

SOUTHVIEW EVANGELICAL CHURCH, CHIRNSIDE

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Exodus 17: 1-7

Introduction:

God's people under pressure.

Here we have a classic picture of God's people under pressure. Life is not plain sailing for anyone, and Christians are no exception. We have financial worries. We have responsibilities for the care of elderly relatives. We are concerned about our children's development. We have relationship difficulties with members of our family, neighbours and work colleagues. Our household appliances all seem to break down at the same time. We are stressed, ill, tired, misunderstood, depressed. We have to cope with all these things and more. We come under intense pressure at times, and these are the times when our relationship with God is put under the most severe strain. We may learn to trust over one issue, but then fail to trust Him over the next. We are just like the Israelites at Rephidim. So this account of God's dealings with His people at Rephidim has a lot to teach us now.

1. Testing, not resting, at Rephidim.

The Israelites had been on the move for between two and a half to three months, since they had left Egypt. They had seen God's remarkable interventions for them. It was God who had enabled them to leave Egypt in the first place. He had divided the Red Sea, guided them in the pillar of cloud and fire, provided them with sweet water at the bitter wells of Marah, sent them a continuing supply of manna and quails as they crossed the Desert of Sin. (By the way, the Desert (or Wilderness) of Sin has nothing to do with the English word 'sin' – Siyin is a Hebrew name whose meaning is uncertain, but may derive from the name of the Canaanite moon goddess).

The Israelites were now leaving the Desert of Sin and moving on towards Sinai. Surely, by now, they would have learned that God would supply their needs, and that there was no need to grumble and grouse at their leaders, and indirectly at God who had appointed them. But no, they were slow to learn – just like us. God teaches us one lesson after another, and sometimes teaches us the same lesson time after time, but

how slow we are to learn! I am sure I would have been one of the grumblers and complainers if I had been on that desert march!

They had probably been looking forward to Rephidim. It was a place where the supply of water was legendary. Rephidim means ‘resting places’ and was (and still is) a traditional point for travellers and traders to rest up on their road through the desert. It is a well-watered valley between the mountains, full of palm trees – providing water, food and shelter in abundance. But they hadn’t quite made it there, and they had run out of water! Remember, we are told in Exodus 12:37 that the number of Israelites that left Egypt was 600,000 men. If we add in guestimates of the numbers of women and children, we have a total of round about 2 million. Such a column of people moves slowly, and it takes a lot of food and water to keep that number alive! Things weren’t going their way. They deserved a break, but there was none. What a huge disappointment. God had provided in the past, but each new circumstance was subtly different – could He be relied upon again to make provision? There was no respite as they trudged towards Rephidim.

The account in Exodus makes it clear that the people were being guided by God all their way through the desert. They had been guided by God into the desert in the first place, and they were under His guidance in the desert up to this point. Moses was merely obeying divine orders. God was their satnav. So they were detained in the desert because God had led them there. The challenge they faced now was nothing to do with their disobedience; in fact, they had followed God’s leading but they were still faced with this predicament, this possible disaster. A lesson for us – difficult times for us are not necessarily the result of our disobedience or sin. In fact, they can be natural consequences of obedience to God, because God has more to teach us through the difficulties.

In the previous two chapters, God makes clear His purpose – He was teaching His people important lessons. A) At Marah, God was teaching the Israelites to listen to His instructions and to obey them, no matter how strange they seemed (15:25ff.). B) In the Desert of Sin, God was teaching them to obey His instructions to the letter (16:4). God was all the time preparing them to receive the Law at Sinai, in all its complexity and requirement for obedience. Here, as they marched towards Rephidim,

we are not told in what specific way God was continuing this process of instruction, but we are told in Exodus 20:20 what the general aim of God's teaching was. It is rendered in *The Message* in this way: '*God has come to test you and instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won't sin*'. So the purpose of God's teaching, in summary, then, and today, is to increase His people's awe of His majesty and sovereignty, so that we will not disobey Him and go our own way. In other words, God's desire is to develop our relationship of trust in Him, based on our growing understanding of His character, so that we obey Him in faith rather than rebel against Him and commit sin.

When we talk about God testing His people, what do we mean? This concept of God testing His people is difficult for us nowadays for two reasons:

- 1) In Hebrew and Greek, there is a single word which is translated into English, sometimes as 'test' and sometimes as 'tempt' or 'prove';
- 2) Because our own - sometimes bitter - experience of tests at school gives us a warped understanding of the nature and purpose of God's testing.

a) Confusion between 'testing' and 'tempting'

1) In Hebrew and Greek, there is only one word to cover the two English words 'test' and 'tempt' (Hebrew = *nacah*; Greek = *peirazo*). The translators of the Bible have had to use the context to know how best to translate the Hebrew or Greek words and they have not always been consistent in the word they have chosen. Of course, the two words have very different connotations in English: 'test' or 'prove' or 'show the worth or character of something' is generally positive, whereas 'tempt' means 'to entice someone to do something wrong or sinful' and has a negative connotation.

