

Our Only Hope In The Wilderness

by John Piper

This sermon delves into Exodus 17:1-7, highlighting the journey of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Rephidim where they faced a waterless encampment. It emphasizes the importance of trusting God's providence even in seemingly hopeless situations, showcasing God's life-giving presence and mercy despite the people's unbelief and questioning. The ultimate message is to trust in God's righteousness and the sacrificial work of Jesus, understanding that every blessing, past, present, and future, is owed to the cross.

Scripture: Exodus 17:1, Psalms 95:7, Romans 3:25, Romans 8:32, 1 Corinthians 10:4

Topics: "Trust in God's Providence", "The Sacrificial Work of Jesus"

Description

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Transcript

I invite you to turn to Exodus chapter 17 verses 1 through 7. Exodus 17. It is important that you see this text with me and not just hear it. So get your phone or your print Bible.

The people of Israel have been enslaved for hundreds of years in Egypt. The time for their deliverance had come. God had sent Moses after 10 plagues and a mighty deliverance at the Red Sea.

The people have entered the wilderness. They encamp at Marah. They move from Marah to Elam.

They move from Elam to Dofka. They move from Dofka to Alush and from Alush to Rephidim. You can read those stages in Numbers 33.

And we meet them in Rephidim. And according to the previous chapter, 16 of Exodus, they entered this region only six weeks after the dividing of the Red Sea. It's as though everybody in this room saw God divide the Red Sea on May 1st, 2022.

This generation in Israel had seen some of the greatest miracles in the history of the world. We meet them in chapter 17, verse 1 through 7 at Rephidim. And the drama unfolds in these seven verses in four scenes.

I'm going to read them one at a time. Every one of them is brimming with implications for your life. I'll pause after each scene and state the main point as I see it.

Scene 1, verse 1, Exodus 17. And all the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of sin. I'll pause there, clarification.

That looks like sin in English, S-I-N. It's a transliteration of the Hebrew sin, which has nothing to do with sin. So don't think wilderness of sinning, it's not.

It's a name like Indiana. 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 in camp at Rephidim. But there was no water for the people to drink.

Main point of scene 1, God led his people to a campsite with no water. Now you can see this in the middle of verse 1. They moved by stages according to the commandment of the Lord and in camp at Rephidim. There had been two other stages, Dofka and Alush.

He doesn't mention them. He's got one goal in mind, get them to Rephidim. And Rephidim has one significance, no water.

That's where you go, that's where you camp, that's where I take you. God is commanding these movements, not Moses, and he gets them to Rephidim exactly where he wants them. If you're a Christian, that's your life.

God works all things according to the counsel of his will, Ephesians 1.11. If God wills, we will live and do this or that, James 1.15, 4.15. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord, Job 1.21. Our God is in the heavens and he does all that he pleases. Psalm 115, verse 3. Hundreds of you, hundreds of you came to this conference encamped at Rephidim, and there is no water. As far as you can see, there's wilderness in every direction, and from a human standpoint, your circumstances are going to end badly.

There is no human way out, and this text says, you are not there by accident. Your ways are ordered by the Lord, Proverbs 20, verse 24. One of the purposes of these seven verses and this sermon is to help you see and feel that's goodness.

Scene 1, God has led his people to a campsite with no water. Scene 2, verses 2 and 3. 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? But the people thirsted there for water.

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? Main point of scene 2, God's people did not trust that God's providence is good, but accused Moses and God of harmful purposes. Verse 2, the people take issue with Moses. Whatever's happening here is not happening fast enough, and they demand water.

Give us water to drink. And in essence, Moses responds, your quarrel is out of place. It's not a quarrel with me.

When you quarrel with me, you try God's patience. Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord? And verse 3, you with me? Verse 3 gives the heart of their indictment. They don't ask, why did you

bring us up out of Egypt? It's not what they ask.

They ask, why did you bring us out to kill us? They're not questioning God's timing. They're questioning God's goodness. They're not saying God is incompetent to give them water.

They're saying, he doesn't intend to. He's not going to help us. They're saying, he doesn't intend to save us.

His purposes are not saving. They are murderous. And when Moses says in verse 2, why do you test the Lord? There's a warning.

Don't try God's patience. It runs out. For people who don't trust him and despise him, it runs out.

We know how this story ends in the wilderness. Numbers 14, verse 22, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness and yet have put me to the test these 10 times and have not obeyed my voice, none of them shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despise me shall see it.

So we may not understand all the reasons why God chooses to bring us into a waterless encampment, but story after story after story in the Bible, including this one, is God's word. Trust me. Trust me.

They didn't. That's scene 2. Scene 3, verses 4 through 6. So, Moses cried to the Lord, what shall I do with these people? They're almost ready to stone me. And the Lord said to Moses, pass on before this people and take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go.

Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb and you will 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. Main point of scene 3, God's life-giving presence toward absolutely undeserving people goes on.

