

The Waters of Quarreling

Exodus 17:1-7

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(Lesson on Exodus 16:22-36 not transcribed)

If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 17, as we continue to work our way through this book. Tonight we are coming to the final stage of Israel's journey to Sinai. This is the last stop on the way to Sinai, but this oasis of Rephidim turns out to be yet another example of Israel's faithlessness and of God's patience and mercy. Remember that on the way to Sinai, four crises occur in Israel experience. There is the lack of drinking water that we saw in Marah back in Exodus chapter 15 verses 22 to 27. Then in Exodus 16, when they go out into the Wilderness of Sin after passing through Elim, there is a shortage of food and God provides the manna and the quail there in the wilderness. Here we come again to another shortage of water. Finally, next time we are together, we'll see an unprovoked attack by a desert people against the people of God. So these four crisis attend the children of Israel as they come out of the glorious miraculous Red Sea crossing experience and begin to make their way to Sinai. Four real crisis in their lives.

At the same time we have already seen a pattern develop in the three incidents that we have studied so far. We've looked at that shortage of water at Marah, we've looked at the lack of food in the Wilderness of Sin. We've also seen the disobedience of Israel at the end of Exodus chapter 16 when they do not obey God's word, or some of them do not obey God's word with regard of the gathering of the manna and the ceasing of the gathering on the Lord's day.

In each of these pre-Sinai wilderness stories about the things that happened to Israel on the way to Sinai, we saw four elements. First of all, there is the journey. They begin to journey and when they run into a need or to a test, they murmur. Then there is intercession on the part of Moses on their behalf. Finally there is deliverance. Now, when you look at their journeying after the Exodus, there will be two more elements in each of those stories. After murmuring because of their need, there will be judgment and repentance, then intercession and relief. But in these passages, despite Israel's failure, God does not bring immediate judgment. In fact He shows them grace and mercy despite their faithlessness and disobedience. We'll see there is a reason for that leading up to Sinai. God is teaching a gigantically important lesson in this particular pattern.

We have also said that the things that befall Israel in the wilderness on the way to Sinai reflect the harsh realities of life in the wilderness. Following God out of Egypt was not going to be going to the land of Canaan on flowery beds of ease. This was hard stuff. It was going to require faith. They face the cruelties of nature and the cruelties of man. Israel's needs were very real. In criticizing Israel's response to these circumstances we are not down playing the reality of these trials. When we call on believers to trust in God, we're not downplaying what they're going through. When we say that Israel should have trusted in God, we're not saying that they should have trusted in God because the trial really wasn't that bad after all. No, the trials are real, and we do Israel a disservice, we are unjust, if we speak of them as if they are not really facing something of great consequences. Oh, the things they are facing are absolutely real and have consequences, more than some of the things that tempt us to question the goodness and love of God.

The things that they are facing are real, but their response is inappropriate. Over and over it is clear in these passages, that though God does not bring judgment, He is displeased with Israel's faithless and disobedience response. There is a negative lesson being taught us along side the positive lesson of God's grace.

Now, in this series we've already drawn attention to Paul's use of this section of Scripture in I Corinthians, but let me remind you of that, because in I Corinthians chapter 10, verses 1 through 6, especially verse 11, Paul teaches us four things about the Exodus and what we are to learn from the Exodus.

You'll remember that we said that first of all Paul emphasizes that the Exodus and the wilderness experience happened for us. That God, in taking the children of Israel through the wilderness, intended this to be an instruction for us, for believers, for those upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Secondly, the Exodus story, Paul says has not only happened for us, but it was written down for us. The reason that God, in His mercy, had Moses write down these experiences was for the benefit of Christians. Paul is not denying that the Exodus story had benefit for Old Testament believers. Of course he's not denying that, but he's emphasizing that these are not just musty old stories that have nothing to say to us as Christians. These things are living, breathing, practical, applicable truths. They are for us. They have been written down for us. They are not just for a people that lived one hundred, or two hundred or five hundred, or one thousand or 1200 years ago; they are for us Paul says.

Thirdly, in I Corinthians 10, Paul says that the wilderness experience was full of Christ. Now, I'm not going to remind you of how he says that because we are going to look at that at the end of that passage tonight. He emphasizes that Christ is all throughout this wilderness experience. Christ is everywhere you turn in the wilderness.

Then finally Paul emphasizes that God's purposes in recording these events are largely bound up in teaching us how not to act. In other words, He's got a negative instructional purpose. You see what they did? Don't do that. It's a negative teaching device. It's a negative instructional device. Sort of like the guy that says, "See how that guys batting? Don't try and do that. It will kill you; you'll last about 3 years if you bat like that. You'll never hit the ball, and you'll throw your arm all out of joint if you try and bat like that, or pitch like that, or shoot like that, or throw like that." It's a negative didactic device. Paul says, "God's purpose is that we would learn not to do what Israel did in the wilderness." Now, it's important for us to remember this because Paul perhaps especially has Exodus 17 verses 1 through 7 in mind in some of the things that he says in the first part of I Corinthians 10. And again we'll come back to that a little bit later on.

