

Text: Exod. 17:1-7

Title: "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Time: 1/17/2021 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Our water situation here at the church has been a reminder of the importance of water to our lives. One of the most important preparations for worship I must complete every Sunday morning is to remember to turn the bubble up machine off and the water to the church on. At the parsonage the worse part of losing power when that happens is that we lose our water. Some of us have been praying for a sister this past week who lost her water to an unknown plumbing issue at home.

The Israelites certainly understood what it was like to be desperate for water (v. 1, 3a). They were thirsty people in a very arid and desolate region of the Middle East. Children and livestock were among those needing a drink. They did not have the option of driving to Market Basket to pick up gallons of water. They only had two options. They could cry out to the Lord in faith about their need the way Moses had taught them by example to do (15:25), or they could do what our passage calls *testing the Lord*.

Instead of praying in faith, Israel decides once again to test the Lord in unbelief. They do so by asking some questions. Have you ever been asked by a troubled child something like the question, "Why do you hate me so much?" Well, what is the answer from a loving Mom or Dad to a question like that? There is a foundational assumption that must be accepted before this specific question can be answered. The specific question is *why*? And to answer *why*, the parent must first agree that the assumption that the question is based on, namely that the parent hates the child so much, is

true. It is easy to see that the one who asks a question like this is making an accusation, not seeking an answer.

The questions of Israel are like that, especially in verse 3: “Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?” They are making an accusation, not a real inquiry.

But there is another question that tests the Lord in unbelief that sounds much more like a real inquiry. It is the one at the end of verse 7: “Is the Lord among us or not?” I must say that I have never been tempted to ask the Lord, “Why did you want to kill us?” One reason this is true is probably that I have never been thirsty enough. But I can say that the temptation of the other question has troubled my spirit in unbelief at times: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

It is that question that I would like us to focus on this morning. I want us to see three things from our passage about this question, which we find on our own lips during difficult circumstances: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

I. The question is a sinful question (vv. 1-3).

Illustration: David Rohl does a good job describing the likely twenty-mile route of the Israelites from Alush (Wadi Al-Ush) to a place known today as Wadi Refayid (Num. 33:14). In our passage it is called Rephadim, which is plural. *Rephad* is singular and sounds a lot like the Arabic *Refayid*.

One of the geographical details Rohl notices about this leg of the journey is that their path would have taken them past a place known as the Oasis of Feiran, the most plush and well-watered location in the wilderness of Sinai. So one question that comes up as we think about this journey is

why Moses would lead the people to waterless Refayid without stopping at this plush oasis instead.

Rohl believes he sees an answer in Deut. 25:17-18. The Amalekites will attack Israel later here in Exodus 17, and Deuteronomy 25 tells us that they do so from the rearguard of Israel. Rohl believes that Israel did not stop at the oasis because the Amalekites were already camping there, occupying the place that had plenty of water. Rohl believes that the Amalekites were associated with the Hyksos who took over Egypt after the exodus "without striking a blow."

Application: So there you have it – God’s people are thirsting in the waterless wilderness of Rephadim, and the Amalekites of the world are going swimming in the best watered spot in all the wilderness of Sinai. And the Israelites want to know as they look at these circumstances, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

So, we can see why the Israelites would ask what they did, but I wonder this morning whether we can really see the sinfulness of this question. We immediately recognize that the question of verse 3 was a bit harsh, but the question in verse 7 can make some sense to us under these circumstances. Why would a question like that be considered by the Lord to be testing Him in a sinful way?

The answer is really a simple one that is explained for us in verse 1: "And all the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, after their journeys, according to the commandment of the Lord." The Israelites were in Rephidim according to the commandment of the Lord. It was at His direction that they found themselves without water in a waterless place. The question, "Is the Lord among us?" is always a sinful accusation against the

Lord, for He has promised to be with us always, and it is His providence that is ultimately in control of whatever circumstances we find ourselves faced with. Because He is the Lord, He is worthy of our trust and faithfulness, even when the Amalekites have plenty to drink and God's people are left waterless for a time.

We do not read this passage well unless we can see the sinfulness of our own hearts in the questions of the Israelites on this difficult occasion. C. H. Macintosh put it this way: "From it we learn, amongst many other things, the unvarying tendency of the heart to distrust God. Any thing, in short, for it but God. It would rather lean upon a cobweb of human resources than upon the arm of an omnipotent, all-wise, and infinitely gracious God; and the smallest cloud is more than sufficient to hide from its view the light of His blessed countenance" (2.225).

This tendency for distrusting unbelief is the nature of our sinful flesh. We doubt when we should trust. We complain when we should give thanks. We throw up our hands and quit when we should faithfully persevere. We need greatly the Lord to show us our hearts, give us repentance, cleanse us from our sinfulness, and empower us with His Spirit to trust Him more.