His patience has not yet run out. So, what's God's answer to Moses' question in verse 4? What shall I do with these people? They're almost ready to stone me. What's God's answer to that? His answer is, I will give them water to drink.

Now, to make that answer as amazing as it is, he describes it in four ways, this miracle of life-giving grace, he describes in four ways. Number one, it's public. Verse 5, first phrase in the verse, pass on before this people.

So, they indicted us in public, we will be vindicated in public. Second, it will be well-tested by the elders. Verse 5, second phrase in the verse, pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel.

This will become part of their history, part of their teaching, part of their judging of the people. Third, this miracle will be a continuity, it will be a continuation of the miracles in Egypt, all of a piece. Third part of verse 5, take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go.

Moses struck the Nile one time with his staff. Exodus 7, verse 20, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, he lifted up his staff and he struck the waters of the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. In other words, with this staff, I turned water into blood, and with this staff, I will now turn rock into water.

All of a piece, same grace, same power, same God, then today. Fourth, the miracle of life-giving grace will come about by the Lord's presence. This is best.

It's the best thing. This is the best thing in the text, I think. Verse 6, behold, God says, behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, and the people will drink.

I will stand before you there on the rock. He might have said, I'm done with this rebellious people. I'm done.

I'm not going to be in their midst anymore. That's not what he said. He might have said, okay, I'm going up on the mountain, the top of Horeb.

I will unleash a lightning bolt. This rock will split. Water will come out, but I'm not going to defile my holy presence with this despising people, and that's not what he said.

He said, when you strike the rock, I'll be standing on the rock before the people. Now, why would he do that? Why would he do that? Because what the people need more than water is the presence of God. The steadfast love of the Lord is better than life.

I wonder if you believe that. That's Psalm 63, verse 3. The steadfast love of the Lord is better than drinking water and staying alive, better than being healed of cancer. What, after all, was the point of choosing Abraham, guiding the patriarchs, bringing Israel into Egypt, delivering them with a mighty hand, bringing them out into wilderness? What was the point? He states the point in the next chapter, verses 4 and 5 of Exodus 19.

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. I'm going to take my stand on the rock that will give you life because my presence is your life. I brought you out of Egypt to myself.

You think you need water? You think you need water in the wilderness? You need me a thousand times more than water. So, scene number 3, God's life-giving presence toward undeserving people goes on. His patience has not run out.

Scene 4, last scene, verse 7. And he, that is Moses, he called the name of the place Masa 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? Main point of this scene, Moses memorializes their failure to believe in God's saving presence. He memorializes their failure. This story does not have a happy ending.

There's no repentance. There's no awakened faith. There's not even any water, just the promise of water.

Verse 6, in the middle of the verse, the people will drink. And no doubt the water came, and no doubt they drank. Moses doesn't talk about that.

Moses' point is failure. That's the point of the story, failure. He doesn't name the place, grace abounding to the chief of sinners.

He doesn't name the place, water from the rock. He doesn't name the place, God is faithful. He names the place, Masa, Meribah.

Masa means testing, Meribah means quarreling. It says, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel and because they tested the Lord. So scene 4, harks back to scene 2, verse 2, why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord? And that's where the story ends.

Memorializing the quarreling, memorializing the testing, almost. Moses has one final indictment at the end of verse 7, which I haven't mentioned. He means for us to see the greatest failure in the light of the greatest gift.

So verse 7 ends, they tested the Lord by saying, is the Lord among us or not? God had said, I will stand before you on the rock. And the people said, we don't even know if he's here or if he intends to kill us. End of story.

Now, let's step back and ask, Moses, what's your point? God, what's your point through Moses in telling us these four scenes to this drama in verses 1 through 7 of Exodus 17? What are you trying to get across to us? Now, the way Moses tells this story, failure is foregrounded. The story begins, verse 2, and it ends, verse 7, with quarreling with Moses, testing of God, memorialized. It begins with unbelief.

They don't trust God. They harden their hearts against him. God brought them into waterless places, an encampment with no water, and he doesn't intend to help us here.

That's what they say. And the trumpet blast of this text that echoes through all the rest of the Bible is, don't be like that in your wilderness. Don't be like that.

I mean, listen, Psalm 95, verse 7, today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as at Meribah on the day of Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. Don't do that, TGCW. Don't do that.

Or Hebrews chapter 3, verse 7, as the Holy Spirit says, today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts as in the rebellion on the day of testing in the wilderness. Or 1 Corinthians chapter 10, they all ate the same food, manna. They drank the same spiritual drink.

Nevertheless, with most of them, God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did. Now, these things happened to them as an example.

They were written down for our instruction. Therefore, let him who thinks that he stands take heed, lest he fall. Don't be like them.

World, centuries 2022, don't be like them. In other words, this failure of Israel to trust God in the wilderness reverberates through the whole Bible. And the message is this, when God brings you into a waterless encampment and you see wilderness stretching in every direction and no way out, don't be like that.

