

Introduction: As we study in our recent sermon series the experiences of that rough desert prophet, Elijah, we are reminded that the *best experiences of the LORD* are in the wilderness periods of the lives of God's people, when all seems dried up and the way is hard. May this week's return to Israel's desert wanderings be a comfort to us, as we take a one week break from the ministries of Elijah and Elisha.

Mon/Tues: read Psalm 78:40-43 and Deuteronomy 6:4-16. Though it is sobering to see how Israel in the desert repeatedly tested God [according to Henry Ainsworth in his commentary on Psalm 78:40, there are at least ten shameful examples in the desert where Israel tested God and refused to obey Him] and though there is no doubt of the seriousness of testing God [see God's wrath boil over in Psalm 78:59]. Yet, we also see how gracious God is in handling the memory of this terrible sin in Deuteronomy 6:16, where He uses this terrible episode as an incentive to turn His people to Him in love and devotion.

The point is that Deuteronomy 6 contains not only the warning of verse 16, but also the great command of verse 5: "*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" As the Rabbis used to say, God is able to turn the waters of judgment into waters of mercy. According to Exodus 17:6, water flows from the rock as God's mercy triumphs over His people's sin!

Meditate and Pray: Praise God for turning the hard judgment of Exodus 17 into waters of mercy for an undeserving people! Sing hymn #131 in the Trinity Hymnal as a song of thanksgiving to God for His waters of mercy in your life:

*Children of the heav'nly Father
Safely in His bosom gather;
Nestling bird nor star in Heaven
Such a refuge e'er was given.*

*God His own doth tend and nourish;
In His holy courts they flourish;
From all evil things He spares them;
In His mighty arms He bears them.*

*Neither life nor death shall ever
From the Lord His children sever;
Unto them His grace He showeth,
And their sorrows all He knoweth.*

*Though He giveth or He taketh,
God His children ne'er forsaketh;
His the loving purpose solely
To preserve them pure and holy.*

Weds/Thurs: read Psalm 78:1-72. We must admit that reading the accounts of Israel's wilderness experience in the desert, so full of their persistent unbelief, is a bruising experience. Nevertheless, it is good for us to realize the spiritual fruit which such convicting Bible stories are to produce in our lives. As 1 Corinthians 10:6 puts it: "These things occurred as examples, to keep us from setting our hearts on evil as they did".

Another example is Psalm 78:9-67. Yes, it is a bleak description of Israel with which we are all too familiar from their rebellious years under Moses in the desert. Yet, is there anything more sweet than Psalm 78:1-8, which we sing as # 364 in our Trinity hymnal, in its expression of the godly lessons for future generations which such stories of Israel's failure are meant to produce? What hopeful lessons there are in the last verse of that hymn by Isaac Watts (speaking of what our covenant children will learn from such sinful history):

*Thus shall they learn in God alone
Their hope securely stands,
That they may ne'er forget His works,
But practice His commands.*

Fri/Sat/Sun: read Psalm 106:6-48. Psalm 106:6-43 is another psalm which sums up how low sin had brought God's people in the desert. Look at verses 13-14: *"But they soon forgot what God had done and did not wait for God's counsel. In the desert they gave in to their craving; in the wasteland they put God to the test."*

Yet Psalm 106 actually begins with a sweet confession of sin in verse 6, *"We have sinned, even as our fathers did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly."* It ends with an affirmation that God remembered His covenant even during His people's exile and captivity: *"For their sake He remembered His covenant and out of His great love He relented. He caused them to be pitied by all who held them captive... Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from the nations"* (v.45-46).

Prayer of Reflection: "Lord, our battered faith revives when we see you remember your covenant towards wayward Israel! Thank you that some of the sternest songs of judgment in Scripture also contain the sweetest revelations of your grace. How quick and ready your grace is to forgive! Help us to set this doctrine up in our lives as a pillar and rock-like ordinance to hold onto when we sin: That you have the authority to forgive sins and that we ought always to reckon on your help and deliverance, **especially when we like Israel least deserve it.** Amen."

For our meditation on God's generous, forgiving grace, here are all the verses of hymn # 364:

*Let children hear the mighty deeds
Which God performed of old;
Which in our younger years we saw,
And which our fathers told.*

*He bids us make His glories known,
His works of power and grace;
And we'll convey His wonders down
Through every rising race.*

*Our lips shall tell them to our sons,
And they again to theirs;
That generations yet unborn
May teach them to their heirs.*

*Thus shall they learn in God alone
Their hope securely stands,
That they may ne'er forget His works,
But practice His commands.*