

Exodus: Life in the Wilderness

Part 1

Exodus 17

April 12, 2026

Understanding the Wilderness

1. Identifying Your Wilderness: The sermon mentions that the wilderness is the "University of learning." How would you describe your current "season" of life? Is it a season of "comfort and ease," or are you currently in a "waterless place"?

2. Faith vs. Circumstances: The Israelites were at Rephidim "as the Lord commanded," yet there was no water. Have you ever felt like you followed God's leading only to end up in a difficult or "dry" situation? How did that affect your view of God's guidance?

3. The Purpose of Trials: Charles Spurgeon called the wilderness a place where God teaches lessons that comfort cannot. Looking back at a past trial, what is one thing you learned about God's character that you couldn't have learned while things were going well?

The Danger of Grumbling

4. Lament vs. Grumbling: The sermon distinguishes between "lament" (bringing pain to God) and "grumbling" (putting God *on trial*). How can we tell the difference in our own prayer lives? How can we express honest frustration to God without "charging Him with wrong"?

5. The "Secondhand Grumbling" Effect: We discussed how complaining can be "contagious" and even affect our brain's ability to solve problems. How do you guard your heart and mind when you are in an environment (at work or home) where grumbling is the default language?

6. The Hardening of the Heart: Hebrews 3:15 warns, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." What are some practical "warning signs" that your heart might be hardening due to disappointment or unanswered questions?

God's Provision and The Rock

7. Putting God on Trial: The Israelites brought a "legal accusation" against Moses and God. In what ways are we tempted to act as "judge and jury" over God's timing or His methods in our lives?

8. Grace in the Midst of Rebellion: God provided water for the Israelites even while they were "ready to stone" Moses. Why is it important to remember that God's provision is based on His grace rather than our "good behavior" during a trial?

9. The Struck Rock: Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10 that "the Rock was Christ." How does the image of Jesus being "struck" on the cross change how you view your current "thirst" or needs? Does it give you confidence that He will provide for your future?

Personal Application

10. Taking it Home: If you are currently in a "dry season," what is one practical step you can take this week to move from *grumbling* to *trusting*? How can this group pray for you as you navigate your "Wilderness U"?

Summary

Introduction

Charles Spurgeon, the famous English preacher who lived in the 1800s—often called the “Prince of Preachers”—once said that the wilderness is “the Cambridge and Oxford of learning.” The wilderness is the university, if you will, of learning, maturity, and growth. Just like students at college are shaped by long hours of study, challenges, and discipline, so too are God’s people shaped by trials in the wilderness. Because it’s in the wilderness that God teaches lessons that comfort and ease are not able to do. In the wilderness, faith is tested, our character is formed, and dependence on God is strengthened.

We find the Israelites as we continue our study in Exodus in the desert, in the wilderness; they have found themselves thirsty, hungry, and unsure of the circumstances. But the wilderness was their classroom, part of their schooling to grow their trust and faith.

The Wilderness Classroom

Here’s the reality: the same God who led them and who tested them is teaching us the same lessons today. We all have wilderness seasons—moments when life feels dry, confusing, and overwhelming. Just like the Israelites, we face a choice: Will we harden our hearts and grumble? Or will we trust God, lean on His provision, and let Him teach us and mature our faith in the process?

In Exodus 17:1-7, the scene we find is that the Israelites have no water in a place called Rephidim. They are thirsty, and things get intense. Now, they’ve grumbled and complained before, but with this episode in the ongoing drama, the hostility intensifies. We will work through these verses and then consider three powerful lessons for our own lives.

Putting God on Trial

Look with me at verse 1: "The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink" Verse 2: "So they quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses replied, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?'"

Verse 3: "But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?'"

Now, if this sounds familiar, that’s because it is familiar. After the miraculous deliverance from slavery, the plagues, the Passover, and the Red Sea parting, you might think the Israelites would fully trust God. You’d think it would be smooth sailing toward the Promised Land. But it’s not been smooth sailing. They are still in the beginning stages of their relationship with the Lord, and it’s been a struggle to trust Him. A pattern has developed: a continual cycle of not trusting, which leads to grumbling.

