
Water in the Wilderness

Exodus 17:1-7

Introduction Water is a great necessity of life. God has designed a marvelous engine in the creation of the hydrological cycle. An intricate system of winds transports water from one place to another, all guided by the providential hand and purposes of God.

We little know what it means to be without water. Most of you have grown up where water is plentiful. Turn a tap and you have your choice. We waste water like there is a never ending supply of it. Where I grew up in Africa, we had two seasons: wet and dry. In the wet season, you had to catch and store all the water you planned to use during the dry. In the dry season, water often became a scarce commodity.

Bread and water are usually thought of as sustenance level provision for man's life. People all over the world often live on bread and water, on rice and simple vegetables. Israel is being weaned off the rich meats and varied vegetables of Egypt. God has provided the bread. His people have tasted bitter water turned sweet at Marah. They have begun to see the faithful provision of God six days a week in the giving of manna. But now, they will learn just how important what water represented really is and how it would come.

1 Corinthians 10:1-6 says, *"I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. 6 Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did."* Where does Paul get this? How does He know from reading the Old Testament that "that Rock was Christ"? What did he see in this text that caused him to make such an extravagant claim? But wait, maybe it is our problem that sees this as unusual, challenging and surprising. Could it be that we are simply not reading our Bibles the way the apostles did? As we work through this text this morning, I want you to see the importance of paying close attention to the historical setting, the grammar and flow of the language. I also want you to see that we must get that right first. Then, from there as we move through the Bible, beyond Moses' intent, we begin to grasp the Holy Spirit's intent. Through the very words, sentences and paragraphs which make up this text we are launched on a trajectory that lands us with, "And that Rock was Christ."

So, back to Exodus we go; back to the wilderness, back before the giving of the Law, back to over a million people raising the dust as they tromp along following God.

Note

I am indebted to Phil Ryken for his insight into the court room setting behind this narrative.

The Guiding Providence of God

(v. 1)

As we have seen before, God is in charge of the trials and tribulations Israel faces. His sovereign hand and guiding providences are evident here.

In their Steps

Notice first God is leading them in their steps. The path they take is not a meandering trail chosen by scouts sent ahead. It is not some strategic movement put together each evening by Moses and Aaron. The day's travel is led out by the pillar and cloud of fire. Each morning, after the collecting of the manna, tents are pitched, livestock are ordered, pack animals are loaded. The pillar moves out from the center of the camp and leads out along the trail. Step by step they are following God.

To their Stops

God is also leading them to their stops. Where they end each day is up to God. They don't stop at a Holiday Inn where they have a group reservation. They stop for the evening when the pillar halts and hovers. There, the camp is set up. At times, they stop for more than one night. There are stops where they do not move forward at all, but rather spend significant time. I would guess that these longer stops were over the Sabbath weekends.

Now their steps lead them and land them at an unexpected stop. While an overnight at Rephidim might not be too bad, this is a longer stop. It is not an oasis. It is not a pleasant place. They are there long enough for what water they can carry and what little may be at this stop to have run out. They are in a dry place and they are a thirsty people.

The Discontented Grumbling of the People

(v. 2-3)

I suppose we all hope for Israel, that they will come to trial and trouble with hearts ready to trust in God and rest in His promises. But alas, again, it is not to be.

By their Quarrelling

Now let us make no mistake. Thirst is a difficult thing. We are not talking about the inconvenience of an empty water bottle on a jog around the park. We are talking about one million plus souls along with all their livestock going without water. This is thirst on a massive scale. Imagine the whole city of Atlanta waking up one day to no water at the taps, which they well may be heading toward. So this has come to a crisis. This is no imagined complaint. Many panting tongues and crying children and dry barrenness as far as the eye can see, brings the problem into sharp focus.

Matthew Henry helpfully notes, "Not only that they wanted water and felt the inconvenience of that want, but that their passion sharpened their appetites and they were violent and impatient in their desire; their thirst made them outrageous. Natural desires, and those that are most craving, have need to be kept under the check and control of religion and reason."¹¹

¹¹Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991), Ex 17:1.

So, in the morning, after gathering up the manna supplied to them from heaven by God, they gather in front of the town hall, in front of Moses' tent. There is a certain irony here. Ah, here we have supernaturally provided bread from God every day including this day. But as they eat the bread, they also see they have no water. So, what will they do?

