

## EXODUS

### PART TWO: JOURNEY IN THE WILDERNESS

#### Chapters 12:37 to 18:27

[*You are encouraged to read the biblical text before you read this commentary.*]

In this article, we will look at the crossing of the Red Sea (sometimes called the Sea of Reeds) event and the struggles of Israel in the desert.

***Departure from Egypt (12:37-42).*** Over a half million men, not counting women and children (most likely exaggerated), leave Egypt. Can we imagine three million men, women and children crossing the Red Sea in one night? But huge numbers of slaves did leave because of the Lord's compassion for them. Not all are Israelites. They are a crowd of "mixed ancestry" (12:38), probably a reference to Israelites who have married Egyptians. Additional regulations on the Passover are given – mainly for those who may and may not participate (12:43-50).

#### **Chapter 13: Feast of Unleavened Bread; Redemption of the Firstborn**

*"You shall dedicate to the Lord every son that opens the womb. . ." (v. 12) If your son should ask you later one, 'What does this mean?' You shall tell him" (v. 14).*

The Israelites are to practice two rituals as a way of remembering how God delivered them from the slavery of Egypt (13:1-15). When celebrating the feast of *Unleavened Bread*, the elders are to explain to the children what the feast symbolizes. In like manner, the parent or catechist, in telling this story today, ought to personalize this exodus event. "This is what God did for *me*" (13:8). For the Israelites, remembering is not just recalling a past event; it is also *re-living* it *now*. The God who liberated their ancestors continues to liberate them in their own day.

The lives of the first-born sons and first-born animals are spared on the night of Passover as they are considered belonging to God (13:11-16). Thereafter, the first-born son is to be bought back through a special ceremony in which the child is dedicated to the Lord. Once again, when children

ask about this practice, its meaning should be explained to them (13:14-15).

***Israel's journey toward the Red Sea (13:17-22).*** Israel sets out to move towards the Red Sea. God manifests himself to Israel as a "column of cloud by day" and a "column of fire" by night" (13:21-22). "This description probably stems from the ancient practice of putting a burning brazier at the head of an army as it went forth to indicate the line of watch – smoke visible by day, fire by night" (Norman Langenbrunner). It was a familiar Hebrew way of saying that God was traveling with them by day and by night.

#### **Chapters 14 & 15: Crossing the Red Sea**

*"Fear not! Stand your ground, and you will see the victory God will win for you today" (v. 13).*

In these two chapters, we have two accounts of the crossing of the Red Sea: chapter 14 expressed in prose and chapter 15 in poetry. The chapters are filled with religious drama.

One would think that the experience of the tenth plague would have convinced Pharaoh that he should not mess with the God of Moses and Aaron. But when Pharaoh realizes that he has lost his best workers, he decides to send his army after them. According to verse 4, God makes Pharaoh's heart obstinate. Here again, we need to remember what we learned in article seven about primary and secondary causes. Verse 5 states that it is Pharaoh who changes his mind. If Pharaoh had not been so stubborn, he would have saved his people much suffering.

The final editor of Exodus prepares us for a dramatic battle. On the one side, we have Pharaoh and his "six hundred first-class chariots and all other chariots of Egypt" (14:7). On the other side, we have unarmed men, women and children who, no wonder, become so terrified when they see the Egyptians in hot pursuit of them. They then complain to Moses (14:11). As we shall see, *complaining* and *murmuring* against Moses are a central theme in Israel's wilderness experience.

Israel's murmuring contrasts sharply with Moses' strong faith in the Lord who is imaged in these chapters as a 'Divine Warrior.' To the frightened Israelites, Moses says: "*Fear not! Stand your ground, and you will see the victory the Lord will win for you today. The Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Lord himself will fight for you; you have only to keep still*" (14:13-14).

These powerful verses remind us of Paul's words to the Romans (8:31): "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" Moses is telling his frightened people to stand back and watch God at work. So now, we are ready for the big showdown between God and Pharaoh's best.

***Crossing the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptians (14:15-31).*** Our childhood images of this event is that of Moses waving his staff over the sea, causing it to divide into two big walls of water, in between which the Israelites are able to cross on dry land. Seeing this, the Egyptians and their charioteers follow suit. Moses again lifts his staff and the walls of water come crashing down to destroy all the Egyptians (14:16).

