

WILDERNESS: A NEW AND DANGEROUS LIFE

Background from the Author

Chapter 7 of *Theology in Exodus* will provide supplementary material for Sessions 8 through 11. You can probably find at least one picture of Jebel Musa in a Bible dictionary, but the more illustrations of the Sinai desert you can find, the easier it will be to appreciate the hardships facing people who try to live there.

Depending on the group's interests, the importance of having a regular day of rest in our society, which makes virtually no allowances for such a luxury, may be a useful subject to explore.

The Lord's Supper becomes a major part of this session, because of John's interpretation of the feeding of the five thousand. At least one good commentary on John 6 will probably be a help to the group. Raymond Brown's work in the Anchor Bible Commentary series is recommended. Note that the bread of Communion was originally the unleavened bread of the Passover meal, as we saw in Session 6. Now John associates it with the manna given in the wilderness. Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "This is my body," seem to be taken very literally by John when he speaks of eating Jesus' flesh. He has moved from Passover bread and from manna to the idea of Jesus as bread of life (and water of life, as we found in Session 7). This is the concept that has led to debates in the churches over the "real presence" of Christ in the Sacrament. Does the bread actually become the body of Christ (transubstantiation) as the Roman Catholic Church teaches? Is Christ present "in,

with, and under" the bread, as Luther taught? Or is Christ really present, but in spirit, as the Reformed churches teach? This course is not the appropriate place to get into that old debate, but I mention it here in order to alert leaders that in some groups John's language may bring it up.

Mekilta is a rabbinic commentary on Exodus, parts of which may have been written as early as the second century A.D. You may find it helpful to look for additional information on the uses of allegory and typology, and the problems associated with them, as you prepare for this session.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

- 1. Tell the story of Israel's wandering in the wilderness in Exodus 15:22-18:27.
- 2. Relate the Hebrews' experience of being fed manna in the wilderness to their understanding of Jesus as the "Bread of Life."
- **3.** Discuss four ways Christians have interpreted the Old Testament.
- **4.** Apply lessons learned by the Hebrews in the wilderness to their own faith journeys.

Resources You May Need

Bibles, chalkboard or newsprint and markers

Map of the Sinai Peninsula

Copies of the following: Dramatic Reading "Murmuring and Testing in the Wilderness, Worksheet A, "Wilderness Story Pattern," Worksheet B, "We Are Fed by God's Hand," and Worksheet C, "Life Journey Remembrance"

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Prayer from the Psalms. Read Psalm 23. If you want the group to read the Psalm together, photocopy it from "Prayers from the Psalms" in the Appendix. (3 minutes)

and/or

Opening Prayer. Offer a prayer inviting God's presence as we study Israel's time in the wilderness. (3 minutes)

2. Introducing the Theme. Introduce today's theme as "Wilderness, a new and dangerous life." Note the stark and immediate contrast between the Song of Miriam in 15:21 and the situation presented in 15:22. In the words of Exodus commentator Terence E. Fretheim, "Instead of a land of milk and honey, they got a desert." [Exodus: Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville: John Knox, 1991) p. 171] As the Resource Book notes, the memories of this period in Israel's history are varied and they run deep. (3 minutes)

and

Routes of the Exodus. On a map, point out the possible route(s) of the Exodus described by Dr. Gowan. Ask, "How important is it to know the physical location of Mt. Sinai and the wilderness events? Why?" (5 minutes)

and

Review. Ask:

- Who are the people that are now following Moses?
- Where have they come from?
- How prepared are they for this journey?
- What do you think their expectations were at the end of 15:21? (3-5 minutes)

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Writing "News." Using the script, "Murmuring and Testing in the Wilderness," located at the end of this chapter, assign volunteers to read the parts of the Lord, Moses, and a narrator. Invite everyone else to participate as "the people," ad-libbing their responses. After the dramatic reading, divide into groups of 3-4. Have each group write a UPI wire report from "on the scene with Moses and the Hebrew People" including quotations from key figures. Appoint one person in each group to act as anchor person on the evening news with other members of the group providing live interviews with "on the scene" reporters. Present the "reports" in the large group. (25-30 minutes)

or

Research: Wilderness Story Pattern. In groups of 3-4, complete Worksheet A "Wilderness Story Pattern." Assign one scripture reference to each group, and ask them to fill out the corresponding column. If your group is smaller than 18, omit one or more of the Exodus passages. Note that not every passage will follow the pattern perfectly.

