**Rescued: Food for Thought**

Exodus 16:1-5, 27-35

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I didn’t grow up with TV and so the first time I had a favorite movie was 1999 when Neo woke up from the Matrix. And man was my mind blown! So much about this movie had never been done before. The story was fresh. The CGI was revolutionary, and I was hooked.

If it’s been a while, in *The Matrix*, a computer hacker named Neo discovers that the world he lives in is a simulated reality created by machines to enslave humanity. So with the help of rebels like Morpheus and Trinity, he learns to manipulate the simulation, embrace his destiny as “The One,” and fight to free humankind.

And manipulate the simulation he does. Neo figures out that since he is in a computer program he can just download solutions to any problem he faces. Like if he can’t tell what’s real, just download Kungfu and punch it in the face. And if someone like Agent Smith wants to shoot you, just download Kungfu faster. And if you are torn between saving Trinity who you love and saving the world, you guessed it, just Kungfu to the speed of light. And to my 19-year-old brain this was the dream – if only I could download solutions for life!

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If you’ve been with us this fall, you’ll know we aren’t in the Matrix but rather are looking at how God used Moses to save His people from slavery in Egypt. But “saved” is one of those Bible words that has a lot of baggage – it raises images of angry preachers yelling at people – not me, other preachers. But we’ve seen that the reason words like “saved” have baggage is because they don’t have simple dictionary definitions, instead scripture painstakingly defines these words in the context of story.

And so it’s Exodus that defines salvation. And Exodus tells us that when God saves, He liberates His people from the things in our lives that want to enslave or kill us.

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Well today we’ve moved past the 10 plagues and Passover. We’ve walked through the Red Sea. And now God’s people are “free” out in the desert on the other side. And it’s here that we start looking at what it means to live out the salvation God’s won for us.

So would you stand with me as we come before God’s word? We are going to start with Exodus 16 verses 1-5 and then skip down to verse 27. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Exodus 16:1-5;27-35]

So Israel is out in the desert of Sin. Now this is just a location close to Sinai – there’s nothing theological being said here. But it is a desert. And because nothing can live in a desert God’s people are starving and need to be saved.

Salvation means liberation from what seeks to kill us. So this is what God does with the mana. But as we dig into this three questions about deserts rise to the surface: Why does God take His people into the desert at all? What does God do with them there? And what method does He use?[[1]](#footnote-1) If you’re taking notes that’s where were’ going.

So first, why does God take His people into the desert at all? So deserts are terrible places, but it’s clear in Exodus that God has brought His people here on purpose. In Exodus 13 we read:

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light…Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. (Exodus 13:21-22)

In other words God literally led His people into the desert. And then, while the walk from Egypt to the Promised Land should only have taken 11 days God kept them in the wilderness doing circles for 40 years. Why?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Well He wasn’t simply getting His people out of Egypt, He was getting Egypt out of them. And we see that this hadn’t happened yet in verse 3. Here the grateful children of Israel thank Moses for all his work. They say:

“If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” (Exodus 16:3)

That is not only not very thanksgiving; in fact it’s addiction language. Israel is out of Egypt but as soon as they are faced with a new challenge their minds play tricks on them and they “remember” that life was good in Egypt even though they were slaves. They are out of Egypt, but Egypt isn’t out of them.

And this is why God has them in the desert, He’s training them. So in Deuteronomy 8, which is a sermon Moses preached to Israel at the end of their 40 years in the desert – this is the benefit of hindsight speaking – Moses says:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart (Deuteronomy 8:2)

So God wasn’t trying to take His people from point A to point B because location and circumstance weren’t their problem; their problem was in their hearts. They were dreaming about the meat pots. They were like addicts who hate that the drugs have stollen their family from them but still dream of the high. That’s addiction. And it’s not just drugs that trap like this.

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Imagine you grew up with parents who were never pleased with you. And so you very naturally became an adult who lacked confidence and was always overworking to please people.

And then one day you met Jesus and discovered that you don’t have to follow His rules in order to earn His blessing, instead He gives it free of charge. And if you will let Him, He will adopt you into His family. And so you let Him do this, and in that moment you are transformed. You have been forgiven and saved. It’s awesome.

But guess what. You don’t stop being you. So you still tend to be a workaholic, people pleaser who lacks confidence. Why? Because you still need to learn how to live into the new identity Jesus has given you.

Now where do you suppose we learn to do that? In the desert. The desert, where things are hard and don’t go as planned, is the gym of sanctification. This is where we put muscles on the identity God gives us. So this isn’t about getting saved, this is about how we grow in Christ after we are saved. And here’s how Paul says this happens. He says:

For our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Paul says the worst of the difficult things we experience in life are only temporary but produce a glory in us that lasts – the glory outweighs the pain.