In Hebrew and Greek, 'testing' and 'tempting' can be seen as the two sides of one coin. When we are facing a time of difficulty or trial, which is allowed by God, as the Israelites were here at Rephidim, we are open to hearing two sets of opposing voices: i) voices telling us to blame God and those people who we think got us into this situation in the first place; ii) but there are also voices challenging us to trust God, believe in His sovereign majesty, trust in His provision and go His way.

The Israelites in the desert, time and again, inclined their ears towards the negative voices, and began to blame God and complain against the leadership of Moses. These negative thoughts and responses come from the evil one. They are designed to destroy our own individual faith and cause difficulties within our faith community. If we give into these negative voices, the resulting sin brings guilt and retribution. These are temptations. As James says in his letter (1:14 'each person is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin'). Temptations to do evil never come from God (James 1:13); they always come from the evil one.

We can either yield to them and fall into sin, or we can resist them and turn to listen to the voice of God. When we do this, we are built up in our faith and our faith community is strengthened. This response brings joy and peace, and results in praise and worship of God. In the test, we have learned the lesson God had purposed for us. James says (1:12): 'Happy is the man who perseveres under trial (or testing), because when he has stood the test (or 'when he has been approved'), he will receive the crown of life God has promised to those who love him'. The slide sums up the difference between 'being tempted' and 'being tested'.

b) Confusion caused by modern educational approaches to testing

Because of our educational experience, we have a certain view of testing. Probably, like me, you hated tests at school. They provoked anxiety, and, when poor results arrived, made us feel pretty worthless. We were taught something and were expected to have learned it, and then we were tested to see if we measured up. If we did reach the required standard, we passed; if we didn't, we failed. That approach to testing is on the right hand side of the slide.

But God does not treat us like this. This is not God's approach to the education of His people. If God's testing were designed to see if we measured up to His standards, we would all fail every time, for we all fall short of the glory of God. God does not set us up to fail, like some cranky schoolteacher. He doesn't put us into a difficult situation and then turn round to us and say 'Just testing!' NO - testing, in God's schoolroom is carried out quite differently. Paul states in 2 Cor. 13:10, that testing is 'for building you up, not for tearing you down'.

God teaches us through the challenge of the testing experience. He gets alongside us and steers us through the difficulty or pressure or time of trial. He teaches us through the experiences more about following Him and walking in obedience to Him and more about His love and patience, care and provision. And when, under His guidance and with His help, we produce good work, He says to us: "Well done, my good and faithful servant".

It is interesting that this approach has always been used to teach traditional crafts and is nowadays increasingly finding its way into mainstream education – the Master (or expert) sits alongside the pupil (actually that is the derivation of the English word 'assessment'). Like a master craftsman, God sits with us, His apprentices. He patiently guides us as we learn new skills and develop new understandings. He gives us new challenges to face, to hone our skills and sharpen our understandings. When we mess things up, He patiently shows us again and again and again. Think of a master potter working with His student. The teacher guides the student through the processes and helps the student to produce better and better work – work which is closer and closer to the standard of the master potter himself. Then one day, the student produces a pot which the master can approve as meeting His standards. The master allows the student to mark the pot with the master's stamp. The Greek word for 'stamp of approval' is 'χαρακτήρ' – the origin of the English word 'character'. We can see then in Romans 5:3, Paul's summary of the educational process in God's classroom – 'We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance (i.e. keeping going with the learning process); perseverance, character (i.e. God's seal of approval as He sees His character being formed in us); and character, hope (i.e. hope or expectation that , if we continue learning, we will become more and more like Jesus). And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.'

So God is sitting beside His students in this testing situation at Rephidim, as He had sat beside them at the shore of the Red Sea, at the bitter wells of Marah and in the Wilderness of Sin, longing for them to learn the lessons which will lead to their health and happiness and spiritual growth. After all, there was so much for His people to

learn. They needed so much building up. They needed so much guidance if they were to get through the desert into the Promised Land.

Much about life is still desert-like, even for Christians. There are times when the desert seems particularly harsh and unremitting. But the desert is God's school-room. The desert was a place of teaching for many throughout the Bible: it was David's testing ground as he fled from Saul. It was where Elijah received God's succour and encouragement at a time of fear and depression in 1 Kings 19: 4ff. It was the place, of course, where Jesus received sustenance from God after 40 days of temptation by Satan. It was on the desert island of Patmos, whilst labouring in the quarries, that John received his revelation of the last days.