Yes, the Lord is indeed among us, water or no water, whether Amalekites are swimming or not. Our Lord is worthy of our trust. To question that truth is to believe a lie and commit horrific sin. The question is a sinful one.

II. The question is one only the Lord can answer (v. 4).

Illustration: We have seen intense hatred for our nation's president climax in his second impeachment by the House of Representatives this past week. Three presidents in the

history of our nation have been impeached. In 1868 the House took from February 24th to March 3rd to impeach Andrew Johnson. In 1998 the House took from October 8th to December 19th to impeach Bill Clinton. In 2019 the House took from September 24th to December 18th to impeach Donald Trump. Last week, the House took only a day to impeach the outgoing president a second time.

Application: Whatever your political leanings this morning, the extraordinary nature of the impeachment we just witnessed has a lot of similarities with verse 4 of our chapter. It seemed that what has been called a constitutional impeachment process has taken about as much time as this stoning might take. Neither event enjoyed due process.

But Moses faced something far worse than any of our presidents have ever faced, and he does something that I wish they all knew how to do and that we all knew how to do as well. Moses cries to the Lord and says, "What shall I do?"

It turns out that one of the greatest spiritual leaders of men the world has ever known, when faced with his followers' question - "Is the Lord among us or not?" - could not convincingly provide the answer to their question. He could say "Yes," but he could not make them believe his answer. The hatred engendered against him meant that those asking these accusatorial questions of unbelief wanted less an answer and more a stoning. And so, it is clear that this question is one only the Lord can answer in such a way that those asking will hear the true answer and accept it as true.

What can we do if not make people listen? We can cry to the Lord as Moses does. Remember the truth about our troubles from chapter 15 - "The righteous cry, and the Lord hears them and delivers them out of all their troubles" (Ps. 34:17). God has a plan for Rephidim and a reason for times

of trouble. He beings to work in ways we never could when we cry to him in desperation and say, "What should I do?"

III. The question is one the Lord answers with a rock (vv. 5-7).

Illustration: Shortly before my family moved to New Hampshire, the famed Old Man of the Mountain had his face fall off. A kind family from Boscawen took us up there, and all we could see was a sign with a picture of how the Old Man used to be on the mountain. As the Granite State, we still appreciate the importance of a good rock.

Application: The Lord answers the question, "Is the Lord among us or not?" with a mountain rock. Our text tells us that the Lord Himself would stand upon the rock before Moses to identify in some way with it. And then Moses, obeying the Lord, struck the rock that the Lord was standing on. When struck, the rock fell apart and produced water for the people of Israel. Their question was answered.

The apostle Paul explains what God's hidden plan for waterless Rephidim was with a simple phrase in 1 Cor. 10:4, "And [Israel] did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ." God had taken them to waterless Rephidim so that they would find a drink of a different kind, a spiritual drink of faith. This spiritual drink of faith comes from a spiritual Rock that was to be symbolized by the rock Moses struck that day. The source of spiritual life-giving water is Christ. He is the Rock. He became the source of spiritual life when God ordered Him struck at Calvary.

And so now there is a flowing fountain of spiritual water for spiritual thirst, because Jesus our Rock was struck by

God for our sins. C. H. Macintosh explains the meaning of this metaphor for us: "Christ [has] taken His seat at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens, having wrought out perfect righteousness, answered all the claims of holiness, magnified the law and made it honorable, borne the unmitigated wrath of God against sin, exhausted the power of death, and deprived the grave of its victory." That is God's spiritual life-giving water from Christ the Rock. That is salvation from sin in Christ. Jesus is God's answer to the sinner's question: "Is the Lord among us or not?"

This morning, the Holy Spirit and the Bride of Christ, His church, say to thirsty, dying souls: "Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17). The Lord is not merely among us; He also died for us. Will you come to Christ, cleft for you, and drink by faith this life of forgiveness from sin?

Conclusion: So, the question of the Israelites is answered, but sadly, their focus has been on the wrong question all along. They have been testing the Lord by asking, "Is the Lord among us?" The correct question, the righteous question this morning, is one that tests us rather than the Lord: "How could I ever have questioned whether the Lord is among us or not?" The real problem in Rephidim had nothing to do with the Lord's absence or even with Israel's severe thirst. Instead, it had everything to do with the problem of the sinners' hardened hearts of unbelief.

Israel called the place where water came from the rock Massah (temptation) and Meribah (provocation). Will the place where the rock was cleft for you, Calvary, be the place your thirst is quenched to never thirst again, or will it be forever remembered by you as your Massah and Meribah?

Hear the psalmist as we think about the decision before our Rock this morning: “O 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 ye will hear his voice. Harden not your heart, as in the provocation (the Meribah), and as in the day of temptation (the Massah) in the wilderness: when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work” (Ps. 95:6-9). Harden not, for the Lord is among us with the water of salvation.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*