God’s revealed will (here expressed in His “healing” of the waters) was *faith* – that is, compliant trust in His word. Such obedience would result in their deliverance from all the diseases Yahweh had inflicted upon the unbelieving and rebellious Egyptians. The healing of the diseased waters meant deliverance from disease for Israel, but only if it would live a life of obedient trust. In tangible affirmation of His promise and His power to fulfill it, the Lord led Israel from Marah to the oasis at Elim.

- b. The second test occurred in the wilderness of Sin, and, in parallel with its predecessor, involved Israel’s hunger (16:1-36). Here the people’s unbelief and rebellion were escalated as they lamented their departure from Egypt. Not only did they disbelieve God for their provision – after just being charged by Moses at Marah and being led to Elim – *their grumbling expressed resentment regarding the loss of what they had enjoyed in Egypt as they served its gods* (16:3).

Once again God responded with supernatural provision: He supplied manna as “bread from heaven” and meat in the form of quail that flew in and covered the camp (16:4-36). The manna arrived in the morning and the quail in the evening, thereby showing Israel that Yahweh was their provider *in full*. He met their needs in both bread and meat, and did so at the start and end of their day.

The narrative gives no indication that God's provision of meat continued (ref. 16:14-36). The text's emphasis on the manna – in contrast to only three verses concerning the quail – suggests that this was a unique event. One thing is certain: The provision of quail served a prophetic role by anticipating a similar future occurrence by which God would judge His people for their dissatisfaction with the heavenly bread (cf. 16:4-5 with Numbers 11:1ff).

The focal point of the second test was the introduction of manna as the heavenly bread by which God's children were to be nourished throughout all the days of their journey. *The manna was miraculous, not only in the manner of its appearing, but also in its form.* It was an inhuman food, previously unknown in the world of men. Having never seen anything like it, the people responded to it with the question, "What is it?" This expression became the name by which it was called – *manna*, after the Hebrew, "man hu."

This miraculous food from heaven was different from any food Israel had ever known. Its unique form testified to its unique source: It was provided directly and supernaturally by God Himself. The people could neither cultivate it nor preserve it. Each day Yahweh gave them their "daily bread," and they were to live day-to-day upon His provision. Just like Abraham before them, Israel was to know that its God is Jehovah-Jireh – the covenant Father who shows *hesed* to His children.

Most importantly, the provision of manna served as the occasion for the introduction of the *Sabbath* principle which would be ratified in only a few days at Sinai. God had chosen Israel to be His unique son, taken from among all the peoples of the earth. For that reason Israel was a *consecrated* people: a people devoted to the Lord their God, and the Sabbath would epitomize and formalize this principle as a binding ordinance and the very sign of the Sinai Covenant.

The significance of the manna to Israel's redemption and life prior to her rest in Canaan is shown by God's demand that it be *memorialized*. At this point the narrative jumps forward and inserts a brief anachronistic parenthesis (16:32-36). Moses directed Aaron to place a jar of manna before the Testimony of Yahweh (the tables of the Law) as an everlasting memorial for the sons of Israel. It was to serve as a tangible reminder to Israel's generations that their Father had sustained them through all their wanderings by means of a supernatural and other-worldly bread. He had carried them into their rest by nourishing them on His own heavenly bread, a fact that would find its destiny in the true Bread of Heaven (cf. John 6:22-59). Given the historical and salvation-historical significance of the manna, it is easy to see why this parenthetical was inserted into the narrative flow.

- c. Israel's third test implicating Yahweh's provision is recorded in 17:1-7. Like the first one, it involved Israel's lack of water. But here the nation's doubt regarding God – which was rebuked and shown to be unfounded at Marah – is *heightened*. Israel's grumbling and resentment reached such a level of intensity that Moses feared the people might actually stone him.

The text contrasts Israel's escalated unbelief and rebellion with an equally escalated response. At Marah God had provided water to Israel by Moses' act of throwing a tree into bitter water; now Yahweh would bring water out of a rock. *And not simply any rock, but a rock upon which He Himself stood* (17:6). The text doesn't specify the form in which Yahweh appeared, but it leaves no doubt that His presence was visible to all Israel, as represented in its elders. This event has huge salvation-historical significance as it contributes to God's developing revelation of redemption: *"God who is the Shepherd of his people not only leads them through the wilderness; he stands in their place that justice might be done. The penalty is discharged: Moses strikes the Rock. The Lord redeems by bearing the judgment. From the smitten Rock there flows the water of life into the deadly wilderness. When Paul says the Rock was Christ, he perceives the symbolism of the passage. Christ is present both in person [in the theophanic Angel] and in symbol."* (Edmund Clowney, Preaching Christ in All of Scripture)

- d. The Lord had promised to give Canaan to Israel and this meant granting them victory over the nations residing in that land. The fourth test directly implicated that promise and Yahweh's integrity regarding it, for it involved Israel's first military conflict with an enemy nation (17:8-16). Like every other episode in Israel's life, this circumstance served to bind together Israel's past, present, and future. The warfare with Amalek reaffirmed Israel's unique identity as Yahweh's covenant son, His ongoing faithfulness to that son, and the promise of future conflict with and victory over the nations of Canaan.

