

Prayer

Almighty God; You are our Creator and our Redeemer, and Your care for us extends far beyond our understanding or our reach. Give us the humility to accept that ultimately, we do not know all things, and that we may explore but never compete with Your supreme creative and saving power. May we honour You as the One from whom everything comes, and live as if we truly believe it. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Ring up a friend you have not spoken to recently, and make a note of the things you discuss. Make them the subject of some of your prayers.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the homeless.** *Pray for those who work with the homeless on the streets of our towns and cities, especially church workers*
- *Give thanks for the open countryside near to where you live*
- *Pray about immigration and how it affects your own country*

Meditation

If, for a moment, we stand in peace and quietness
And let our Saviour come near to us,
Will not the Holy Spirit like a wind
Engulf us with the inspiration of His eternal word?

If, for a moment, we give our time to a personal friend
And allow the love of Christ to fill us,
Will we not feel the touch of His hand
That ministers through our weakness to bless another?

If, for a moment, we stop to gaze at the Cross of Christ
And see the Father weep for the Son;
Will we weep too, and know the passion
Of His glorious victory over evil, suffering and death?

If, for a moment, we stand back from the distraction of life,
And wait for the voice of God to speak;
Might we hear a whisper in the world
That tells us He is full of love and never stops His caring?

Take the time, my soul; yes, take the time.

Bible passage – Exodus 17:1-7

¹ The whole community of the Israelites journeyed from the Wilderness of Sin in stages, according to the Lord's instructions. They set up camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² So the people challenged Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses replied, 'Why are you challenging me? Why are you testing the LORD?' ³ But the people were thirsty for water right there, so the people grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us here from Egypt only for us, our children and our livestock to die with thirst?'

⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, 'What can I do for this people? If there is any more of this they will stone me!' ⁵ The Lord replied to Moses, 'Keep going whilst the people watch you. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and hold in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and come on.' ⁶ When you see me standing in front of you on the rock in

Horeb, strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.’ Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel,⁷ and he called the place ‘Massah’ and ‘Meribah’ because of the discontent of the Israelites and their testing of the LORD by saying; ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’

Bible Study

Review

How much more proof did the people of Israel need that the Lord their God was leading them through the desert? The Lord had delivered them out of Egypt after a series of quite extraordinary events, leaving them able to travel to the Promised Land. In addition, they had the benefit of God’s presence in the cloud which led the way in front of them and appeared at night as a pillar of fire (13:21,22). Today’s passage describes the third incident in which Israel’s practical problems of living in the desert led them to doubt God, and this spilled over into a confrontation with Moses. The first of these incidents was about water and thirst (15:22-27), the second was about food and sustenance (ch.16), and now, unsurprisingly, problems with water recur.

Earlier, at Marah, the Israelites had come to a watering place only to find that it was bitter, but after Moses dealt with the problem, they went on to find substantial relief at the oases of Elim (15:27). We might think that the Israelites might trust Moses and their God to deal with what lay ahead, but they did not. More water was soon required, and a lack of faith re-emerged. This story of what happened at Rephidim contains a great deal of tension for at least two reasons. Firstly, due to the natural angst of those who might die in the desert if they do not get water, and secondly, because the Israelites persisted in ignoring God and directing their thoughts and feelings at Moses. They had not yet learned that their complaints against Moses were really complaints against God, and they could not avoid God by focussing on Moses.

So it was that despite Moses’ painstaking instructions to the people about remembering the Lord (16:31-36) and honouring Him by keeping His Sabbath (16:22-30), the old problem surfaced. As soon as a water crisis occurred, the Israelites reverted to their old habit of questioning Moses and his motives (17:2,3). It is not surprising that Moses was tired of all this, and there is a degree of weariness in his voice as he says ‘*why are you challenging me? Why are you testing the Lord?*’ (17:2), and later, ‘*what can I do for this people?*’ (17:4f.). Moses knew that he was under threat of stoning by a group of people who were at the point of desperation because they feared imminent death. It was a dire situation.

The Lord’s response was astonishing, and as the situation required, immediate. He commanded Moses to go and stand by a rock upon which He, the Lord was standing (17:6) and then strike it. This, He said, would produce flowing water to satisfy the people’s thirst (17:5,6). Moses did as he was told, and in a spectacular moment captured in thousands of paintings and dramatic presentations ever since, Moses struck the rock and water poured out!

However, in addition to the crucial importance of the water from the rock, the Israelites were able to see Moses and the Lord God standing together at the rock in full sight of the elders and the people (17:5,6). Although it is not entirely clear from the text whether the Lord was visible to all the people (though he was clearly seen by Moses, see 17:6), the story implies that the Israelites did indeed see something of their God. This dramatic moment was designed to show the people that their leader and their God would not be separated, and that a complaint against Moses was in fact a complaint against God. Moreover, the Lord Himself provided for the people’s needs, and He vindicated His servant Moses.