Now, a few more things and then we'll get into the passage. Our passage tonight is the fourth instance of Israel grumbling against God recorded in the book of Exodus. The first grumbling incident came before the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus chapter 14 verses 11 and 12. The people grumble again in Exodus 16:2 because of a lack of food. The people grumble against the Lord and now again for the fourth time here in Exodus 17. The people grumble against the Lord and that grumbling indicates a distrust in God's providence that leaves Israel to be tempted to look else where for help. The grumbling of Israel reflects a distrust of God's provision. When they first grumbled, do you remember what they said? "Why did we ever leave Egypt? God, you're not giving us what we need. What we really need to do is go back to Egypt because Egypt will give us everything that we need."

Now, however totally out of skew with reality that sentiment is, that is in fact the estimate of the people of God. They question God's providence, they question His provision and they look somewhere else for their help. My friends, that temptation will be one of the key temptations of Israel through out the period of the existence of Israel as a nation. Here it is at the very outset, before they have even been given the law at Sinai, before they have even ever thought of having a king, before they have ever had a centralized jurisprudence and government in Jerusalem. Long before those things come into being they are already being tempted not to trust in God's provision, but to look elsewhere. Of course, that is an incredibly timely pastoral issue for us, especially when we come into circumstances of serious testing and it is our temptation to question God's provision and to look elsewhere for help. So, Paul's words and Moses' words in this passage tonight are very, very appropriate for us. So, for that as background let's turn to Exodus chapter 17 and hear God's holy and inspired word.

Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that

we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go "Behold I will stand before you there on the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because thy tested the LORD, saying, "IS the LORD among us, or not?"

Amen, thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He write His eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

This is Your word, O Lord, to instruct us in faith and in grace and to keep us from temptations. We ask that You would give us seeing eyes and hearing ears in Jesus name. Amen.

We've said several times that God is, among other things, teaching the children of Israel to live by grace in the wilderness. Living by grace in this instance entails trusting God to provide, trusting in the wisdom of where God is leading them, how God is leading them, and being obedient to His instructions and commands. So, living by grace means here trusting God and following His family instructions even in the face of hardship. God is the one who has taken them this way. Yet, from Marah, to the giving of the manna, to Massah and Meribah, Israel is showing fairly clearly that she does not want to live by grace. She's failing miserably. But remember the big picture. God is preparing a people to do what? To worship Him. That's His great point in the Exodus. To create a people who will worship Him. And by creating a people who worship Him, God does not mean that he wants a group of people to go through a series of external liturgical and ritual actions without a comprehensive trust in Him and love for Him and obedience to Him. So in the wilderness, He is providing them opportunity to worship Him in all of life. In hardship and in trial. In situations where they are called to obey Him, in situations in which they are called to trust in Him because God desires a people who will worship Him in all of life, from the depths of the heart, in faith, by obedience before, during and after corporate praise. God doesn't want people to go through the motions when they gather together to worship Him. He wants people who are already worshiping Him in all of life. He's preparing them for that even in the wilderness.

Now, in this passage, we're going to see a trial, and grace, and an assessment. In verses 1 through 3, we are going to see the trial described. In verses 4 through 6, we are going to see the grace of God displayed, and in verse 7, we are going

to see Moses', and really this is God's, assessment of what happened at Massah and Meribah. I'd like to look at this passage in those three sections with you briefly tonight.

I. The people of God are tried and respond in unbelief.

First, let's look at verses 1 through 3. Here is the situation and response. Once again, in verses 1 through 3, we come to a circumstance of trial and we see Israel respond in unbelief. Now, let me reiterate. The circumstances here are hard and so the reaction is perfectly understandable. Indeed, this kind of a trial is a standing issue for the life of faith. You have, and some of you are, and all of you will face trials like this. It may not be literally wanting water. But it may be wondering what in the world God is doing in your life right now and wondering how in the world that the things that He is doing could possibly be done by a God who is wise and who loves you. So, the trial that is being faced here is a standing issue of the spiritual life.

The passage begins with two important points I'd like you to see in verse 1. Notice the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the Wilderness of Sin according to the command of the Lord. So, Israel is where she is because the Lord wants her where she is. She's there at the behest of the Lord. This is not an accident.