We’ve talked about this before, but in scripture glory is weight or substance. And Paul’s talking about a spiritual weight, but this exists in the natural as well. Life if you’ve ever been around someone who has never had anything bad happen in life you know that they are pretty shallow. Like they can’t sympathize with you when you hurt because they’ve got no experience. And when something small does go wrong in their lives they freak out because they don’t know what to do. They’ve got no substance. And it’s the same on the spiritual level. If you want to have spiritual depth and wisdom then you need to spend time in the desert.

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But oh but we don’t like this! The other day I went to a naturopath and explained to her that my body is getting older and doing things I don’t like. And I was very disappointed in her response. She said I need to change the way I’m living. I need to stop eating all the foods I like to eat and replace all those tasty things with other things that the food I like to eat usually eats. And that wasn’t what I wanted to hear. What did I want to hear? I know none of you guys are like this, but I wanted her to sell me an expensive supplement so I can keep living how I want and just avoid ageing.

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And I do the same with God. Before bed I pray “God, make me more loving and wiser. And help me leave the old sins behind that I’ve struggled with. And please accomplish all this in me while I sleep. Oh, and while You’re at it, please help me not have to wake up and go to the bathroom. Amen.” I want to download the solutions for my life.

And I’m frustrated when God doesn’t answer. “I mean, these are all things You want for me, right God? How come You aren’t giving them to me?” Well the problem, God says, is that you’re trying to download character, but that’s not how it works. Christlikeness grows in the desert. And that’s why I’m bringing you there.”

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Now one clarification: does this mean God causes bad things to happen just so He can watch us squirm? “Ha! Watch this guy build character. Zap.” No. In Genesis when God creates the world you will notice there are no deserts. He doesn’t create bad things. He doesn’t create war and disease and death. Our own sin has brought these things into our reality. And one day Jesus is going to return and recreate this place back into what it was supposed to be.

But in the meantime, He uses the bad things; Romans 8 says He causes all things - the brokenness and hunger and sickness we experience - to work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. This means He uses the desert to grow the glory of Christlikeness in His children. And He does this because He knows this is where the abundant life we all seek is found. And this is why God takes His people into the desert.

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But this brings us to our second question which is: what does God do with us in the desert?

So when I’m in a desert I feel alone like I’ve been left out to dry. But contrary to how I feel, look what God tells Moses He is going to do in verse 4. He says:

“I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.” (Exodus 16:4-5)

So when God leads us into a desert He provides what we need. And in this case it’s the miracle of mana. After all deserts don’t usually rain bread. So Mana means “what is it” because the Israelites had no idea. After all deserts don’t usually rain bread.

But before you get too excited about that, there is something subtle here that’s really important. God gives His people what they need. So what was it the starving Israelites needed? Was it to get out of the desert? Obviously not. So was it food? Well certainly the Israelites thought that was what they needed, but it’s not that simple.

See if all the people needed was food and God was going to use a miracle to provide it, then why make them go out and get it? Like why not just zap it into their stomachs? You wake up hungry, and then poof, you feel great all day. Actually, just once and it lasts 40 years. God could have done that.

Instead the people have to go out and get the mana every day except on Fridays where they gather twice as much because none shows up the next day. What’s going on?

Here we come face to face with a hard reality. Often what we think we need is not what God is interested in providing. So what do you pray for in your desert places?... Now it’s not wrong to pray for what you think you need “God, take me out of this desert or make it rain bread” – we see people doing this in the Bible and sometimes God answers those prayers. But usually He gives something else.

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So earlier this year my dad died. I prayed for healing and it didn’t happen. And instead God gave me an extended season with my dad where we both knew he was going to die. And as a result we got to say all the things you would want to say to someone you loved if you knew the time was short. It was special. Several times we commented to each other “I’m not happy about death, but I’m so glad we are doing this together.”

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Often when we are in a desert God doesn’t answer our prayers and take us out or fix our pain, instead He gives us what He knows we need. And He knows the greatest thing we need is to learn to rely on Him. And this is what God’s doing with the mana.

So again, with hindsight to his advantage, Moses preaches in Deuteronomy saying:

[God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Now if that sounds familiar it’s because Jesus references this line several times. And one time He used it to teach His disciples to pray. He said, pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.” This isn’t some random idea Jesus came up with, He was talking about the mana that had to picked up every day. And in this He shows us what the secret to the mana was. God wasn’t simply feeding people; He was building a daily trust between His people and Himself. And this is what they actually needed and what we need as well.