At the very end of our passage, Moses named the place ‘Massa’ and ‘Meribah’, two words that mean ‘testing’ and ‘complaint’ respectively. Obviously, the purpose of this was to remind God’s people not of the amazing nature of God’s provision, but the faithlessness of testing God by doubting His provision, and the fruitlessness of complaining against His chosen servant. We should not glorify this story as a record of God’s provision when it is really record of faithlessness from which God’s people can still learn.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Some problems
- The camp at Rephidim and the people’s challenge to Moses
- The Lord’s response; which rock to hit?
- Waters from the rock

Going Deeper

The story we have read is powerful, but it contains many problems which have to be solved if we are to gain a fuller understanding of what was happening. The passage is similar to the story of water from a rock that is found in Numbers 20:1f, which happened later on in the story of the people of Israel, after the giving of the Law on Sinai. We will have to decide at least whether Moses performed this miracle twice or whether the same incident is recorded twice for some reason. In addition, this is only the first of a number of awkward issues that need to be sorted out in this complex story!

Some problems

The incident we have read about today happened at a place called Rephidim. This, like all places on the wilderness route is almost impossible to establish, but it does appear that it was quite close to the range of mountains called 'Horeb' (see 17:6), a name closely associated with Sinai. If the text of our story today is literally true, then Moses walked from Rephidim to a rock in the mountain range of 'Horeb', from which came the Lord's provision of water (17:6). Both 'Sinai' and 'Horeb' are called the 'mountain of God' in the book of Exodus and in the rest of Scripture (for example, see Exodus 3:1 for Horeb and Ex 19:11f. for Sinai), and it is not unusual for places to have more than one name in Scripture. Indeed, the place where this happened was given two names ('Massah' and 'Meribah' – 17:7). Nevertheless, it certainly appears that in this story the people of Israel were coming close to the holy mountain where they would soon give worship to God and receive the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 19,20). The proximity of Rephidim to Sinai / Horeb is confirmed in Numbers 33:14, a passage of the book of Numbers that attempts to outline the route taken by the Israelites when they travelled through the desert.

What is more difficult to deal with is the fact that although Numbers 20 records a story which is remarkably similar to that described here, the place where it happens in Numbers 20 is called 'Kadesh' (Num 20:1,14), a place otherwise known to be far closer to the land of Canaan and with no connection to Sinai or Horeb. In this story, the place is named (or, re-named) with the same name; 'Meribah', but no mention is made of the other name, 'Massah'. This is either an incident that has found its way into two different parts of the story of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, or there were indeed two incidents which were very similar, and it is hard to establish which parts of which story belong where! Because Scripture does not give us a clear answer to these problems of a 'historical' nature, it is best to read each story carefully for what it means in both Exodus and Numbers, and accept that along with many other features of the journey of Israel through the wilderness, we do not know many of the details!

The camp at Rephidim and the people's challenge to Moses.

The story begins with the people challenging Moses, and the word 'challenging' is significant. In chapter 16, most translations of the Bible describe the people as 'complaining' against Moses and God (verses 2,7,12 etc), and then they use a similar word, 'quarrelled' here in this story. Careful scrutiny of the Hebrew shows that chapter 16 uses a number of words for this complaining, most of which mean 'murmuring' or 'muttering'. This suggests a low but dangerous level of antagonism towards Moses and God, and the Lord addressed this by facing the Israelites with their obligation to have faith in Him (see previous study) because of all He had done for them.

In today's passage however, the Hebrew word used means 'strife' or 'contention', and this clearly indicates that things were getting worse, and the relationship between the people and God Himself were at a dangerously low point. The Israelites repeated their accusation that they believed Moses had brought them into the desert to kill them (17:3 and see also 16:3), and it was evident from Moses' response that he knew the situation was becoming dangerous because the people began preparations to stone him (17:4). Stoning has always been the last resort of an angry crowd, so in this critical situation, Moses needed the Lord to act quickly. The people were not able to trust God for their immediate needs, and they had still not learned some important lessons about faith.

The Lord's response; which rock to hit!

With the crowd itching to throw stones, it appears that the Lord Himself appeared in some form; perhaps as an angel. All we know for certain is that Moses was able to see Him on the rock (17:6). Certainly, the instructions given to Moses in verse 5 describe the tense situation. Moses was told to keep calm and walk deliberately and purposefully past the angry crowd of gathering Israelites, summoning those elders who would walk with him in a show of strength, and holding in his hand the staff with which he 'struck the Nile' (the first great plague which hit the Egyptians). This great staff was a reminder to Moses and to all the people of the great strength and authority of God wielded on His behalf by Moses, and its purpose was to remind those grasping for stones of the true source of all power. It was an extraordinarily tense moment in the story of the Exodus.

Most people believe they know what happened next, which was that Moses struck a rock and water poured out! It is not often remembered that Moses performed this dramatic action only when shown which rock to hit by the 'presence of the Lord' standing on top (7:6)! You may recall paintings of this event in classical art, or

even dramatic portrayals of it, but personally, I do not remember any of these that depicts the presence of the Lord standing on top of the rock, as clearly described here in this passage! Most commentators say that they reckon the presence of the Lord was not visible to the people, only to Moses; but the text does not say this. Rather, it strongly suggests that everything that happened was in full view at least of the elders of Israel (see the end of 7:6). I am also of the opinion that the Lord is not in the business of spiritual 'sleight of hand' in such matters, and if it was important for us to know that only Moses saw the Lord, then this would have been made clear.