They do not see in the manna the possibility of God's merciful and rich supply. The blessing they partake of is overshadowed by the hardship they are experiencing. They are not only thirsty, but they are craving water. The natural desire and the necessity of life has now become a ruling master.

They go and demand water from Moses as a matter of debt. Moses owes them water. Rather than coming to inquire as to what God requires and what Moses may teach, they make a demand. "Here, you give us water. Now. We don't care whether you are able to or not. Just give us water."

They are not coming with humility or hopefulness. The word translated "quarreled" here is the idea of abusive speech, to revile. It is to rail against someone. This is confrontational and strident. It is not a gentle request for help, but a violent demand that Moses solve the problem.

With their Questioning

Now, let's face it. As a leader in your home, in your work place, in the church, when you have done what the Lord asked you do and then the people you lead complain and attack you, this is very hard. Our tendency is to become sarcastic, cutting and unkind in our responses. But Moses exhibits here the character that he is later commended for. He is a meek man. He is not cowardly or afraid. He is not weak or spineless. He is strong. He is strong in that he is right. He is strong in that he has obeyed God and led them where God directed. Now, how will he respond?

Now see the meekness and mildness of Moses in his response. The questions here do not ring with anger rather with heart penetrating quietness. You must hear a different tone in Moses' response than in Israel's demand. They have found fault with him for not providing them with water. He responds by shifting the weight of the issue from himself to God.

The second exposes what all our quarreling and complaining and demanding is doing – it is testing God. It is testing His patience. It is presumptuous as though God owes us. Even when God promises we do not ask in demanding way. They have come to quarrel and complain to Moses but the effect is to wear out the patience of God.

Why does he challenge their demand of him? Because in their hearts they were saying what would be said all the way down to Jesus' say, "Moses gave us bread in the wilderness." (John 6:32). They saw Moses as the provider of bread and therefore responsible to provide them water. But ultimately, they were blaming God for their plight. They knew God had brought them there. They just blamed their leadership so that they would not have to face the fact that they were blaming God.

One commentator speaking of this incident wrote, “All our dissatisfaction shows that we are disappointed with God.” (Ryken, *Saved for His Glory*). When we are dissatisfied in our circumstances, we are denying the wise goodness of God who brought us into those very circumstances. In what ways are you dissatisfied? What do you tend to complain about? Who appears to have fallen short of what they ought to have done for you? Who’s to blame in front of you when you dare not blame the God who is above you?

In their Complaining

The people thirsted there for water. There is nothing wrong with being thirsty in a dry place. But the repetition here is significant. It was not just that they were experiencing thirst, they were ruled by thirst. Notice the shift in expression from verse 1 to verse 3. They had no water, there. But they thirsted for water in their complaining to Moses.

Psalm 78 locates the problem. This is not a problem of the situation, but an issue of the heart. Listen to the Psalmist’s analysis of this and other situations like it.

¹⁴ In the daytime he led them with a cloud,
and all the night with a fiery light.

¹⁵ He split rocks in the wilderness and gave
them drink abundantly as from the deep.

¹⁶ He made streams come out of the rock
and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

¹⁷ Yet they sinned still more against him,
rebellng against the Most High in the de-
sert.

¹⁸ They tested God in their heart by de-
manding the food they craved.

¹⁹ They spoke against God, saying, Can
God spread a table in the wilderness?

²⁰ He struck the rock so that water gushed
out and streams overflowed. Can he also
give bread or provide meat for his people?”

²¹ Therefore, when the LORD heard, he was
full of wrath; a fire was kindled against
Jacob; his anger rose against Israel,

²² because they did not believe in God and
did not trust his saving power.

They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. Their disobedient complaining arose from their hearts. We think, “How could they have come demanding to God when He had so clearly met their needs.” The Psalmist tells us that they mistook the merciful and blessed provision *as their right*. Our needs do not obligate God at all. This is one of the downward progressions of the heart: what is desired will be demanded when it is denied.

Their complaining also arose because they did not believe in God and did not trust His saving power (v. 22). Do you see this? Here is a very hard situation. In it they grumbled, complained, rebelled against God, attacked the leader and demanded God provide for them. This sin came, not only because they were mastered by their thirst, but also because they did not believe nor trust God.

