

Sacred Space In Promise – Preparation for Sinai

I. Five Tests of Israel's Faith (15:22-18:27)

1. From their miraculous triumph at the Red Sea, Israel set out toward Mount Sinai (Horeb) and their appointed encounter with their Redeemer-God. * Exodus 3:11-12
2. God's elect "son" needed to be formally joined to Him in covenant union, *but before Israel reached Sinai it was confronted with five tests of faith, in which Israel also "tested" God.*

These tests openly demonstrated Israel's heart toward their God, even as they showed His unwavering commitment to His covenant and its promises and purposes.

A. Marah (15:22-27)

Within three days of their deliverance at the Red Sea, the Israelites' jubilation had already turned to disbelief and grumbling. *The abrupt juxtaposition of the episodes underscores this duplicity.*

1. Arriving at Marah and finding the water undrinkable, the people began grumbling to Moses.
2. Moses petitioned God, and He responded with a supernatural purification ("sweetening") of the water. *Notably, this first ordeal was to serve as foundational instruction for Israel's life.*

Faithfulness – heeding their faithful God – constituted Israel's obedience. Meeting this obligation would see their well-being preserved, even as He'd healed the waters of Marah.

3. God affirmed this commitment by leading Israel from Marah to the *oasis of Elim* (v. 27).

B. The Wilderness of Sin (16:1-36)

The second test occurred in the wilderness of Sin in parallel with the first one. *It escalated the people's unbelief and rebellion in three respects: 1) the subjects; 2) the objects; 3) the complaint. What they had lamented they now longed for – the provision of Egypt's gods.*

1. 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).
 - a. The manna arrived in the morning and the quail in the evening, *showing Israel that Yahweh was their provider in full. This, too, was to be instruction for the nation.* * 16:4
 - b. The manna would continue on, while the quail seems to have been a unique occurrence – *one that God would repeat as His judgment against Israel's rejection of His provision.*
2. This test introduced manna as God's heavenly food – heavenly in its form and its appearing.
 - a. It was an unearthly, unknown food, hence its name derived from *man hu* – *what is it?*
 - b. It was supernaturally provided by God Himself; the people could neither cultivate it nor preserve it. Manna was their *daily bread*, attesting that Yahweh was their provider (Gen. 22:14) and they lived upon Him. * cf. Deut. 8:3 with Mat. 4:1-4; Mat. 6:11 with John 6

3. Importantly, God’s provision of manna provided the occasion for the introduction of the *Sabbath* principle that He would soon ratify at Sinai. * Exod. 16:14-30
 - a. As a **creation** principle, sabbath spoke of *completed order* and its *administration* by God.
 - b. As a **human** principle, sabbath showed that God intended His divine “rest” to be carried out through His image-son, *which status Israel possessed through covenant election*.
 - c. In this way, sabbath was fundamental to both the Sinai Covenant itself and the relationship it governed. *And because this covenant relationship involved **cohabitation**, sabbath was to be the defining principle of Israel’s life in God’s sanctuary land, even as it had been in Eden.* * cf. Exod. 31:12-17; Ezek. 20:10-20; also Isaiah 56:1-7
4. Manna’s significance in Israel’s redemption and new life was attested by its *commemoration* – which is highlighted as an anachronistic parenthesis in the narrative flow. * 16:32-36

C. **Massah and Meribah** (17:1-7)

Israel’s third test also involved the lack of drinking water. But, as with the second test, it saw an escalation in the nation’s unbelief and rebellion.

1. Not only did the people not learn from their experience at Marah, they overtly questioned God’s presence with them and lashed out at Moses such that he feared for his life.
2. God, in turn, answered with a response that affirmed both His presence and His abiding care: *He would again give them water, but out of a rock upon which He Himself stood* (17:6).
3. It’s unclear how God appeared to the people, but His presence was clearly evident to them, and His action made a profound contribution to Israel’s perception of their covenant God:

“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.” (Edmund Clowney, Preaching Christ in All of Scripture)

D. **Battle at Rephidim** (17:8-16)

The last two tests involved Israel’s faith in God’s stated commitment to their protection and preservation. He’d elected Abraham’s seed as His covenant “son” and pledged to dwell with them in Canaan. But this meant giving them victory over the inhabitants of that land and those who stood in their way. The battle at Rephidim with the Amalekites was the first such encounter.

1. Amalek was the forefather of the Amalekites, and a descendent of Esau. *This battle and its outcome echoed and reaffirmed Jacob’s triumph over Esau, and was profoundly significant in the development of the biblical storyline.*
 - a. Jacob’s triumph was entirely the Lord’s doing and reflected His covenant faithfulness, and so it was with Israel’s triumph at Rephidim.

- b. But as the Amalekites opposed God's covenant intent, they embodied the ongoing conflict between the serpent's seed and Eve's seed. * 17:14-16; cf. 18:10-12

Thus the divinely-granted victory at Rephidim prefigured and strengthened the hope of the ultimate victory of Abraham's seed over the adversaries of God and His purposes.

2. Yahweh secured the victory for Israel, *but through the pleading, upraised arms of Moses*, His servant-mediator, who himself was strengthened in his task by the Lord's provision.

*This episode, too, was to be memorialized as enduring testimony of Yahweh's faithfulness (Deut. 25:17-18). In every generation, the covenant children were to **live out** their God's commitment to His covenant – trusting not only His material provision, but also His protection from every power poised to destroy them, thus setting itself against their covenant Lord and His designs.*

E. Appointment of Judges (18:1-27)

The final test for Israel leading up to their encounter with Yahweh at Sinai involved His provision of *judicial resource* to oversee and maintain the nation's civil well-being.

1. Israel was faced with a looming crisis that, in its own way, spotlighted the fundamental human problem of **estrangement**: *It led the Israelites to doubt and grumble against their God and Father, even as it provoked them to dispute and contend with one another.*
2. In both instances, Moses acted as mediator. He was God's appointed judge, but the task of leading Israel was pressing him to the breaking point, even as the nation's integrity, unity, and very continuance were at risk. *If Moses could not successfully mediate Israel's internal conflicts and disputes, the nation would almost certainly collapse in chaos and fracture.*

This test was unique in being entirely internal – Israel was threatening its own well-being and was poised to disintegrate before the unifying covenant was even ratified.

3. It was Moses' father-in-law Jethro, the Midianite priest, who proposed the solution: Moses needed to identify other godly men to share the burden of judging the people. * 18:14-23

Conclusions

1. These episodes were tests of Israel's *sonship*. Specifically, they tested the people in regard to their *faith*: Would they look to and trust in their *circumstances*, or their *God who had spoken* (cf. 15:25-25, 16:4, 31-34, 17:6-7, 18:14-16 with 19:1-6)? ***Would they walk by faith as true sons, resting in their Father's word to them, or by sight as all people naturally do?***
2. In each instance, Israel failed its testing. Even their victory over the Amalekites reinforced their confidence in the *sword*, not *Yahweh's hand* working through weakness and petition.
3. Israel's failure – already openly manifest before even reaching Sinai – was the failure of its sonship. But Israel's sonship reflected the *covenant* behind it, so that God's purpose for the world – the fulfillment of His covenant – depended on Israel fulfilling its calling as elect son.
4. Israel was failing as covenant son, but the Lord of the covenant remained faithful; in each instance, He met His son's failure with His own provision, carrying them toward Sinai.