Indeed, early Christians realised that the desert was God's schoolroom so they spent long periods in deserted places so that they could learn from God. There are such places close to here, like the Farne Islands, which were Cuthbert's desert schoolroom. They sought out their desert places. That is not our calling; indeed, we do not have to seek them out. They are all too common on our doorsteps! James encourages us to relish these times of testing, because this is where God is alongside to teach us. 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials (or tests) of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.' (Jas. 1:3,4). The writer to the Hebrews urges us to 'endure hardship as discipline' (the Greek word means 'training' or 'teaching'). The desert can become a fruitful garden, as we learn the lessons of God's teaching and come to rely more on the strengthening and provision of God's Spirit. 'No discipline (or teaching) seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it' (Heb. 12: 7, 11).

When I was once working in Egypt, I took the opportunity one Friday to drive out into the Western Desert, the Sahara, to visit a group of Coptic monasteries, which had existed there since the 4th century or earlier. The desert is barren and stony and stretches out flat in every direction to the horizon. The monasteries are surrounded by high mud-brick walls to protect them in the past from invaders. It is a harsh place to live. As you walk through the gate, what a huge contrast - you come into beautiful

gardens, full of date palms, fruit trees, flowers and vegetables. The desert, so barren and sterile outside, can become a place of fruitfulness within.

2. Resisting God's teaching at Rephidim.

How did the Israelites respond in God's classroom? They resisted the teaching. They began quarrelling with Moses their leader (17:2) – open conflict; grumbling against Moses (17:3) – backbiting; almost resorting to physical violence (17:4). In turning against Moses, they indirectly turn against God, who had appointed Moses. 'Why do you put the Lord to the test?' asks Moses – v.2. Moses was learning that God was patiently and gently teaching His people – He had their very best interests at heart. God was not playing with them, or amusing Himself by causing their suffering. But the people were throwing His teaching in His face.

Let us be clear. The response of the Israelites is very different from the questioning of God, for example, contained in Psalm 22:1 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? My God, I cry out by day and night, but you do not answer.' – a verse repeated by Jesus as He hung on the Cross. Or Job's many questions in his suffering: 'Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in. For sighing comes to me like food; my groans pour out like water. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil' (Job 3:23ff).

The 'Why is this happening to me?' kind of questions sound the same, but the motivation behind them is very different. The Psalmist and Job are in dialogue with God. Their ears are open, although they are suffering deeply in their bodies and their spirits. In both cases, the dialogues are long and protracted, but they come to an end with the lesson learned. Job confesses in ch. 42:2 : 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. Surely I spoke things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.' And in v. 5: 'My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes'. And as the Psalmist in Psalm 22 recounts his sufferings, he realises that God has heard his cry and in v.24 admits: '(The Lord) has not hidden his face from (his afflicted one) but has listened to his cry for help. From you comes the theme of my praise'.

God wants us – even expects us - to engage in honest and open dialogue with Him. It is central to our relationship with Him. He is not shocked by our questioning, but rather relates to it as a father bends down to listen to the ‘Whys’ of his children. He understands that we should ask ‘Why?’ when we find ourselves under pressure, and, if we remain open to His teaching, He will teach us and show us more of Himself as He did David and Job. That is part of the educational process.

However, here in Exodus 17, the people have closed their ears to dialogue. They are making demands and casting blame, but they are not listening to God to teach them. They no longer have a teachable spirit. What a tragedy when our walk with the Lord reaches this point! When we are no longer prepared to listen to Him and have closed our ears to His Fatherly voice. When we stop learning and try to teach God what He should be doing – when we test God. Jesus talks of this in the parable of the sower. All that seed had so much potential for growth and a rich harvest, and yet, because the soil was not receptive, because it was hard-packed, stony or weed-choked, it could not establish roots. How important it is to remain receptive to the teaching of God to produce a good harvest.

The lesson here is to remain open to God’s teaching, however hard the circumstances and however tough the lessons seem to be. Also, as we pray with, and counsel, our fellow believers, it is important for us to gently help them to turn to the Lord and to encourage them not to indulge in recrimination and blame.

3. Resting in God’s provision – the lessons of Rephidim.

In spite of their provocation of God, He is gracious with His people, as He is so often with us. He provides them with water. God is forbearing. In gracious love, He provides His people with what they need, although they have sorely provoked Him. a) Moses did what the people should have done. He entered into dialogue with the Lord (v.4). b) He listened to, and obeyed, God’s instructions (v.5). And God showed him a wonderful truth – God is the Lord of the desert. He is there, in the unremitting days of thirst, just as He had been there for His people in the cramping days of hunger. He provides. In spite of the people’s rebellion and provocation, he provides water – the very refreshment that they needed. He instructs Moses to strike a rock with the staff which he had used to strike the Nile. When he had struck the Nile, the water had

become polluted with blood and was undrinkable (7:18); but here at Rephidim pure water tumbles out of the bare rock. There is a cleft rock still standing at the approach to Rephidim which according to Arab tradition is the very rock which Moses struck.