The people slander Moses and God. It is an attack on their motivations. They are assuming the worst. There is an active and acidic disbelief and doubt. “Why did you bring us here to kill us?” It is a “why” question as though Moses and God had some kind of evil agenda. Moses and God have done this “in order to kill them.” This is a purpose statement. It is active voice. They have now taken the stand to charge Moses and God with attempted murder.

The Humble Prayer of the Leader

(v. 4)

After admonishing the people, Moses turns to God in prayer. Under attack, he humbles himself and cries out to God.

As the Right Response

Moses' prayer is the right response. He does not open a book on *Contemporary Leadership in the Hard Times*. He does not begin to seek out people who will be loyal so as to ensure a following. He does not check to see if his self-esteem is intact. He does not seek to bring about change through updating his leadership style. He does not send his resume' to another nation who might be looking for a leader. He does not even Google "well drilling". He cries out to God.

What we tend to do as a last resort Moses does as a first response. Isn't this true of most of us? Something goes wrong. People begin to attack us. So we try to fix it. We try to placate people. But what we ought to do is to turn to God immediately. We are not asking God to approve or baptize our worldly schemes. We are hopefully coming with the right request.

With the Right Request

This is what Moses does. He recognizes that the situation is not the problem. The people are the problem. Changing their situation will only relieve the immediate symptom, but will not bring any lasting solution. He needs help with these people. In view of the imminent danger of stoning, what does God want him to do?

Is he one hundred percent pure as the driven snow? Probably not. He does say, "What am I to do with *these* people." It seems the ESV is capturing a subtle tone. These people are not just a group standing around, but a people of a certain kind of character. And their character is being clearly manifested through their conduct.

God has done a deep work of grace in Moses' life. 40 odd years ago, he had taken a life in defense of these very same people. He had run under sentence of death. He had spent 40 long year tending sheep in this very desert they were camping in. He has learned some deep lessons of the soul. But God is not finished transforming Moses. The people he is leading are the primary tool in God's hand to continue to shape Moses' character and conduct.

The Surprising Provision from God

(v. 5-6)

So, in response God tells Moses exactly what to do. Here unfolds one of the most dramatic scenes in Exodus. I suspect that it is even deeper and more astonishing than we often realize. Why go through this exercise? Why record the details as they are? Why is this set up so that any knowledgeable Israelite recognizes a court, a jury, the law, the magistrate and the judgment? Because, the New Testament sees much more in this narrative than the bare story of water from a rock.

Moses Leads to the Rock

First, Moses is to lead the way along with some of the Elders of the people out to the rock at Horeb. So the people are demanding water. Moses has responded by crying out to God. The elders are gathered around for a court is being convened.

He is instructed to lead the people to a different place. Now, we would expect that this would be an oasis. But where is Horeb? Horeb is Mt. Sinai. It is the place of the burning bush and where they later will receive the Law.

God Stands on the Rock

In a sentence often overlooked, God says that He will stand before Moses. He will stand on the rock. He will intervene between the people and Moses. He draws attention to His personal presence, His visible manifestation on the rock. He takes His place as the accused, the One charged with crime. He is not guilty of anything. He is innocent. Israel is prosecuting Him for attempted murder and misleading the nation. Will He be acquitted?

Moses Strikes the Rock

Moses was told to take his rod. Notice that it is identified as the rod with which he struck the Nile. This is rod of judgment. This is rod which turns the waters of Egypt to blood. This is the rod of judgment that is to strike the rock on which God stands, the rock from which the law comes. The one who is accused by Israel, the one who stands as mediator between Moses and the people, the one who is innocent of all charges will be struck by the rod of judgment.

Water Streams from the Rock

Moses rears back with the rod and strikes the rock where God stands. The rock is cleaved and out of it flows water. Not a small trickle or stream. It is a rushing river of clear, sparkling life-giving water. This river flows out of the rock and down through the desert and all along the banks of this new river over a million people and all their livestock are amply supplied.

This was all done in the sight of the elders. They sat as a jury. The verdict is rendered. God is with them. God is willing to bear the sin of their grumbling and complaining. In His mercy, He bears the rod of judgment that ought to have fallen on their sinful heads. And in the very act of justice exercised on the Innocent One, God makes a full provision. His promise is true. His name is upheld. His law is satisfied. His provision is gloriously rich and free and flowing.

See how God has ordained the exact order of events as they are recorded. Moses leads to the rock where the law will come. There, God will stand on that rock. That rock is then struck by the rod of judgment. At its cleaving, out of the rock streams the water that gives and sustains life.