Return to the large group, and have each small group report on its findings. Observe the differences in the way the LORD responds in the Numbers passage. (15 minutes)

and/or

Preparing Report Cards. Divide into four groups. Invite each group to dare to enter the mind of God and to prepare report cards for the Hebrew people based on Exodus 15:22-17:7 and Numbers 11. The groups are to make up their own grading criteria and scales. Make the following assignments:

- Group 1. Report Card for the People based on Ex 15:22-17:7
- Group 2. Report Card for Moses based on Ex. 15:22-17:7
- Group 3. Report Card for the People based on Numbers 11
- Group 4. Report Card for Moses based on Numbers 11

Return to the large group and have each group present its report card. Because of the varied recollections from the wilderness period, the report cards will probably differ. Ask:

- How do you account for the different emphases in these accounts?
- Can differing recollections all be valid? Why or why not? (25-30 minutes)
- 2. Writing cinquains: We Are Fed by God's Hand. In groups of 3-4, discuss and complete Worksheet B, "We Are Fed by God's Hand." Then have spokespersons from the groups present their cinquain. (15-20 minutes)

Reflection and Sharing: Jesus as the Bread of Life. Read aloud John 6:1-14, noting that the feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. Ask, "How did Jesus use the memory of the manna in the wilderness (6:31-32,49,58) to identify himself and his purpose?" Note their responses on chalkboard or newsprint. Then invite participants to talk with another person about what it means for them that "Jesus is the Bread of Life." (10-15 minutes)

and/or

Designing a Church Brochure. Ask the group to read John 6:41-65 silently, noting the parts that are particularly meaningful and any that are troublesome or unclear. Then divide into groups of 3-4. Suggest that the groups take a few minutes to discuss their thoughts about the passage and then design a flier or brochure inviting someone to visit the church, based on these verses. Have them present the brochures in the large group. (20-25 minutes)

- 3. Methods of Interpreting the Old Testament. Dr. Gowan discusses four methods Christians have used to make the Old Testament more "relevant" to Christianity. Referring to the section Israel at War for the First Time in the Resource Book, invite participants to name and define each of the four methods. Then discuss the following questions with the whole group:
 - What is the appeal of these methods?
 - Why might they be inappropriate?

• Can the group think of other Old Testament passages that have been interpreted using one of these methods? (10 minutes)

or

"Interpreting" other Exodus passages. As in 3 above, ask participants to name and define the four methods Christians have used to interpret the Old Testament, referring to the section Israel at War for the First Time in the *Resource Book*. Then divide into groups of 3-4, giving each group one of the passages listed below. Invite the groups to "interpret" their passages using one or more of these methods to "prove" a particular point or cause of their choice. Give the groups permission to exaggerate the possible misuse of these methods to demonstrate their limitations and dangers.

Exodus 15:22-25

Exodus 15:26

Exodus 16:1-8

Exodus 17:1-7

After about 15 minutes, bring the whole group together and invite a representative from each group to share the group's "interpretations." (20-25 minutes)

- **4.** Writing and Sharing a Sabbath Code. Read the wilderness Sabbath recollections in 4:22-30 aloud. Then ask:
 - What did the Sabbath mean to these people?
 - How is Sabbath a gift?
 - What does it mean to keep Sabbath today?
 - What prevents us from keeping a Sabbath today?

Write the following questions on chalkboard or newsprint, and allow some time for quiet reflection.

How well do you keep Sabbath?

- How would your life be changed by keeping Sabbath more faithfully?
- Write a Sabbath code for yourself (like a New Year's Resolution).

Invite group members to talk about their Sabbath codes in pairs. (20-25 minutes)

and/or

Discussion: Jethro's Advice. In your own words, briefly relate the account of Moses' meeting with his father-in-law Jethro described in Exodus 18:1-12. Then ask a volunteer to read aloud 18:13-27. Ask:

- What is striking about this passage?
- What can this story teach us about gifts, leadership, and sources of wisdom?

If time allows, invite group members to write diary entries that Moses or Jethro might have made at the end of this visit. Ask some volunteers to read their entries. (15 minutes)

CLOSING

1. Sharing Life Journeys. In groups of 3-4, invite participants to tell some of the memories that they wrote on the worksheet, "Life Journey Remembrance," which they filled out as they prepared for this session. (You will have given the worksheet to them at the end of the previous session.) Encourage the small groups to listen to each speaker without interruption. After about 15 minutes, bring the whole group together. Invite those who wish to do so to read the sentence prayers they wrote on the worksheet. Close by having the whole group read God's Promise for the Journey given at the end of the worksheet. (20 minutes)

and/or

Closing Prayer. Close with your own prayer expressing thanks both for God's care on our life journeys and for the growth we experience through life's challenges. (3 minutes)

Looking Ahead

One option for the next session suggests playing a CD or audiocassette of thunderstorm effects (Setting the Stage). You might ask at this session if anyone has such a CD or audiocassette. If not, most record stores will have one.

The next session (Exploring 3) also suggests reenacting the covenant-sealing ceremony. This activity can be very effective and also simple to plan. Look ahead to this option now. You will need to designate an area where people may stand or sit in a circle and to locate something to use as an altar. Your sanctuary is a possibility if it will be available and has movable chairs. Or perhaps an altar used in a children's worship might serve. If not, a small table or even several chairs could suffice. The activity suggests using a stuffed animal (from the nursery or a family with young children) as the "sacrificial animal." And you will need a bowl to hold "sacrificial blood" (water).

