"I Am The LORD, Your Healer"

Intro: Our passage today finds Israel in a vulnerable place – the wilderness. They have just crossed the Red Sea, and now it's time to set out to the Promised Land. They are a new nation, a vast people, leaving the predictable comforts of Egypt to enter the unknown of the desert. *Who will take care of them?* That is the theme of this section of Exodus (15:22-27, 16, and 17).

This morning we will see that **because the LORD, our healer, takes care of his people, we can endure tests, walk in obedience, and anticipate the Promised Land of heaven**. Our focus is: *How does God take care of his people?* As we look at Israel this morning, we'll see ourselves.

God takes care of his people:

I. Through Trials (22-25) – may sound like a strange way to care for us

Notice the first word in verse 22, "Then." It's important to know what just happened: Walls of water collapsing. Egyptian chariots sinking. Singing. Dancing. The Song of Moses. Miriam dancing and shouting: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex 15:21). Freedom. Freedom! Free from Pharaoh's cruelty – no longer oppressed, overworked, overlooked. Moses sings:
"Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea,…
The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,
your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy" (Ex 15:4-6).

Is this not the case for us? In Israel's deliverance from Egypt, we see our deliverance from slavery to sin; death; and despair, by the better Moses, Jesus Christ. Now we are making our way through the wilderness of the Christian life, seeking our Promised Land of heaven.

For Israel, it's time to get moving from the exhilarating victory or the Red Sea to the unknown of the wilderness. How will God care for them

in the desert? How does God care for us in the day-to-day wilderness of the Christian life?

He cares for us through tests and trials. Does that sound cruel and unusual? God used a test to reveal to Israel what was in their heart and to grow their faith in him. He does the same with you and I.

Look at what happened to Israel: three days and they find no water! No water in the wilderness is a serious threat, especially after three days' travel. Physical thirst is almost foreign to us – maybe the restaurant was out of sweet tea. But what about other needs in your life? Areas where you feel like God isn't caring for you?

(23) They finally come to water! But, it's bitter. "Marah" means bitter. Many of the water holes in that region were slightly salty, and thus undrinkable. So it's been three days, no water, and the water they come to they can't drink. Is this some kind of test? Actually it is – in verse 25, we see that God is testing them at Marah.

(24) How will they respond? "And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, '**What shall we drink?**'"

Had they forgotten God's power over water when he turned the Nile into blood (Ex 7:20), and when he made the Red Sea stand like two walls on either side (14:22)?[1] I would think drinking water would not be a problem.

Notice their gut reaction – they "**grumbled**." They murmured and complained against Moses. But is their complaint really with Moses? As God's appointed leader, he is only following God's instructions. By complaining against Moses, Israel complained against God. How could he not be strong enough or wise enough or good enough to care for them?

[1] ESV Study Bible note, p. 170.

Do you ever see this in yourself? I do often. What is your "*What shall we drink?*" complaint this morning? In what area of your life is there a feeling of unrest, being betrayed by God, worry about a need you have that doesn't seem to be being met.

We must see that when we grumble, complain, and murmur about some situation in life, our complaint is not against that situation or person, but against God. Our grumbling reveals a deeper unrest in the sufficiency of God to care for us. Like a patient doctor, God lifts the bandage to show us diseases like pride, self-reliance, and lust underneath.

Notice what happens next – when they ask about water, we might expect God to say, "Didn't you just see what I did to Egypt's army?! I've had enough of you people!" But he doesn't, and what happens instead is surprising – look at verse 25.

Moses "cried to the LORD" for help. **Trials often lead us to fresh desperation in prayer.**
Moses cried for help, and "the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet." *What just happened?*

God, through Moses, makes bitter water sweet.

The "log" was likely a small tree or desert shrub. Some argue that it was a special plant with properties that take away a bitter taste in water, but no specific plant has been identified. I think the tree was simply the instrument God chose to supernaturally change the water, just like he chose to use Moses' staff to part the Red Sea.

What made the difference between bitter and sweet water was not the log; it was the LORD. Notice that **God did not take them to different water; he makes the water they have different.** This is often the way he works in our lives in the "What shall we drink?" situations. He often doesn't make everything instantly better, but meets us in the bitter.

So when it comes to the wilderness of the Christian life, are we supposed to find a desert tree somewhere to toss into our situation?

No, there's no need. Jesus, the better Moses, saw our hopeless state of death in sin. He cried out to God: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). On another tree, he drank the bitter cup of wrath you and I deserve, so that now, we drink from the sweet cup of God's favor.