In chapter 14, as the Egyptian army pursued them, they panicked and asked if they were brought out there to die because there were no graves in Egypt. In chapter 15, just three days after the Red Sea, they grumbled at Marah

because the water was bitter. They didn't want tap water; they wanted Fiji water. In chapter 16, they grumbled because they were hungry. It's like a long car trip: "Are we there yet? I'm hungry! I'm thirsty!"

The Science of Grumbling

Interestingly, research shows the average person complains 15–30 times a day. Some of you hit that quota before finding a parking spot this morning. Complaining can actually shrink your hippocampus, the part of the brain tied to problem-solving. The more you complain, the worse you get at solving problems. Even being around complaining for more than 30 minutes can cause issues. We've moved from secondhand smoke to secondhand grumbling. So, if you walk away from a complaining spouse, just tell them you're protecting your hippocampus from brain damage.

With each of these episodes, God continued to provide: saving them from the army, making bitter water sweet, and providing manna and quail. Now in chapter 17, they cry out again because they are thirsty. Their physical needs are real, but they should know how to handle it. They should have gathered to pray and wait on God. They should realize God designs these tests to grow their maturity.

Instead, the hostility reaches a new level. The word "quarrel" in verse 2 literally means to bring a legal accusation. They are putting Moses on trial, and as Moses indicates, they are putting God on trial. They accuse God of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them.

Judgment and Grace at the Rock

In verse 4, Moses cries out to the Lord: "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me". Tensions are at a breaking point. By picking up stones, the people are acting as judge, jury, and executioner, declaring Moses guilty.

The Lord answers in verse 5: "Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink".

When Moses strikes the rock, he is striking in the presence of God. The rod that brought judgment on Egypt was now carrying out another act of judgment—but this time, God Himself was bearing the judgment. God took the place of Moses and bore the judgment so that water could flow: life-giving, abundant water.

Moses calls the place Massah ("testing") and Meribah ("quarreling"). These legal terms mark the place where the people held God responsible and were unhappy with His provision. It stands as a witness to what happens when people put God on trial.

Lesson 1: Difficulties Don't Mean You're Off-Track

It's easy to judge the Israelites, but they had real, harsh challenges. However, their difficulties did not mean they were off-track. Verse 1 says they camped "as the Lord commanded". They were exactly where God wanted them to be, even in a waterless place.

God allows difficulty not to harm your faith, but to grow it. While some hardship is due to sin, some is due to the Lord's leading. He leads us into the wilderness so we learn that He provides and that we can depend on Him. He is forming us through sanctification. Just because the path feels dry or hard doesn't mean it's wrong. God may lead you to a waterless place to teach you to trust Him more deeply.

Lesson 2: Don't Harden Your Heart

The author of Hebrews looks back at this scene and warns: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." When hardship shows up, don't turn away from the living God. There is a difference between honest lament—bringing pain to God—and grumbling, which puts God *on trial*.

When we accuse God of evil, it's hardening unbelief. Just as distrust fractures a marriage or a business partnership, trust erosion with God changes everything. Yet, God has never once failed His people. Pay attention to your heart. Is difficulty an opportunity to trust, or a path to bitterness?

Lesson 3: Rely on God's Profound Provision

When the rock was struck, it wasn't a trickle; it was a surge. For millions of people and livestock, God provided abundantly. He provided for a rebellious, accusing people.

The staff of judgment fell where God chose to stand. The place of judgment shifted. What should have been judgment became mercy. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10 that "that rock was Christ". This was a foreshadowing. In the wilderness, the rock was struck for rebellious people; at the cross, Christ was struck to save sinners. The innocent One was struck so the guilty could go free.

Reflection

We see ourselves in this story because we know what it is to grumble and put God on trial. Yet He responds with patience and grace. If you are in a wilderness, don't mistake dryness for God's absence. Jesus, the Rock who was struck, is the source of everything you need to reach the promised land.

If you've never turned to Christ, His patience is meant to lead you to repentance. Jesus is the living water your soul has been searching for. Admit your need and place your trust in Him.

Are you interpreting your challenges correctly?

Is your heart starting to harden?

Have you come to the Rock, Jesus Christ?

Go to Him, for He alone can satisfy.