Don't question him. Trust him. Trust him.

He brought you into the wilderness. He can bring you out. He led you to Rephidim where there is no water, only rock.

And he will take you stand on the rock and be your life. Or will he in 2022? For many of us, the greatest obstacle to joy, joyful confidence in our waterless place is not that God can't save us. That's not our problem.

Our problem is, will he? Will he? And the greatest obstacle to believing that he will is our sinfulness. I speak from experience. How can God be a just and holy God and do what he did in scene three? Surrounded by a thankless people who say, you brought us out to kill us.

Surrounded by that people, he says in verse six, behold, I will stand before you there on the rock and water will come out of it and the people will drink. How can God be righteous and act as though the despising of his name had so little consequence? Our very hearts cry out, I've scorned the name of the Lord in all my doubting, all my unbelief, all my complaining, all my despairing in the wilderness. I have scorned the name of the Lord.

Will God simply join me in belittling his name by sweeping my God-despising sin under the rug of the universe? How can I ever be saved by a righteous and holy God? How could they ever experience scene three? Now, the Apostle Paul thought that's the biggest problem facing humankind, and it is. No matter how many commentators talk about other things, that's the biggest problem facing humankind. How can God uphold the righteousness of his name while showing mercy to God- belittling, God-despising sinners? How is scene three, Exodus 17, verses four through six, even conceivable? God, offering himself as our life, surrounded by the outrage of people indicting him as evil.

How is that possible? Paul's answer, and I think it's probably the most important verse in the Bible, his answer is Romans chapter three, verse 25. I'll read it to you. God put Christ, the Son of God, the eternal second person of the Trinity, God put Christ forward as a propitiation.

That means a satisfaction of God's righteousness. God put Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith. Here comes the sentence.

This putting Christ forward by his blood, this was to show God's righteousness. Because in his divine forbearance, he had passed over former sins in scene three. When God passed over the sins of scene two, and passed over the sins of scene four, and poured out his life-giving mercy in scene three, was he unrighteous? Was he belittling his own name? Was he taking his own holiness lightly? Was he sweeping God, indicting God, despising attitudes under the rug and saying, it doesn't matter, I'm not worth that much anyway.

Was he unrighteous? No, he wasn't. And the reason he wasn't is because he knew that 1,400 years later, he would vindicate his righteousness for passing over sins. The death of Jesus is the thunderclap of this truth.

No sin is ever merely passed over. None! It will be paid for in hell, or it will be paid for on the cross. No quarreling with God's word, no testing of God's patience ever goes unpunished.

Ever! God's righteousness is absolute, and the unspeakable mercy of scene three, verse six, Exodus 17, that mercy is directly owing to the blood of Jesus. That blood, the blood shedding of the Son of God, was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance, he had passed over former sins. Every, and this is a sweeping statement, it will change, if you understand it and believe it, it will change the way you read the Old Testament.

Every undeserved blessing shown to God's elect in the Old Testament, every undeserved blessing shown to God's elect in the Old Testament was bought by the blood of Jesus, without exception. When Paul made this strange statement in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 4, about Israel in the wilderness, when he

made this strange statement, they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. This is what I think he meant.

The undeserved blessing of water from the rock, the undeserved blessing of manna from heaven, the undeserved blessing of deliverance at the Red Sea, the undeserved blessing of guidance by the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, the undeserved blessing of Moses' leadership, all of it was owing to the cross of Christ. Is it not right, then, to say the rock was Christ, the manna was Christ, the deliverance was Christ, the pillars of fire and cloud were Christ? God's guilty people would enjoy no blessings apart from Christ and what he did 1,400 years later. And so it is for you and me who are in Christ, you who despair of your sinful selves and know God owes you nothing.

So it is for you. Every undeserved blessing you will ever taste now and forever is owing to the death of Jesus. I suppose if you were to ask me, do you have a favorite verse? I might say Romans 3.25, but probably I would say a verse that says the same thing with a future orientation, namely Romans 8.32. He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not with him graciously give us all things? Not just can he, but will he? Everything we need to do his will, everything we need to glorify his name, everything we need to make it to the promised land.

So when he leads you into the waterless encampment of Rephidim, and he will if he hasn't, when he leads you into the waterless encampment of Rephidim and there is no human hope, trust him. Trust him. He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not with him graciously give us all things? Everything you need has been purchased by the blood of Jesus.

Above all, the best purchase and the best gift, himself. For your enjoyment now in the midst of the wilderness and your enjoyment forever. Let's pray.

Father, please don't let us, any of us, harden our hearts in the wilderness of Rephidim where there's no water. Take away our questioning, take away our doubting, take away our complaining, take away our despairing. Oh, grant us trust.

Let this text and all the Bible strengthen, deepen, and make unshakable our confidence that in the wilderness you will be our life and you will bring us out into a promised land in due time. This is in Jesus' name. Amen.

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