Water from the rock

Perhaps the simple fact is that once the people had the water from the rock and their thirst was quenched, the presence of the Lord on the rock and what happened before the water was produced became irrelevant to the people. We, too, follow the drama of the water coming from the rock, and ask questions about how this miracle could be produced, as if some natural explanation of such an event would enable us to come to terms with what this powerful story means! The truth is that Scripture presents us with a miracle, not a quirk of nature, guided by the sight of the Lord Himself visible at least to Moses and probably others as well. After all that had happened, especially the sin of disbelief amongst the people, the Lord intended to show that He alone was the One against whom the people complained, and consequently He alone was the One responsible for the miracle of water from the rock; not Moses. The Lord's presence on the rock also reminded the ancient Israelites and all who followed them that although Moses was a powerful leader, his real role was to do what the Lord required him to do, no more and no less.

At the end of the passage, we discover that we are right to interpret the story in this way because this fits with the naming of the place as 'Massah' (meaning 'testing') and Meribah (meaning 'complaint'). The truth was that the people had continued to question in their hearts 'is the Lord among us or not' (7:7). The people of Israel were not changed overnight into people who believed in the wondrous power of Almighty God, despite everything that happened and all they had been taught through the experiences of deliverance and victory at the Red Sea. They had much to learn, but God was not going to reject them despite these problems. He had chosen them and He was going to work through them whatever happened. That was His purpose and His intent.

Application

From this, the third story of God's provision for His people in the desert, it seems that the Israelites had not learned the lessons of faith they should have learned from the earlier incidents (see chs.15,16). The remarkable thing is that although the people continued to act in an irresponsible way, God still blessed them because they were His people. He had chosen them for a purpose, and He fully intended to use them, despite their lack of faith.

This faithfulness of God is a source of great encouragement to us even today in New Testament times; but it would be wide of the mark for Christians today to suggest that because we have faith in Jesus, we are somehow better than the ancient Jews. The nature of our salvation by Jesus Christ may give us a firmer foundation for our faith, our belief in God, our trust in Jesus as His Son, and our acceptance of the power of His Holy Spirit. However, we all know that people today, even Christians, still fall short of what the Lord wants and expects of them; but this does not mean that He abandons them, in fact, the opposite. God Himself is faithful when his people are not, as Paul says in his second letter to Timothy; 'if we are faithless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself.' (2 Timothy 2:13). The steadfast faithfulness of God is an abiding treasure of our faith, and will always remain so.

The great miracle of this story is that God provides a basic need, the need for water, at the very moment it is needed and in order to make a point about trust in God. Those of us who live where we can take water for granted are indeed fortunate, because there are many places in the world where people still do not have the water they need. Indeed, the provision of all the water needed by people in the world is a stern challenge to humanity in our day, and one that cannot be avoided; and we are called to respond to that need in God's name. In addition, the New Testament reminds us that water is a symbol of God's new life (e.g. John 2:6f. and 4:7f.). If we attempt to explain away God's provision of water for His people in the desert as mere 'point-making' by dramatic gesture, then we belittle the spiritual meaning of what happened. Ultimately, God's provision of the water of new life is a river '*flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb*' (Rev 22:1) in God's new Heaven and Earth. It is the destiny of all who keep faith in God to receive His water and His 'new life'.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you been in or observed a situation in which people become violently angry? Discuss how Moses must have felt when facing the Israelites.
2. In discussion, suggest some reasons why God should be patient with His people when they persist in disbelief.
3. What reasons can you give for the Lord to stand on top of the rock to identify where Moses should strike it to obtain water?

Topics covered by this text

- *Water from the Rock*
- *The problem of faithlessness*
- *God's provision despite sin amongst His people*

Personal comments by author

Water is a basic ingredient of life, and without it, our life is compromised. Have you been in a situation in which your life has been compromised, and do you feel any sympathy for the people of Israel who began to panic in this story? It can be helpful to try and see all sides of a story such as the one studied today, so that we do not end up making rash judgements about the Israelites and their hesitant efforts at being the people of God. The contrast between them and the great power of God is huge, but that is always so between Almighty God and His people. We do our best to sustain a life in which we do all we can to be faithful, and learn to trust in God's ability and desire to supply our needs exactly when we need them!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect upon circumstances when you have needed God's assistance and it has felt as if it has not been forthcoming until, perhaps, the last moment. Think about the reasons why God might hold back His hand, and why it might be necessary for us to be 'taken to the limit' in such circumstances.*
- *Pray for those who are without water and are scared for their lives and fearful of death because of drought.*

Final Prayer

Take our prayers, Lord God, and use them as a channel of Your grace: take our work, Lord God, and use it as a channel of Your care within the world: take our passion, Lord God, and use it as a means of love and hope within this troubled world. You can do more with our gifts and graces than we can ever imagine. Thank You, Lord God: AMEN