Murmuring and Testing in the Wilderness

Exodus 15:22 - 17:7

Narrator: After Israel crossed the Red Sea, Moses led them into the Desert of Shur. They traveled for three days without finding water. On the fourth day they found water, but it was too bitter to drink. They named the place Marah, meaning "bitter." The people grumbled against Moses! (Pause for grum-

bling.)

Then Moses cried out to Yahweh.

Moses: Help us!

Yahweh: Here, I'm going to throw this piece of wood in the water. Now taste the water!

Narrator: Moses tasted it and it was sweet! Then Yahweh made a law for them, and tested them.

Yahweh: I am Yahweh your God, and I cure your diseases. If you obey me by following my laws and teachings, I won't punish you with the diseases I sent on the Egyptians.

Narrator: Later the Israelites wandered through the western edge of the Sinai Desert in the direction of Mount Sinai. There they started complaining to Moses and Aaron! (Pause.) Then Yahweh said to Moses:

Yahweh: I will send bread down from heaven like rain. Each day the people can go out and gather only enough for that day. But on the sixth day of each week they must gather and cook twice as much.

Narrator: After awhile, the people looked out toward the desert and saw the bright glory of Yahweh in a cloud. And they exclaimed in amazement! (Pause.)

That evening, a lot of quail came and landed everywhere in the camp, and the next morning dew covered the ground. After the dew had gone, the desert was covered with thin flakes that looked like frost. The people had never seen anything like this, and they started asking each other questions about it! (Pause for murmured questions.) Moses answered.

Moses:

This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. And he commands you to gather enough for your family and not to keep any overnight.

Narrator:

Some of them disobeyed, but the next morning what they kept was stinking and full of worms. Each morning, they gathered as much as they needed. However, on the sixth day of the week, everyone gathered enough for two days, for Yahweh had said:

Yahweh:

Tomorrow is the Sabbath, a sacred day of rest to honor me. So gather all you want to bake or boil, and make sure you save enough for tomorrow.

Narrator:

So the people obeyed, and the next morning the food smelled fine and had no worms. Once, while they were camped at a place called Rephidim, the people complained to Moses because there was no water for them to drink. (Pause for complaining.)

Then Moses prayed to Yahweh,

Moses:

What am I going to do with these people? They are about to stone me to death!

Yahweh:

Take some of the leaders with you and go ahead of the people. Take along your walking stick that you used to strike the Nile River, and when you get to the rock at Mt. Sinai, strike the rock with the stick and pure water will pour out.

Narrator:

Moses did this while the people watched. And the people exclaimed in amazement! (Pause.) Moses named the place Massah, which means "testing" and Meribah, which means "complaining."

Worksheet A

Wilderness Story Pattern

What Happens	Exodus 14:1-31	Exodus 15:22-26	Exodus 15:27-16:30	Exodus 17:1-7	Numbers 20:1-13
A note concerning movement					
Description of the problem					
People complain					
Moses cries to the Lord					
The Lord responds					
Moses obeys					
Results					

Worksheet B

We Are Fed by God's Hand

Exodus 16

Discuss:

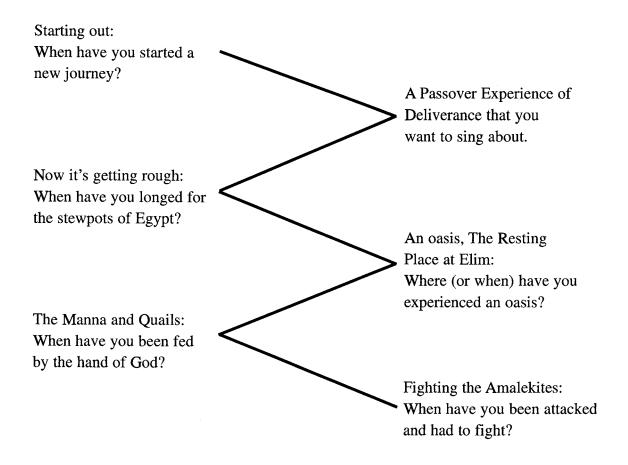
- How do you think the Israelites felt when they discovered and ate the manna in the wilderness?
- When (if ever) have you felt that you were fed by God's hand?

As a group, write a cinquain, in response to your discussion. A cinquain is a structured 5-line poem. Write one word in each blank below.

	(a 1-word name for God)
	(2 words describing God)
(3 we	ords suggesting a need or situation)
(4 word	ds describing God's actions or nature)

Worksheet C

Life Journey Remembrance



GOD'S PROMISE FOR THE JOURNEY:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers they will not overwhelm you. (Is. 43:1-2)