

Testing & Grumbling

Exodus 17:1-7

Intro:

How many of you brought a water bottle with you this morning? How many regularly carry around your own water bottle? Some of that probably has to do with some excellent marketing by water bottle manufacturers, but it's also because we have a growing awareness of how dependent we humans are on water. It's one of our basic needs, right?

Percentage-wise, our bodies are mostly made up of water. Newborns and infants are so soft and squishy and cuddly because they're almost 80% water. The average adult is about 60% water. Your brain, lungs and muscles are about 75-80% water. We need water as building material for cells, to regulate our temperature, to transport nutrients through our blood, to flush waste and toxins from our bodies, as shock absorbers for our nervous system, for digestion, to keep our joints lubricated, and so on... Rule of thumb is that we can only survive about three days without water (depending on climate, etc...). We are completely *dependent* on water. Why? Because God made us that way.

We were created as dependent beings. The very fact that we are *created* beings teaches us that we are dependent upon another Being for our existence. And God has given us physical needs, like thirst, as constant reminders of our dependence on Him. Physical thirst is intended to be a sign to us of our spiritual thirst. As much as we need to water, we need God much more!

Because of this close connection between our physical needs and our spiritual needs, the way that we respond when we really feel a *physical* need reveals a lot about our *spiritual* condition. Things that make us feel how physically dependent we are- like having a deep thirst, or facing financial uncertainty, or dealing with a serious illness- these things can lead us to harden our heart towards God. Or they can reveal a heart that is

already hard towards God. Or, they can lead us into greater humility and trust in God.

That's why, in our study of Exodus over the past several weeks, we've been seeing God put His people through these physical tests where they're confronted with their deep dependence. They're faced with hunger and thirst as tests. These tests are *not* for God's information, He already knows them inside and out. Rather, it's to reveal to *them* (and us) the condition of their hearts.

And in our passage today, we see that their hearts are still faithless, despite all that God has done for them. He's rescued them dramatically out of slavery in Egypt. He provided a way for undrinkable water to become drinkable. He's begun miraculously providing food for them from the sky *every day!* And yet, when they face another test- being confronted again with their absolute dependence on God- they fail the test. Instead of going to God in humble, dependent prayer and asking Him to provide what they need, they harden their hearts toward Him.

Now, we don't see the fact that they hardened their hearts spelled out directly in this passage. But, in Psalm 95, God reveals His perspective on what happened:

Psalm 95:7b-9

Today, if you hear his voice,
do not *harden your hearts*, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your fathers put me to the test
and put me to the proof,
though they had seen my work.

Instead of submitting to God's test, the Israelites turned it around and put God to the test! And God responded with gracious patience- again. He proved His ability and His willingness to provide for their needs. But the fact that they put God to the test, is evidence that they were actually hardening

their hearts against Him. And, as **1 Corinthians 10:6** says, *“These things were written down as examples, that we might not desire evil as they did.”* So, here’s what I believe God wants us to specifically learn from their example today:

Sermon Summary: To fight against hard-heartedness we must recognize God’s presence and provision, pay attention to God’s warnings, and trust in God’s promises.

So first, in order to fight against hard-heartedness...

1. We must recognize God’s presence and provision.

Notice how they got to this place where they so deeply felt their dependency- God was with them, and He led them there.

*17:1 “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.”*

God was leading them, showing them where to camp, through the very visible pillar of cloud and fire! His presence with them was evident. And it was no mistake that He led them to this place where they couldn’t find water. But, as soon as they got thirsty, they became blind to the evidence of God’s presence with them.

Which is remarkable, because it seems like they had plenty of evidence that God *was* with them and *would* provide everything they needed. The time markers given in chapters 16 & 19 tell us that these events in chapter 17:1-7 happened somewhere within about a two week period *after* God had started raining down food for them every day. So, they’ve been getting this manna from heaven for less than two weeks, and it seems that they’ve already forgotten how miraculous it is! Already, they don’t see it as evidence of God’s presence and provision. The very last words of verse 7 get to the heart of the issue. The core question in the Israelites’ grumbling and complaining was, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Manna from heaven has already become a natural thing to them! “Yeah, sure, we see that giant pillar of cloud and fire. But...maybe that’s just a crazy freak of nature. And, yeah, OK, we’re getting food from heaven every day, but that’s just a natural occurrence, isn’t it? It happens every day, just like the sun rising. That’s not evidence of God’s presence with us. Is He really here or not!? We need more proof!!!”

When we consider the amount of proof that they already had of God’s presence with them, the Israelites’ doubt sounds ridiculous to us. But, this is teaching us that *visible signs alone are never enough to create faith*. The natural condition of the human heart is unbelief, and no amount of evidence proclaiming the existence of God can change that by itself. Apart from the Holy Spirit’s work, we will do everything possible to squirm our way out of the obvious.