See what we need in life is to see that God is active and providing for us over and over and over again. And this is the blessing He gives in the desert. He shows that He is faithful.

Now I’m not saying this is easy. When I’m in the desert I ask for the download solution “take me out of the desert or take my pain away.” But what God’s doing in the desert is teaching me to trust Him for my daily bread. And that reliance is the blessing. See a desert is just a place where what I’ve grown used to relying on goes away. But it’s when God is all I have that I realize He’s all I need. And this is what God’s doing in the desert.

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Now there is one last tricky question to wrestle with in this passage. So God leads us into the wilderness to grow our glory – our weight and character so that we look like Him. And He does this by teaching us to trust Him daily rather than simply downloading solutions for our problems. But finally what method does He use to accomplish all this? Well look at verse 4 and 27. God says:

I will test them and see whether they will follow My instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days…. Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. (Exodus 16:4-5;27)

So the method God uses in the desert is a test. And when God tests His people fail. What’s up with this? Like I hate tests. I failed my driver’s test, and then just to prove a point I failed it again. It took me three times.

And high school and university were hard for me. There were all these tests used to either qualify or disqualify me from moving on and I hated them. I was so happy to get to grad school and find out that there were no more tests, just papers – and I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Maybe you think that’s weird, but it worked for me! I can spit words onto paper.

But before this it was a qualify or disqualify. And tests in school and the workplace are like this- but not all tests are the same. See when God tested His people and they failed, He didn’t disqualify them, instead He patiently walked with them feeding them mana for 40 years. So something else is going on here. And Solomon speaks to what that is in Proverbs. He says:

My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline, and do not resent His rebuke,

because the Lord disciplines those He loves, as a father the son he delights in. (Proverbs 3:11-12)

In other words God tests or disciplines like a parent. So I heard a story once about a father who kept telling his little girl not to touch the stove, but she kept doing it. And so he devised a test. He turned the stove on just hot enough to hurt and then he sat back to see if she would obey. And she didn’t. But it was the last time. And now that father is saving up to pay for counseling.

But notice the purpose behind the training. Good parents don’t test to disqualify, instead when their child fails their heart goes out more to them. And the punishment isn’t meant to be justice. Like “you disobeyed so now your hand is going to burn.” No. That would be abuse. But good parents bring the pain of discipline to their children so their children will avoid greater pain down the road. And that’s called love.

Of course it takes time for kids to see the love behind the discipline. But that doesn’t mean it’s not there. And it’s the same with God. We usually don’t see why He has us in the desert until its past – if we ever see. But if we will believe Him that He is good then we can trust that He is working out all the pain we experience for our good as well.

So here’s the call: when you find yourself in the desert you can either be destroyed by it and grow angry and bitter, or you can blossom, but it all comes down to what it is you believe about God. So what makes the difference?

Well there is a belief that sits in every heart and that needs to be rooted out because it’s a lie. The belief is “If I live right, then my life should go right.” And then if something goes wrong it’s either because there is something wrong with me, and I hate myself. Or there is something wrong with God and I hate Him. And you’ve probably watched people walk this out. But we need to be saved from this idea because it’s killing us. So how?

Well, the way we put this idea to death is by looking at Jesus. See Jesus was perfect in every way and yet His life wasn’t painless. In fact He suffered the greatest pain any person has ever suffered. On the cross He cried out “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Did you know this is the only time in Jesus’ life where He doesn’t refer to God as His Father or His Abba Father? Why? It’s because in this moment Jesus was losing His sonship. He was losing His relationship with His Father. He was getting the punishment that we deserve so we could get what He deserved – we could be adopted as the children of God.

So life isn’t about getting what we deserve. It’s not about living right so things go right. In fact, none of us have lived right – the Bible says all have sinned, and the wages of sin is death – but through Jesus we get what we don’t deserve. So when we are in a desert and things are hard it’s not God punishing us in justice as our sin warrants, He’s training us as children to look more like Him. He loves us and He knows this is what we need.

See we think our problems are the problem, but God knows we don’t need the Matrix, we need a relationship with the Master. And so He lovingly leads us into desert places where He provides mana but keeps making us come back for more so we will learn that it is Him we need, not His stuff. And it is as we grow in relationship with His Son, that we find the abundant life He wants for us.

So here’s the link to Thanksgiving - wherever it is you find yourself today, give thanks. Choose to trust that God is good even in the difficulty. And let Him use your desert to craft you into the image of His Son. This is what you need.

1. Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/food-in-the-desert/> (Accessed Oct 9, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Deuteronomy 1:2 and Numbers 14:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)