



Exodus 17:1-7

Septuagesima, Feb. 16, '25
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

"Is the LORD Among Us or Not?"

Throughout Moses' second book, Exodus, we get to view this unfolding drama that is the relationship between the LORD and His people Israel. Episode after episode, event after event, we find the LORD *listening intently* to His people, and all the while He is yearning for them to do the same! The LORD wants His people to listen to *Him*, to *listen* to His Word. Of course, you know that *sometimes* they do that, oftentimes they do *not*. Let's review what had happened up till this point.

In Exodus chapter 2, the people of Israel are groaning. They are slaves in Egypt, they're groaning, and they're crying out to the LORD for help. Well, the LORD does what He does, He *listens* to their cry. He hears their cry for help, and He answers. He answers in chapter 2 by calling Moses from that burning bush. He tells Moses that He is sending him to Pharaoh to bring God's people Israel out of Egypt.

In Exodus chapter 4, Moses goes together with his older brother Aaron to the people of Israel and they announce the LORD's plans. They share the words that God had told to Moses, they share a few miraculous signs that the LORD had equipped them with, and the people believe. We're told that they ***"bowed their heads and worshipped."*** (4:31) So far so good! In this unfolding relationship between God and His people, the LORD listens to their cry, and they, in turn, listen to His promises. Well, that arrangement doesn't last very long.

In Exodus chapter 5 then, Moses tells old Pharaoh to let God's people go, and *Pharaoh* responds by worsening Israel's slave labor. He tells them to keep making the bricks as they had been doing, only now they'd have to gather their *own* straw, and they still would be expected to produce the same output. They complain; they blame Moses; they *stop* believing God's promises. And Moses in turn complains to the LORD, ***"You have not delivered your people at all."*** (5:23) The Lord *listens* to the complaint and responds. He says, ***"I am the LORD, and I will bring you... I will deliver you... I will redeem you... I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God."*** (6:6-7) And would the people listen in return? ***"Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses."*** (6:9)

Jumping forward to Exodus chapter 12, the Lord has now performed nine out of the ten plagues

against Egypt, displaying both His power over Pharaoh *and* His enduring love and faithfulness to the people of Israel. And before the tenth plague, the Lord prescribes a Passover for His people. And the people listen once more! ***“And the people bowed their heads and worshiped. Then the people of Israel went and did so; as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.”*** (12:27-28) That tenth plague resulted in the death of every firstborn in all of Egypt, but it did *not* touch the houses of the Children of Israel who listened and believed and acted on God’s promises. And after that plague, finally, old Pharaoh let God’s people go. The whole host, 600,000 men plus women and children and all their livestock left Egypt and went into the wilderness. The Lord had delivered them as promised.

In Exodus chapter 14, God tells the people to turn back before reaching the Red Sea. He tells them that He wants it to *look* like they’re wandering aimlessly in the wilderness, so that Pharaoh would see this and in his pride and hard-heartedness would be provoked into pursuing them, and the LORD would gain the victory over Pharaoh so that everyone—all of Israel and even all of Egypt would know that He is the LORD. Pharaoh does so and pursues them, and the people Israel see it all happening *just* as the LORD had told them, and what do they say? ***“What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”*** (14:11-12) They complain, they doubt, they stop listening; nevertheless, the LORD provides. The LORD does the impossible: He parts the waters of the Red Sea, Israel passes through on dry ground, and Pharaoh’s army is drowned. The people see all this, and they fear the LORD and believe once more.

In Exodus chapter 15, though, the people stop at a place called Marah, and the water in that place was bitter. They couldn’t drink it. And so, they complained about it. They grumbled to Moses. And Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD listened. He gave Moses a log which Moses threw into the water, and the water became sweet and *more* than palatable.

In Exodus chapter 16—the events of which, by the way, are exactly thirty days after the Passover and subsequent flight from Egypt; not a lot of time has passed—in Exodus 16, the people complain *again*. They’re hungry. ***“Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”*** (16:3) And still the LORD *listens*. Again, the LORD answers their complaint. He sends sweet bread from heaven, manna, six mornings a week. He sends quail in the evening. He sends food with the instructions that they were only to gather enough bread for each day, but on Friday they were to gather enough bread for two-days, since the Sabbath Day was to be a day of rest to the LORD. He gives the food, He gives the instructions, and some couldn’t be bothered to listen. Some take *more* than a day’s-worth of food, just in case the LORD wouldn’t keep His Word. And the manna that they kept spoils by morning. Others go out to collect again on Saturday, and they find none. You see the pattern? The people complain, the LORD listens and responds, and the people do not listen in return. They don’t listen, and they don’t learn, and they don’t pay attention.

Well, that brings us to the events of our text. Still not a lot of time has passed since their exodus from Egypt began, and again we find them grumbling and complaining. This time they’re not hungry, this time they’re thirsty. There’s just no water to be had in Rephidim. And they’re so angry, not only do they grumble, but now they’re quarreling, and *now* as Moses is praying to the LORD, he’s pretty sure

he's about to get a stone in the back of his skull. The substance of the peoples' complaint: "**Is the LORD Among Us or Not?**" Now, that doesn't sound so bad by itself, but we're told that they were *testing* the LORD with this complaint.