Secondly notice verse 1. There is no water. Rephidim, as we said, is the last step on the way to Horeb, to Sinai. The children of Israel are on the way to the region of Horeb, to the mountain of Sinai, where God is going to deliver His family instruction, His household law. He's going to give the Ten Words, the covenant words to the people of God. Rephidim is the last step on the way as they make their way toward that goal and they get there and though Rephidim is an oasis, there is no water. Now why? Moses doesn't tell us. Maybe there was a drought and there was no water available at Rephidim. Maybe, maybe the children of Israel were kept from water that was there by the Amalekites. Maybe that's why this story about the Amalekites follows in Exodus 17 verses 8 through 16. Maybe that was Amalekite turf, and they prevented the children of Israel from getting to the water that would have been available to them, but which they now can not drink. I don't know.

Whatever that case is, the children of Israel don't have water to drink and the result, well, the result is becoming all too predictable isn't it? Look at verse 2. Immediately there is an outcry against Moses, "the people quarreled with Moses." And the word that is used for Israel's quarrelling with Moses is a semi-judicial word. It's almost like they are hauling him into court and leveling charges against him as the aggrieved subjects of some action of Moses. They are going to put him on trial. They are going to sue him. In response, Moses characterizes their deeds as quarreling and indicates that their reaction to him is tantamount to

testing God Himself. He says to them angrily, "Why do you test the Lord?"

In verse 3, Moses lets us know that his response didn't help the situation much because the people of Israel now not only quarrel with Moses, but now they grumble against him. They impute to him ridiculous designs in the wilderness journey, 'why Moses, you brought us here to kill us, to kill our children, and to kill our cattle. Yeah, that's why Moses did all this.' That's why Moses left the pastoral life of happiness in Midian, to go through all he's gone through for these last years, because really he wanted to kill you. That's why he puts up with you day by day because really what he wants to do is kill you. What they are charging Moses with is ridiculous.

The word *grumbling* indicates that they're on the verge of mob action and Moses knows it. The situation is so explosive that revolution could break out at any moment. You see, the issue here, that there is no water and Israel is not trusting God in that circumstance, that is a standing issue for the life of faith. Will we continue to trust God when there is no bread and water? Is our allegiance to God conditional? "Lord, we will worship You as long as things are like we like it, like we want it, and make it snappy. Lord, we will trust you as long as my marriage is like I want it to be. You know Lord, you have stuck me with the dog of dogs of a husband. He can't hold a job, he yells at me and at the children all the time. He's not the man that I married and I'm not sure that I can trust him. Lord, I'll trust You as long as my kids turn out alright." Or, "Lord, I'll trust You as long as the situation at work is like I want it to be." You see, it's conditional allegiance that's going on here. "Lord, You're my God and I will trust you and I will think you are good and wise, as long as things are going like I want them to go."

II. God's response to the failure of His people.

What does Moses do in this crisis? Look at verses 4 through 6. First, there is the trial, now we see God's grace. In verses 4 through 6 there is prayer and response. Moses resorts to God in prayer and that prayer precedes a surprisingly patient and merciful response on the part of God to the situation. Moses, in this great crisis, shows us the way forward by a very important act of faith, he prays.

In verse 4, Moses goes to the Lord in prayer. In doing so he models what Israel ought to have done. Notice, nobody called for a prayer meeting. They immediately take out against Moses. Moses, however, calls for a personal prayer meeting. He goes to the Lord in prayer and he indicates in that prayer just how serious that situation is. "God, they are going to stone me." This is not an overstatement my friends, this is not Moses over reacting a little bit. If this had been a minister at a fellow church across town coming to me, telling me that "They were going to stone me," well I might think that well, maybe they are going to run you off soon, but I wouldn't think they are going to pick up stones and kill you on the spot. In Moses case, and Elijah's case, and Jesus case, and

Stephen's case, and Paul's case, that fear was not metaphorical. This is serious. You see, because of the seriousness of his circumstances, Moses has just as much cause to be tempted to distrust God as the Israelites do. His life is on the line, but his response is prayer. His response is trust. His response is to resort to God.

What does God do? Look at verse 5. In this incredible gracious response to the urgent need of the servant Moses and of course to his people Israel, God gives Moses three specific directives. Look at them in verse 5. Pass before the people, take some of your elders, and take in your hand your staff. Do three things, Moses.

First, you leave and you go on out into the wilderness towards Horeb. You go on ahead of the people. That's the first thing you do Moses. Second, take some of your elders with you because I want them to witness what I am going to do. It's going to be a miracle that will blow your mind. Thirdly, take the staff.

Notice that Moses in verse 5 records that God said to him, not simple take your staff, but take the staff that you did what with? "That you struck the Nile with." Now, remember that incident, Exodus chapter 7 verses 14 through 25, when Moses struck the Nile with the rod, the water became undrinkable. Now, the same rod is going to provide water for the children of Israel.