Amalek (here referring to the Amalekite people) was a descendent of Esau. That Israel's first military triumph on its way to Canaan should be with Amalek is profoundly significant in the development of the biblical storyline. For Jacob had also triumphed over Esau, not because he was the first-born or enjoyed any other kind of preeminence, but because of Yahweh's sovereign choice and provision. Jacob's triumph began with the gaining of the birthright, advanced to the reception of the patriarchal blessing, and culminated with Esau's "submission" to Jacob in their reconciliation at Peniel. The man Israel (Jacob), filled with dread, had fled from Esau many years earlier; now Israel – the covenant son who had prevailed with God – returned to encounter Esau, this time to leave in triumph.

So it was that Jacob's previous triumph over Esau was to be repeated on the way to Sinai. The primal enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent was again manifesting itself on the stage of salvation history. Amalek (as representing Esau and the seed of the serpent) stood between Israel (representing the covenant son Jacob and the seed of the woman) and the realization of Yahweh's goal for His people, namely His covenant union with them at Sinai and their entrance into His presence in His sanctuary land. The Amalekites stood poised to destroy Abraham's covenant offspring, and in that way make void God's promise to him. More broadly, Amalek's opposition to Israel threatened the primal promise of final victory in the woman's seed – the singular Seed that was to come through Abraham.

The circumstance of the battle is intriguing and even perplexing. Moses instructed Joshua to assemble a fighting force to engage the Amalekites; he would then ascend the hill overlooking the battlefield and there extend the staff of God. As the battle ensued, Israel prevailed as long as Moses held his arm up, but when his arm dropped the tables turned. Seeing this and noting Moses' weariness, Aaron and Hur set a stone under him to sit on, and then supported his arms until Israel had won the battle. Keil and Delitzsch are helpful in unpacking this symbolism:

“As the heathen world was now commencing its conflict with the people of God in the persons of the Amalekites, and the prototype of the heathen world, with its hostility to God, was opposing the nation of the Lord that had been redeemed from the bondage of Egypt and was on its way to Canaan, to contest its entrance into the promised inheritance; so the battle which Israel fought with this foe possessed a typical significance in relation to all the future history of Israel. It could not conquer by the sword alone, but could only gain the victory by the power of God, coming down from on high, and obtained through prayer and those means of grace with which it had been entrusted.” (Old Testament Commentary)

- e. The final test for Israel leading up to the covenant at Sinai involved Yahweh's provision, not of food, drink, or victory in battle, but of *judicial resource* to oversee and maintain Israel's civil well-being. In this passage God's redeemed people were faced with a looming crisis – a predicament that, in its own way, powerfully spotlighted Israel's fundamental problem of estrangement: Estrangement caused the sons of Israel to doubt and grumble against God, and estrangement caused them to dispute with and contend against each other. In both instances Moses was called upon to act as mediator.

Moses was God's appointed judge, but the task of overseeing the nation was pressing him to the breaking point. At risk were the integrity, stability, and even the continuance of the nation; if Moses should prove unable to successfully mediate Israel's internal conflicts and disputes, the nation would likely collapse into chaos. The people moving toward becoming a covenantally unified and holy nation might not even make it to Sinai. Israel could well disintegrate before the unifying covenant was even established. The threat to the promise in this test was internal rather than external opposition. *Israel was threatening to destroy itself.*

The solution to the problem was provided by Jethro, the priest of Midian and Moses' father-in-law. Moses would continue to stand as mediator between God and Israel, but his mediation among the people would be administered by leaders appointed by him. They would hear and resolve all minor disputes, but anything beyond their capacity would be brought to Moses for his adjudication.

In these five episodes Israel's faith was tested and found wanting. While in Egypt Yahweh had chosen Israel to be His devoted “son,” and already the clear indication was that it would not succeed in fulfilling its calling. It seemed evident that Israel could not be Israel; what, then, was to become of the promise to Abraham? Would God's word fail?