[John Newton, slave-trading sea dog, who believed himself to be the chief ringleader of wickedness before being saved, makes a distinction between Christ's suffering, which was punishing, and Christian suffering, which is restoring.[2] Christ drank the unmixed wrath of God. The suffering we drink during the Christian life is, in Newton's words, "only medicinal to promote [our] chief good."[3]]

[Newton describes indwelling sins as a nest of vipers, which can go undetected until the rod of affliction stirs them:[4]
My grandparents used to live on a lake. After moving away, they heard a chilling story from the new owner who hired a man to cut down some of the brush and bushes down by the water. One day, he slipped and fell into the lake. Immediately he started screaming – realizing he had fallen into a bed of water moccasins! He barely made it out of the water and to the hospital, where it was discovered that he had ___ bites, and almost died. Now that the owner knew about the snakes, they were able to deal with them.]

Indwelling sin is like a bed of poisonous snakes in our hearts. God cared for Israel and he cares for us by showing us these sins through trials – opening the door to repentance and restoration. In short, God uses tests to kill what's killing us,[5] and to restore us to life in him.

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[2] Tony Reinke, *Newton on the Christian Life: To Live is Christ*, p. 181. (wording adapted)
[3] Reinke, p. 181.
[4] Reinke, p. 182.
[5] Pastor Harry Reeder's phraseology

But trials are not the only way God cares for his people in our passage.

II. Through Obedience (25b-26)

At the end of verse 25, we see something odd: "There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, '…'"

In a sense, God had just tested them with finding no water, and the test revealed hearts full of grumbling and distrust.

But in verse 26, God makes a new test for them as they move forward on their way to the Promised Land. This test applies to us as we walk through the wilderness of the Christian life to our Promised Land of heaven.

Here's the test: [READ v. 26]

Let's break this into it's three parts[6]:

1. *What God expects of his people*: one word – **Obedience**

   This isn't a new idea.

   Remember the repeated words of Moses to Pharaoh before each of the plagues: "Let my people go, *that they may serve me*" (Ex 7:16).

   When God made the covenant with Abraham, he called him to keep the covenant by circumcising every male of his offspring as a sign of the covenant (Gen 17).

   When the people get to Mount Sinai, God will give more formalized laws to keep.

   The call to obedience doesn't drop off in the New Testament:

   (I John 2:3-5) "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, 'I know

[6] The first two parts are from: Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 117.

him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected."

If I were an Israelite just freed from Egypt, I would be tempted to think, "Woohoo! I'm free! No more master for me!"
The reality is, God freed them from slavery to Pharaoh to serve him. And in serving him is true freedom.

In Romans 6, Paul says that we, "having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness" (6:18).
[There's the ancient story of a master who bought a slave girl one day and said to her, "I bought you to set you free." And she says to her master, "I will serve you forever."] In Christ, obedience moves from drudgery to joy.

As we walk through the Christian life, God expects our obedience.

2. *What we can expect from God*: **No plagues of Egypt**

   What are the plagues of Egypt? Broadly, this refers to all the plagues God put on Egypt, but specifically to God turning the Nile River to blood – making the water undrinkable.
   God is saying, "If you walk in obedience to me, you will never find what I give you undrinkable."[7]

3. Why does God make this promise? **"For I am the LORD, your healer."**

   This is not the only time God is called "healer" – Psalm 103:3 – "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases."
   God heals our disease of sin, but how does he do it?

[7] R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale, p. 129.

"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and **with his wounds we are healed.**"

Bitter trials take on sweetness with the presence of this Healer. Obedience becomes possible through a new heart and the power of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Philippians 2:12-13).
We see how he cares for us through his commands when we see this truth: **his commands lead us out of self-sufficiency to find all in him, "the LORD, our healer."**

But God doesn't stop there in taking care of his people.

III. He Cares for Us **To the Promised Land (27)**

Verse 27 is a beautiful picture of the end of the Christian journey, which is really only the beginning: [READ v. 27]

Elim is an oasis – a picture of overflowing abundance. 12 springs – one for each tribe. 70 palm trees – these numbers symbolize the fullness of blessing God bestowed on his people.

[Notice that both Marah and Elim were purposed by God. And Elim follows Marah.]

Elim foreshadows Israel's entrance into the Promised Land – a land of milk and honey overflowing with blessing. It points us to our eternal Elim, the new and better Promised Land of blessing.

Among the chief blessings there will be a tree – the tree of life – whose leaves (Rev 22:2) are "for the healing of the nations." *In this land, Emmanuel's Land, all that is bitter will be made forever sweet.*

Let us walk in obedience and anticipation for the day we will see the LORD, our Healer face to face.