The Lord also provides for us, as individual believers and as a church, throughout this desert period before we reach our Promised Land of eternal rest with Him. The New Testament makes several references back to this account of the water from the rock at Rephidim.

a) **‘That rock was Christ’ (1 Cor.10:4).** Paul draws an analogy. ‘Our forefathers all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ’.

In other words the manna and the water from the rock are symbols of the provision which God has made for us through our Lord Jesus Christ, the bread of life and the water of life. As Jesus assures the Samaritan woman at the well, ‘the water I give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life’ (John 4:14). In our times of pressure, our needs are met supremely in Jesus, who, by His Spirit, provides us with constant refreshment. So, as we face each successive time of trial, let us learn to go to God, in prayer, and in honest questioning, ask Him “Father, what do you want to teach me through this? I am open to learn the lessons you have for me.” David is a man who learned to do this, and we see so often in the Psalms how his questioning of God when he was under pressure is so often answered in the same Psalm through the Spirit of God encouraging him and causing praise to well up within him . Psalm 36 is a good example. David begins by feeling the pressure of sinful men, particularly the way they act with pride and arrogant foolishness. His complaint could so easily have turned to bitterness and self-pity, but, instead of yielding to this temptation, he listens to God’s teaching, and the tone of the Psalm turns to praise. ‘Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast in the abundance of your house; you give them to drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life’ (Psalm 36:5,7-9).

Sometimes, because of deep depression or extreme grief, a Christian brother or sister or a seeker cannot come to God themselves, but we can come on their behalf, either at their request or out of our own unsolicited love for them. We can take the place of Moses, who, on behalf of the people, took apart some of the elders and took his staff in hand. He struck the rock on the Israelites' behalf, as God had instructed him. We too can strike the rock on our friends' behalf with the powerful rod of prayer that all believers have been given. In the authority of Jesus' name we can strike the rock of our friends' depression or grief and let water come out – refreshment appear for them, so that they may drink. This teaching is spelled out in James 5:13 ff. : 'Is any of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up.... The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.'

b) From restiveness to rest (Hebrews 3: 7 ff).

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews refers to this incident at Rephidim, and to another similar incident which happened at the end of Israel's wandering in the wilderness to challenge followers of Jesus not to be rebellious and hard to teach as the Israelites were. The Israelites' persistent restiveness and failure to learn God's lessons meant that they did not enter finally into the land that God had promised them. So, with Christians, (although Paul makes it clear that our final salvation is assured in Christ) we cannot now enjoy the fullness of our inheritance promised us in Christ – all the blessings of love, joy and peace – if we resist God's patient and loving attempts to teach us, often through the trials of life. We run the risk, as the writer to the Hebrews says in 3:19, of failing to enter the rest from struggling along by our efforts – the rest which God has promised us.

What is this rest, for the Christian? The events at Rephidim help us to understand. The Israelites at Rephidim failed to trust God. When things did not go their way and they had no human way out, they resisted God. They sought to retain control over their lives and did not trust in God's loving character and desire to rescue them. So they were always resisting and restive; they were always striving. In this

state of unbelief, they could not enter into the rest of God, because they were unprepared and unwilling to hand everything over to him.

My dear brothers and sisters, rest is offered to us, but we cannot experience it and enjoy it, if we strive to get through life on our own. We hack away at the stony soil of our deserts hoping, but failing, to find an adequate supply of water, when it is there available to us all along through the loving intervention of our Father God. Our Rephidim can be a time of resistance, or it can live up to its name and truly be a resting place where we rest in the love, power and good purposes of our all-loving Father.

c) The rest we experience now is a foretaste of the rest to come (Rev. 21:6; 22:1ff)

Our experience of God's promised rest begins now even as we walk through the often desert tracts of this life. But the refreshment we receive now from God's loving hand is as nothing compared with the refreshment which we will surely experience when He comes to reign. He who sits upon the throne says: 'To him who is thirsty I will give drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.' 'Then', John says, 'the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb'.

The road which began at Rephidim leads for the Christian, as we learn to obey God, through to refreshment during our walk on earth, towards the eternal refreshment to be found in the heavenly city. It is a long and often desert road, but throughout the hard and dusty journey we are accompanied by our guide and teacher, the Holy Spirit of God, whose refreshment is always at hand.

PRAYER

Father God, we thank you for your patient and persistent teaching. Help us to listen to your instruction through all the circumstances of our lives, especially through the most difficult times. We thank you that you always teach us for our good. Help us to learn to rest in your provision, rather than try to struggle to find our own way out of difficult circumstances. Indeed, Father, teach us to rest in your love and power and merciful kindness in every aspect of our living. In Jesus' Name.