They're really saying, "*Show Yourself to us. Prove Yourself to us. If you really are our God, and if you really care about us, prove it to us right now.*" This isn't a prayer of faith. They're not saying, "LORD, we *know* you are our God. You have *shown* Yourself to be our God. You have promised to provide for us and so now we believe you are among us." No, they're really saying, "Is the LORD *really* among us? Because if He is, why did He lead us out here to die? No, if He wants to prove that He is God and *that* He is among us, then He will do so by giving us water, right now."

Now, having gotten the *full* context of the last several months of their lives before this event, can you think of anything that they might have been able to point to as proof that the LORD is God? Can you think of anything that might have proved to them that the LORD was *among* them? Can you think of anything, *anything at all*, that might have served as confirmation to them that the LORD was able to do the miraculous with nature to provide for His people as He promised? I can think of a thing or two.

But even worse than their short attention span or their apparent inability to pay attention to these miraculous events and comprehend what it all meant—even *worse*, they just don't believe God's promises. That's *worse*! Because God had promised to bring them out of Egypt, to rescue them, to save them. God had promised to bring them to the land of Canaan and to give them that land flowing with milk and honey. God had promised to be with them and to make them into a great nation. And God had made these promises *very clear* to them. And that their constant refrain was that they were going to die there in the wilderness means that they didn't put any stock into God's promises at all.

Now, very obviously, God is teaching Israel lessons along the way. He didn't *need* them to be hungry first before providing them bread, rather He was teaching them "***that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.***" (Deuteronomy 8:3) He didn't need them to *thirst* here. Just as easily as He provides water from a rock, He very easily could have ensured there was always water available or made it so that they didn't need water for 40 years! But God *allows* them to hunger, *allows* them to thirst, and He is using these moments of lack to direct them to look to Him in faith.

We need these lessons too, because we are so much like the Children of Israel constantly grumbling in the wilderness. We're so much like them, because we *also* put the LORD to the test. We do this when we are facing a moment of lack—our own versions of hunger or thirst. At those times, when we are totally lacking any power to change the situation in the way we want it to go, we *might* pray! And I know from experience that if I'm praying over something—asking God to work it out in the way I'm thinking it should go—that it's very easy to get discouraged if God says "no." It's *easy* to start *wondering* if God's even *listening* to your prayers when the answer is a different one than you'd been hoping for. And when that's the case, how is that any different than Israel putting God to the test, desiring Him to prove that He's really there by doing what they demand? It's not different at all.

So, consider the lessons God was teaching in all these events. First off, most obviously, the LORD provides. It's interesting to see the parallels between this account and the parting of the Red Sea. In

fact, they're really the inverse of each other. Here, the LORD tells Moses to take the staff—the same one he stretched out over the Red Sea. *That* time, when Moses extended the staff, God made dry ground appear in the midst of the waters. Now, Moses is going to extend the staff and strike the rock, and God is going to make waters appear in the midst of the dry ground. The lesson is clear—God is not limited by the normal constraints of the earth. He is the *LORD* of the heavens and earth. And so, whatever we need, God is able to provide. And not only is He *able*, He also *promises* to provide. He promises to give us our daily bread, so that we do not need to worry any more than a sparrow does.

Another lesson is that *sometimes*, the LORD might allow us to lack, to be in want. *Sometimes* we might come face-to-face with the reality that we are not in control. Sometimes there will painful situations in our personal lives that we desperately want to go away, and yet the LORD allows them to come upon us. Hey, every time we saw that sort of thing happening to Israel, it's very clear that the LORD had a plan in mind, even if they couldn't see the way out. And the same thing is true for us! In fact, God gives us a promise about this: ***“For those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*** (Romans 8:28) And even though we might often wonder and ask, *“HOW* is God going to work this for good,” the correct question to ask is, *“WILL* God work this for good?” And the answer to that question is always, “Yes,” because God promises so.

Another lesson that we can see so clearly throughout *all* of the events that we've discussed today is that God is gracious. The LORD is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He remains faithful to His promises. In spite of their sin, He continued showing grace to Israel, because He had given them specific promises to do so. And the same is true for each of you.

If you are dealing with a frustrating trial in your life, none of God's promises to you have changed. You still have been baptized. And God promises *that* means that ***“just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*** (Romans 6:4) We still have the promise ***“that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs-- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”*** (Romans 8:16-17) We also have the *wonderful* promise that ***“the blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin.”*** (1 John 1:7) And though we often demonstrate just how wholly undeserving we are of these great promises, God gives us a *further* promise that His promises always will remain: ***“If we are faithless, [God] remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself.”*** (2 Timothy 2:13)

So, let's not do what Israel did. When they faced a trial, they *usually* didn't pray about it. They complained to Moses, they quarreled, they grumbled instead of praying. No, *this* is what God wanted them to do, and what He wants *us* to do: to pray! To cast your cares upon Him. When you're tested, God is looking for you to trust His Word, to go to His promises, and to ask Him for the things that He's promised to give you with the faith that God always keeps His promises.

And if that's the case, then we can ask the question, ***“Is the LORD Among Us or Not?”***—not to test the Lord but to remind ourselves of His promises. He promises to be with us always; He promises that He knows our needs and will daily provide; He promises to convert even evil into our eternal good; He promises that because He died, we are forgiven; He promises that because He rose, we too will live; He promises to take us home to heaven, and He always keeps His promises! So, ***“Is the LORD Among Us or Not?”*** He is! So, what do I have to complain about? Nothing at all, in Jesus' name. Amen.