For example, there is a growing mountain of evidence, accepted even among secular scientists, that Darwin’s theory of evolution cannot explain the origin of life. One line of evidence for this is that technology that Darwin didn’t have access to in his day has shown today’s scientists the inner workings of the cell. And what they’ve found is that cells are far too complex to have just come into being by chance. The cell functions like a highly sophisticated machine run by a highly sophisticated computer. The encoding and technology that takes place inside a cell is light-years beyond anything yet created by humans. It’s become evident that not even billions of billions of years of chemical reactions and mutations could not have brought it into being. The cell bears every mark of *design*. Yet, the vast majority of biological chemists refuse to accept the possibility of even a Designer, much less the reality of an Almighty, Creating God. They don’t want to accept that they are just frail, dependent creatures who are accountable to their Creator. Not because of a lack of evidence, but because their hearts are hardened towards God.

And growing hardened towards God is a real danger that we all have to be on guard against. So, we must recognize that God *is* with us and He is sustaining at every moment. Let’s not fall into the same trap as the

Israelites, thinking that everything we see around us is just “natural.” If by “natural” we mean “happens without God doing it” then *nothing* is “natural.” We are surrounded by wonder, miracle and mystery all the time. If I let go of this, what happens? It falls, right? Of course, because of...? Gravity. That’s natural. We understand gravity, right? No, we don’t. We can observe the effects of gravity, but scientists don’t really have a clue *what* it is, or *why* it works the way it does. They make guesses and have theories, but it’s really just a big mystery!

And the things that give our lives meaning- things like consciousness, love, beauty, truth, joy!- science has its theories about these, too, but there are no naturalistic explanations for what these are or where they come from! Creation is chock full of “miracles!” God is present, sustaining us in every way, at every moment. As the hymn “This Is My Father’s World” says, “He shines in all that’s fair. In the rustling grass I hear Him pass, He speaks to me everywhere.”

But the ears of our hearts must be receptive in order to hear His voice whispering and shouting in Creation.

17:3 *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?”*

They are longing to be back where water was plentiful. “Sure, we were slaves and our baby boys were being slaughtered by our masters... but hey, at least we had enough water!”

This is an extreme case of “the grass is always greener” syndrome. But, if we don’t recognize God’s presence and provision, we will also be tempted to long for the false “provision” of the world, looking back on the fleeting pleasures of our previous life, or out to the world with longing as if it can satisfy the deepest longing of our heart. We can have such a rose-colored view of our past, and of the world that we remember only the “good times.” Or we look at friends or family who don’t seem to give a thought to God, and go, “Well, they seem to have it pretty good!”

Friends, that is a lie that forgets or obscures the heartaches, the hangovers, and the heavy burden of guilt for sin!

Longing to return to Egypt can lead to hard-heartedness, and this is a real danger, so to fight against it we must recognize God's presence and provision. And it's especially dangerous because when our hearts begin to harden, we won't realize it. Like the frog in the pot of lukewarm water that is slowly brought to a boil. He doesn't realize it until it's too late. So we have to be on guard. And to do that, we must hear and pay attention to the *warnings* of God.

2. We must pay attention to God's warnings.

It was tempting for me, in writing this message, to mainly focus on the gracious patience of God. And that *is* so clear in this passage! God doesn't even rebuke the people when they grumble. He simply, powerfully provides what they need.

But, when we try to discover how a passage of Scripture applies to us, if possible we should always first look at how the Bible interprets and applies it elsewhere. And that is fairly easy with this passage, because after the actual Exodus event itself, this is the passage from Exodus that is most often-referenced in the rest of the Bible. There are about ten other places in Scripture where this incident is referred to directly or indirectly. And they are all in the context of *warnings*.

And this isn't surprising because, as we see in verse 7, the place was even named "testing" and "quarreling" to serve as an ongoing warning- a reminder to God's people to be on guard against this hard-hearted kind of attitude towards Him.

I won't go through all the verses that refer to this passage. We'll just put them up on the screen and you can write them down and read them on your own later. I've already mentioned the first two...

1 Corinthians 10

Psalms 95

Deuteronomy 6:16, 9:22, 33:8

Psalm 81

Psalm 106

Psalm 78

Philippians 2:14-16

Hebrews 3 & 4

I'd like to look more closely at that last one because it shows clearly how the biblical writers applied this passage. In Hebrews 3, after quoting from Ps. 95, which refers directly to Exodus 17, the writer of Hebrews applies it to NT believers, starting in verse 12.

Hebrews 3:12-15 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said,

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

Hebrews 4:6-7;11 Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,
"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

And again, look at the warning and exhortation with which he applies it-verse 11.

11 Let us therefore **strive** to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

It is a sweet Gospel truth that God keeps His people until the end. He *will* hold us fast. But, we must not presume upon that truth by ignoring or minimizing His warnings. One of the means that God *uses* to hold us fast is

warnings like these! They are like a carbon monoxide detector. We can't detect CO ourselves. We can only recognize the symptoms and by then it may be too late! We often can't detect our own hardheartedness and we may not recognize the symptoms. We need the warnings of God!

He warns us, and true believers will respond by doing what the apostle says- by taking care lest there be in us an evil, unbelieving heart, leading us to fall away from the living God. By exhorting one another every day, that none of us may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. We respond to God's warnings by *striving* to enter that rest, so that we do not fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Brothers and sisters, Exodus 17 is a warning for us. Through it, God is pleading with us, "Today, if you hear my voice, do not harden your heart! Do not put the Lord your God to the test!"