Jesus announced that He is the bread of life, the true manna. He also declared that He is the water of life, the true life giving stream. He will satisfy the thirsty forever (John 4:10-15). In John 7:37-39, Jesus connects this life giving water with the giving of the Holy Spirit. After His death, after the rod of judgment had fallen on our Redeemer at the cross, His side was riven and out poured blood and water. Jesus is that Rock from which the Law came. Jesus was struck by the rod of judgment. Jesus poured out His life in His blood. From Him come the true living waters. And one day, from His throne there will flow the river of the water of life which sustains the tree of life and gladdens the souls of believers forever.

The Calling of the Name (v. 7)

Both in the actual events and in the writing of the Exodus narrative, Moses gives places names that are meant to be reminders. All of us have special or not so special places whose events there are invoked by that name of the place. For example, just saying, “Remember 9/11” now invokes a dreadful day in our history. Kamiah, Idaho invokes memories of my honeymoon. So that they will never forget, Moses names this place.

The Names of the Place

Curiously, Moses names this with two names. The names are Massah and Meribah. Massah means “testing.” Meribah means “quarreling”. The names of the place are to remind Israel of their failure here. We marvel at the water from the rock and rehearse this story to our little ones as a grand exhibition of the providing goodness of God. And that is good. But the names of the place point us to Israel’s failure. Here they quarreled with God. Here, they put God on trial.

The Nature of the Problem

What was the true nature of the problem here? What was behind the complaining, quarreling and demands of the Israelites? They did not believe God promises and they did not realize God’s presence. When they tested God by saying, “Is God with us or not?” they put God in the dock. They called on God to justify Himself. They attempted to become the prosecutor and the judge with God as the criminal.

Ah, but the immense and immeasurable mercies of God. When they deserved nothing but judgment and deprivation, God was kind to show them how He would answer as they put Him on trial. He would show Himself true, not just in the moment of need and in the water He provided, but in the grand story of redemption. The Rock, our God, our Lord Jesus Christ, took the rod we deserved and gave us the life giving water of the Spirit. Praise Him.

Conclusion In conclusion, let us rejoice in the rock of our salvation.

Philip Ryken writes, “It is not our place to bring God to trial. The real question is not ‘What do we think about him?’ but ‘What does he think about us?’ It is not a matter of us reaching a verdict about him, but of him declaring his verdict on us. With reference to Israel’s trial at Meribah, the Bible gives this warning: “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).”¹²

¹²Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus : Saved for God's Glory*, Includes Bibliographical References (P. [1165]-1202) and Indexes. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005), 452.

God has marvelously and wonderfully provided for us. Yet, we still grumble and complain. Listen to the warning drawn from this text in Exodus as it is sung in Psalm 78:15-18: *"He split open the rocks in the wilderness to give them water, as from a gushing spring. He made streams pour from the rock, making the waters flow down like a river! Yet they kept on sinning against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. They stubbornly tested God in their hearts, demanding the foods they craved."* Let us stop sinning against our God and rebelling against Him. Let us stop doubting His presence, denying His promises and demanding His provisions. Let us repent and turn to Him in humble trust and simple obedience.

Come to the Rock that is Christ. If you are thirsty, come. Turn away from the muddy pools of the world, the mighty rivers of Egypt and come to the One who gives you His promises and gives you His presence. Turn away from your sin. Trust in the saving work of Christ. He is the one who bore your punishment. He is the One who stands as your King. He is your Redeemer and Ruler. Call on Him to save you.

Psalm 95:6-10 shapes the call from this text:

Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways."

Christian, why do you turn away from the Rock from whom the river of life flows? Why do you seek something less thinking it will be so much better? If you sense the conviction of the Holy Spirit over sins, confess them and forsake them, now. Do not delay.

Take heed to the illustration and instruction from the Old Testament. Guard yourself lest in the moment that you thank you stand, you fall. Take heed to your heart that you do not doubt God's promises as they did and that you do not crave evil as they did. And know that there is always a way to be pleasing to God, to escape so that you do not have to succumb to temptation.

Hold fast in faith until the day we will all gather around the throne. From that Rock, the Lord Jesus Christ, will flow the living water free to all. His grace of the Spirit in us today will one day be a deep well and flowing fountain of sparkling joy in His Presence.