Then in verse 6, God tells Moses what He's going to do. First He says, Moses I'm going to be there standing before you when you get there. Secondly He says, Moses strike the rock when you get there. Thirdly, He says I'm going to provide water. Fourthly He says, the people are going to drink. God continues to demonstrate undeserved mercy throughout the pre-Sinai wilderness experience. It is uniform, the people disobey and God blesses them. The lesson is not, it's okay to disobey God, it's no big deal. That is not the lesson. The lesson is this: when I get you to Sinai and give you My commands, do not think that salvation works this way. When you obey, you save yourselves and I bless you. Before you ever got to Sinai you learned that you did not earn your salvation and you don't deserve your salvation. You are going to falter and fail every step of the way along the line and I'm still going to bless you because your salvation doesn't depend upon your goodness, on your deeds, it depends upon my covenant promise. See, God is debunking the idea of an earned salvation, of a works salvation before the children of Israel ever get to Sinai.

Now, He's doing other things to. He's testing them to prepare them to be full orbed worshipers. He's pressing the issue of their trust of His providence. He's teaching them to obey Him. He's teaching them to trust Him despite all the evidence to the contrary. He's giving us negative lessons about how not to respond in the trials of life. But one of the things He's clearly and unmistakably doing is making it clear that we do not save ourselves and that our own goodness is not the determining factor in God showing mercy to us. If it were,

we'd be dead in the wilderness.

A right understanding of the dynamic going on in these stories leading up to Sinai will banish forever that Sinai set up a salvation by works mechanism. It did not. Even the words of introduction to the Ten Commandments remind us of that. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." It's not, "Here are your Ten Commandments. Do this and then I'll bring you out of Egypt." It's, "I'm the Lord your God who already brought you out of the land of Egypt."

III. God's actions explained.

Thirdly, in verse 7, Moses interprets for us the meaning of this event. Here we get God's divine assessment on what has happened at Massah, and Meribah, and at Rephidim. Moses gives us an interpretation of the spiritual, theological significance of this event and he calls this place Massah and Meribah. The name Massah means *test*. The name Meribah means *quarrel* and they are given to this location by God through Moses in order to indicate the nature of this trial. The people had quarreled with Moses, but they had tested God, and here, testing God means demanding that He meet our demands as a condition of our allegiance. Moses explicitly, he specifically tells us the nature of the trial in verse 7. The people of God have dared to call into question the kind and loving providence of God. God has been gracious yes, but the people had seriously sinned and they had said, "Is the Lord among us or not?" That's a dangerous question to utter.

We need to be careful when we assure people that it's always 'ok' for them to be angry with God. I understand there are times when we are talking with friends who are going through horrific trials, and we encourage them with the example of Hezekiah, who was able to take his deepest, most painful questions to God when he stood on the wall and said to the Lord, "Lord God how can you do this, I don't understand how you can do this. This doesn't seem right, it doesn't seem fair, it doesn't seem good, it doesn't seem wise." Though there are times when God is gracious to let us voice those questions, we must never presumptuously call God on the carpet and say, "How dare You."

God is to be trusted because He is God. He's already shown that He is trustworthy. So He is to be trusted no matter what, and Moses is reminding us of that truth right here. Jesus emphasized this very thing in His response to Satan in the wilderness. In Matthew chapter 4 verses 5 through 7, Satan came to the Lord Jesus Christ and said, why don't You throw Yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple and let God catch You. He'll do it, after all the Bible says "He will command His angels concerning You and on their hands they will bear You up so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." And Jesus said, "It is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test." Don't you presume on God. Don't you make a demand of God and say, "I'll do this, if You meet my demands."

Do you know where Jesus was quoting from when He said that? He was quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 7 and verse 16 that says, "You shall not put your God to the test as you tested Him at Massah." Jesus is counseling against presumption, isn't He? Our allegiance to the Lord God in the midst of the most difficult providence must be absolute. Paul, will appeal to this passage in I Corinthians 10 verses 1 through 4 and he'll say this, "For I do not want you to be unaware brethren that our fathers were all under the cloud and passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them and the rock was Christ."

Of course, his point in that passage is that the Corinthians, because of the presence of Christ in their midst, just like Christ was present with the children of Israel in the old wilderness, should not follow after idolatry. Their allegiance must be whole and solely and completely to the Lord. Just as Christ was in the wilderness there with the people of God, so also He is in the midst of His church. And those lessons, my friends, are just as fresh today. I trust that we learn them. Let's pray.

O Lord God, grant that we would trust You in every circumstance of life by your grace in Jesus name. Amen.

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