What does it look like for us to test God?

Testing God amounts to an attempt to get something out of Him earlier or in greater quantity than would otherwise happen. It comes from doubting that our present circumstances are what we deserve and whether or not God could, or should, have done a better job of providing for us. It's demanding from God *now* what He has promised us only in the new heavens and the new earth. "I demand uninterrupted happiness *now!* I demand perfect justice in the world *now!* I demand perfect financial security *now!* I demand fulfilling, conflict-free relationships *now!* I demand a perfect, constant sense of Your presence God- *now!*

Be warned, testing God hardens the heart! And the thirst of a hardened heart will never be quenched. It will always demand "More!", just like water poured out on hard ground simply runs on the surface and then evaporates.

In our day-to-day, responding to this warning looks like obeying Philippians 2:14, which I believe is a reference to Exodus 17- "*Do all things*

without grumbling or disputing.” Do you have a grumbling, discontented attitude? The biblical answer is not “Get more of X so that you can be content.” The biblical answer is, “Confess your hard heart!”

And, then *repent* by being thankful. If you struggle with grumbling and complaining, take time this week to sit down and start writing out a list of all that you have to be thankful for. You might start by giving God thanks for sending His own precious son to rescue you from an eternity of deserved torment in hell for your sins! Thank Him that He has put his Spirit in you to seal you for the day of redemption! Thank Him that He is giving you another breath right now that you don’t deserve! Then, revisit and add to that list often.

And, when you hear preaching or read the Bible on your own, *pay attention* to the warnings in Scripture. Those may not seem pleasant or encouraging to you, but God has given them to you for your eternal good, so don’t skim lightly over them. Take them seriously and respond to them with humble repentance.

We should respond to the warnings of God by trusting in the promises of God. God's warnings are the "do-nots" and trusting in God's promises is the “dos”--the positive flipside of heeding His warnings.

3. We must trust in God’s promises.

The Israelites were so focused on their immediate need that they forgot, or stopped believing, God’s promises. God had promised to bring them out of Egypt and into their own land, but they didn’t really believe Him. Let’s go back to Exodus chapter 6 and read that promise:

Exodus 6:6 Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. 7 I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. 8 ***I will bring***

you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.” 9 Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.”

Now, it's easy to understand why they didn't believe at that point, right? They had seen no rescue, they were still slaves. But by the time they arrive at Rephidim in chapter 17, they have already seen God keep the first half of His promise! He *had* delivered them out of slavery! Surely they could trust Him to keep the second half of His promise, to bring them into the land that He swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

But no... as we see in verses 3 and 4, they're not thinking about God at all. In their desperation, they turn on Moses, who is just God's representative, and they're ready to stone him to death! They're thinking it would have been better to live as slaves than to die of thirst in the desert! They have lost trust in God's promise, even though He has repeatedly, dramatically, proved Himself to be completely trustworthy.

Church, this was written down as an example for us- An example that urges us to *trust* in God's promises. To remind us that we walk by *faith* not by sight. Are the things you're dealing with so hard that you feel like God is nowhere near? Take comfort in knowing that having your faith tested isn't unusual. And it's not necessarily a sign that God is displeased with you. Throughout the whole history of God with His people, He has tested them.

In fact, in **1 Corinthians 10** the apostle Paul gives you God's promise that no temptation has overtaken you that is not *common* to man. He says God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. The Apostle James delivers another of God's promises, that the testing of your faith will produce *steadfastness*, a steadfastness that you *must* have in order to reach the promised land.

So he urges us, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces

steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Paul gives us yet another sweet promise in **Philippians 4:19**, *And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*

Our needs are real, both physical and spiritual. And some of you are desperate for God to meet them. So what should you do? Just sit passively and say “Ok, I’m trusting God.” No, you should do what Israel failed to do—ask God. PRAY. It sounds so simple, but it is a profound act of faith. Don’t grumble to yourself or other people about God. Don’t turn away from God. Pray and wait for Him to deliver you. Jesus promised us “I will never leave you or forsake you” and He is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

Believe that He *will* give you everything that you need in order to make it to the Promised Land! He’ll do it in His way and in His timing, but it’s ok to ask Him for what you need when you feel your need. In fact, He *wants* you to ask Him! So trust in His promises, and show that trust by praying to our promise-keeping God!

Communion:

I want to give you one last promise to cling to as we move towards communion.

John 7:37-39 *On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

I believe that God created us with such a need for water, such a capacity for thirst, primarily for *this* moment in time. So that, when Jesus proclaimed who He was and what He came to do, He could use that metaphor to teach us about our deepest spiritual need. What we desperately need is Him. To come to Him. To receive His Spirit, the Spirit that wells up in us to give us eternal life. This is His promise. If you come to

Him, trusting in Him, He will give you the Spirit and you will have *real* life now, and though you die, yet you will live with Him.

God always works through the created realm to speak spiritual things to us. The Lord's Supper is another example of that. Through it, God is showing us our spiritual need. We cannot live if we do not feast on Jesus.