Verse 21 gives another account of what happened: "*... the Lord swept the sea with a strong east wind throughout the night and so it turned it into dry land.*" This windswept dry land allowed the Israelites to cross over.

When the Egyptians enter the divided sea, the waters rise up to their normal level destroying all the pursuers. The miracle is clearly in the *timing* of the events. For the Israelites, there is no doubt that God is behind this amazing event. God, their mighty Warrior, is the one who enabled them to cross over on dry land and the one who destroyed their enemies. Without raising a sword, Israel has defeated the greatest army in the world. "*Thus the Lord saved Israel on that day from the power of the Egyptians*" (14:30). As a result of God's mighty deed, the Israelites "*feared the Lord and believed in him and in his servant Moses*" (14:31).

***Song of the Sea (15:1-21).*** These verses are a song of thanksgiving to the mighty God who throws Pharaoh's horses and chariots into the sea (15:1) and rescues Israel from death and destruction. In the song, there is recognition that the God of Israel is the one and only God. "*Who is like you among the*

*gods, O Lord? Who is like you, magnificent in holiness?*" (15:11). Because the song speaks of Israel's entrance into the Promised Land (15:14-17), we know that at least part of it was created some years after Israel took possession of the land of Canaan. The song ends with the mention of Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. With the other ladies, Miriam plays her tambourine, does a Jewish jig, and sings the praises of God (15:20-21).

***Type of Baptism.*** Water can destroy life and save life. The waters of the Red Sea have saved Israel and destroyed the enemy. In the sacrament of Baptism, water is the primary symbol. When it is being blessed, the priest or deacon says: "Through the waters of the Red Sea, you led Israel out of slavery to be an image of God's holy people, set free from sin by Baptism." In Baptism water destroys sin and fills the recipient with the new life of Christ.

**Pause:** Israel's experience of crossing through the Red Sea is frequently used as a way to speak of 'crossing-over or transition experiences'. Can you name one crossing-over experience that you have had to deal with in life? What helped you during that time?

## **Chapters 15:22-18:27 - Israel in the Desert**

Israel's desert experience was a time when the people were expressly called to place their trust in God. Israel was called to let go of a former way of life and to give total allegiance to the God who rescued them from the slavery of Egypt and saved them at the Red Sea. One would think that such a transition should be easy. But, as we shall see, it is not. First, of all, life in the desert is anything but easy. It is made even more difficult when they are attacked by desert tribes who resent the intrusion of these fugitives. In the desert, God tests the Israelites to see if they would place their trust in him, and they test God to see if he would provide for them.

***Desert Grumbings (15:22-27).*** The people grumble due to lack of water. In the desert, Israel's call is to learn to *listen* to the Lord and *obey* his commands (15:26). Israel's wilderness experience has a dual theme: God *providing* for his pilgrim people and the people *grumbling* against God and his servant Moses.

## Chapter 16: Grumbling in the Desert

*“Would that we had died at the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread. But you had to lead us into this desert place to make the whole community die of famine” (v.3).*

The Israelites arrive in a desert area called Sin. They are discouraged and angry at Moses. The word ‘grumble’ is *repeated* seven times from verse 2 to verse 12.

God responds to the complaints of the people, and says to Moses: *“I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them: ‘In the evening twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread, so that you may know that I, the Lord, am your God.’”*(16:12). The flesh provided by God is quail that in their spring migration often land in that area exhausted and can easily be captured. The origin of the manna food has been explained in various ways. *The Collegeville Commentary* describes manna as “the secretion of two insects that live on tamarisk trees. The substance drops from the tamarisk to the ground where it hardens somewhat in the night air” (p. 97). It is said to contain eighty percent sugar. Hence, it is highly sustaining.

The manna God provided in the desert prefigured Christ and the Eucharist (see Jn 6:30-35).

***Regulations regarding the manna (16:16-35).*** God tells the Israelites that they must only gather food sufficient for *one day* with one exception. On the sixth day, they can gather enough food for two days so that they can rest on the Sabbath. Some disobey this command and get their comeuppance for doing so (16:20). Two important points to be noted in this chapter are:

- God *provides*. When the people wonder what the food is, never having seen manna (which literally means “what is it?”), Moses tells them: *“This is the bread the Lord has given you to eat.”* It is easy for us to miss seeing the hand of God in the daily activities of life. Moses makes sure that the Israelites recognize that the rationing of quail and manna is God providing for them. Trying to explain what the food is or where it comes from is not the

main point of this chapter. It is rather the way God cares for his people in their time of need.

