



Geography of Salvation

Preaching the Map

A Bible Study with Stan Key

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE DESERT (PART I)

Exodus 15:22–18:27

I. Why the desert?

A. The eastern shore.

Redemption is now an accomplished **fact!** The blood of the Lamb and the waters of baptism have defeated Pharaoh, liberated the slaves, and accomplished salvation. Isn't that the point? Miriam leads the redeemed in a joyful song of deliverance: The Song of Moses is **Worship 101** (15:1–21). Few spiritual disciplines are better at getting us through the desert than learning to sing.

1. *What* are they doing? **Singing.**
2. *Who* is doing it? The **redeemed.**
3. *To whom* are they singing? To **the Lord.**
4. *How* are they doing it? With **joy** (tambourines, dancing, etc.).
5. *What* are they singing? They are singing about what the Lord:
 - Has done in **the past** (vv 1–12). He has triumphed gloriously.
 - Is doing in **the present** (vv 13–16). He is guiding our steps.
 - Will do in **the future** (vv 17–18). He will bring us home and reign forever!

B. Not home yet.

Although the people are genuinely saved, they are not home yet. In fact, their journey has only begun. It will take about **two years** to arrive at the border of Canaan. However, first they must cross the desert (Sinai Peninsula).

C. Led out of the frying pan and into the fire.

God was guiding them each step of the way by the pillar of fire (Ex. 13:17–22). He does not lead them by the **easy** road or the **quick** path. No. He leads them into a desolate waste land! Describe some characteristics of this desert:

- **No water, food.**
- **No shelter from the extremes of temperature (hot and cold).**
- **Barren; nothing grows.**
- **Snakes, scorpions and Amalekites.**
- **Silence.**
- **The land of in-between; the gap that exists between God's promise and its fulfillment, between what I am and what God wants me to be.**

D. Why, O why would God lead his people into a desert?

*And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might **humble** you, **testing** you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothing did not wear out on you and your*

*foot did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God **disciplines** you.*

1. God led his people into the desert because they needed an **education**. There are some lessons that can't be learned in Egypt or Canaan but only in the desert. To be ready to face the giants that are currently camping on their inheritance, they need to take a few courses at University of the Desert.
2. The desert is not a geographical anomaly but a spiritual **necessity**. All God's saints have degrees from Desert U. Most of the contemporary evangelical church has no **theology of the desert**.

II. Five tests in the wilderness (Ex. 15:22–18:27).

Reference	Place	Problem	Solution	Lesson
15:22–27	Marah	No water (bitter)	The Lord showed Moses a tree ...	I am the Lord who heals you (Jehovah Rapha)
16:1–36	Desert of Sin	No food	Manna... bread from heaven	Give us this day our daily bread: trust
17:1–7	Rephidim	No water (this is a retest)	Strike the rock	Don't put the Lord to the test
17:8–16	Rephidim	Enemy attack	Prayer	Spiritual warfare —the Lord is my banner (Jehovah Nissi)
18:1–27	Near Mt. Sinai	Administrative overload and stress	Jethro's advice: select capable men	Spiritual gifts in the body

- A. God never **tempts** his children (Jam. 1:13) but he definitely **tests** them (Ex. 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut. 8:2, 16; 13:3). But why? Why does a teacher give “tests” to her students? Not because she is cruel but rather to **reveal what they know and don't know**.
- B. Though these desert experiences may be **frightening** and even painful, we are precisely where God wants us to be. We didn't take a wrong turn. We are not being punished. The pillar of fire is leading each step of the way. Though at first it doesn't seem so, the desert is actually a **good** place to be!
- C. At U of D, God is teaching us that salvation involves more than getting us out of Egypt. It also involves getting **Egypt out of us!**

III. The Bitter Water Test (Ex. 15:22–27).

A. The context.

On the eastern shore of the Red Sea the people erupt in praise and worship because of the mighty deliverance they have just experienced (Ex. 15:1–21). We're free! OK, so where's the milk and honey? For **three days** they are led deeper and deeper into the desert. Each day their thirst grows greater.

B. The problem.

At last, they come to an oasis! But the water is undrinkable! God has led them to **a bitter place**. This is only a test! But rather than trusting God the people grumble (v 24). The bitterness on the outside is now matched by the bitterness on the inside.

C. The solution.

God shows Moses a “**tree**” (v.25) that turns the bitter water into sweet water. In the New Testament, the cross is sometimes called a tree (Acts 5:30; Gal. 3:13; I Pet. 2:24;

etc.). After showing the cure for bitterness, God leads the people to lovely Elim, where they make camp.

D. The lesson.

1. This is stop #1 on the journey of salvation! Apparently learning this lesson is **crucial** for the rest of the journey.
2. **Grumbling** is a serious sin! The real battles in life are not what happens to us but how we respond to what happens to us.
3. A bitter experience doesn't mean that we've taken a wrong turn or are being punished. No. God **leads us** to such places so we can learn how the cross can heal the bitterness in our life; even make it **sweet**. Paul wrote from prison: "I have learned the secret of **being content** in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:12-13).

IV. The Creed of Mara.

I have written what I call the *Creed of Mara* to help fellow pilgrims when they find themselves in a bitter place in their spiritual journey.

*I believe God **led me** here. This is only a test.*

*I believe God will **provide for me** here.*

*I believe God will **lead me away** from here.*

*I believe God wants to **use this experience** in my life to be a blessing and encouragement to others.*

TABLE TALK

1. Would your friends describe you as a singing Christian? Are you known for your joyful praise? Discuss this.
2. This lesson states: "Most of the contemporary church has no theology of the desert." Do you agree or disagree? Why?
3. When the Hebrews came to the bitter place they "grumbled against Moses" and Moses "cried to the Lord." When you are in a bitter place, do you grumble or do you pray?
4. Make it personal: Talk about a time when God led you to a bitter place. What lessons was God teaching you there? Did you pass the test?
5. Think of a bitter reality that you are facing now. What is God saying to you through this passage of Scripture?

Horse and Rider

*I will sing unto the LORD,
for he has triumphed gloriously,
the horse and rider thrown into the sea. (2x)*

*The LORD, my God, my strength and song,
has now become my victory. (2x)*

*The LORD is God, and (clap) I will praise him,
our covenant God, and I will exalt him. (2x)*