- God is inviting the Israelites to a whole new way of life – to trust in him *one day at a time*. This is a lesson in spirituality very familiar to men and women involved in the *Twelve Step Programs*. It is in the desert experiences of life that we learn to trust in God one day at a time.

**Pause:** What helps you to deal with people who complain a lot?

## Chapter 17: Water from the Rock; Battle with the Amalekites

*“As long as Moses kept his arms raised up, Israel had the better of the fight, but when he let his arms rest, Amalek had the better of the fight” (v. 11).*

In the previous chapter, the Israelites *grumble* for lack of food. In this chapter, they *grumble* for lack of water (17:2-3). They are not only upset with Moses but with God. *“Is the Lord with us or not?”* (17:7). That indeed is the key question. Can the Israelites believe, especially in difficult times, that God is their companion on the journey *and* their provider? Verse 4 paints a picture of a stressed-out leader. Moses cries out to God: *“What am I to do with these people? A little more and they will stone me”* (17:5). In response to the people’s cry for help, God uses Moses to miraculously bring water from the rock. In his first letter to the Corinthians (10:4), Paul refers to this incident and defines the rock as a type of Christ. *“...all drank from a spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ.”*

***The power of intercessory prayer (17:8-16).*** During their time in the wilderness, the Israelites experience an *enemy from within* (their grumbling spirit and a lack of faith in God) and an *enemy from without*, in this case, the Amalekites.

We are not told why Amalek and his men have attacked the Israelites. Perhaps they have felt threatened by this huge number of people and their livestock. Whatever the reason, the story, among other things, introduces to us Moses’ chosen successor, Joshua, to fight the ground battle. But the

author of the text is clear to point out that it is Moses' perseverance in prayer that wins the day. *The Collegeville Commentary* states: "While salvation always involves the interplay of divine grace and human cooperation, it is reassuring to note a story where the limelight falls on the human protagonist" (p. 98). Moses, with his hands lifted on high, is seen by many people as a wonderful image of *intercessory prayer*. Aaron and Hur are wonderful examples of two people offering spiritual support to their leader in a time of crisis.

Verses 14 to 16 could trouble us. Why would God want to wipe out the memory of Amalek, Esau's grandson (Gn 36:12,16), from the face of the earth? It seems that the Amalekites have become the archenemies of Israel (see Num 14:13,45; Jgs 6:3-5, 33). The continuing conflict between these two peoples intensifies and develops into irrational hatred, as reflected in the final editor's writing of this book.

**Pause:** Can you identify with the Israelites when they cry out "Is the Lord with us or not?" What is your experience with intercessory prayer, prayer offered for the needs of others?

## Chapter 18: Profitable Meeting between Moses and Jethro

Moses has a meeting with his father-in-law Jethro, and with his wife and two sons, who seemingly return to their father's house just when things have gotten hot in Egypt (18:1-12). We can only imagine how difficult it is for Moses to have a brief meeting with his family and then to have to move on in obedience to God's call. While together, Moses has the opportunity not only to catch up with his family but also to *witness* to Jethro about all that God has been doing for his people. Moses' sharing is blessed by God, for Jethro was moved to deliver a prayer of thanksgiving. Perhaps Jethro also becomes a believer in the God of Israel.

During their time together, the perceptive Jethro quickly sees that Moses is falling into the trap that many charismatic leaders fall victim to. He is trying to do it all himself. Jethro tells Moses: "*What sort of thing is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone while all the people have to*

*stand about you from morning till evening?*"(18:14). Moses' style of leadership has produced three negative results: (1) he is overworked, (2) the people are being denied swift justice or counsel, and (3) the elders and other competent individuals are not given the opportunity to use their talents to serve the community.

Moses follows the advice of his father-in-law (18:24). By so doing, their meeting turns out to be not only a wonderful social occasion but also a 'God moment' for both Jethro (18:8-12) and Moses who learns to share the burden of leadership with others.

**Pause:** Have you experienced leaders who tried to do it all by themselves, and ones who shared the burden of leadership with others? How about you--what style of leadership appeals to you and what do you practice?