

Between a Rock

Ever travel with a tour group? It can be fun. But if things don't go just right, tempers flair. So can you imagine the difficulties of traveling on the scale of a *nation*? Israel is a nation on the move. And in their journey they have come to a place called Rephidim. By the time they leave this place something will have happened so drastic that the place would henceforth be known as *Massah and Meribah*. At Rephidim, they are caught between a rock and a hard place – a critical point in their existence a people. Behind them spirit-crushing slavery. Ahead of them, a life of freedom as the people of God. Just down the road, they will receive the *Torah* at Mt. Sinai. And that Torah will define their freedom *and their responsibilities*. But right now, at Rephidim they are caught between what it means to be free and what it meant to be slaves. . . Massah and Meribah: a quarrel and a test.

This is dry place. But lack of water is not the problem. The *real* problem at Rephidim is that these people are still ruled by the slavery patterns of life. They must break with the woundedness of their past. They must get some closure on the trauma of slavery, and embrace their new identity as God's people. But at Rephidim, with parched, dry voices they begin to *murmur* one to another, murmuring a stark and penetrating question. . .

“ Is the LORD with us, or not?”

Every generation of the human family has a wilderness. Each new generation must ask do we have the spiritual resources to survive or will we wither and die in the desert? “ **Is the LORD with us, or not?**” This is the continual question for the people of God. Scholars believe this long remembered story of Israel in wilderness took it's final shape in the Babylonian exile. Now that they are *outside* the promised land, the Jews realized that this story was no longer a story about a water miracle in the desert long ago. No. This is a story about *contemporary faith*. In their generation, their *wilderness* was the *Babylonian exile*. ***And every generation must re-tell the story for its own day. So for us, the wilderness perhaps best represents our existence as people of faith in an anti-faith culture.***

Exodus 17:1-7 is *our* story because we, too, have come to a place called Rephidim. We too will must choose between an empty and enslaving life and the spiritual freedom of the children of God. And we, too, will travel on from our Rephidim, with our spirits refreshed or wither and die in the desert of the post-modern age.

Our faith must meet the challenge of our times. We, must find the water of the Word to quench the thirst within us. But on this journey, in our wilderness, we're at a place called Rephidim. So it shouldn't surprise us if, from time to time, we find a certain amount of murmuring, among the people of God. It is only what is to be expect from . . .

People in a time of transition

“The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded.”

The journey from slavery to freedom will take a long time. It will take place in stages. In the final stage they will reach the promise of a land – and abundant place. A better place to be than what they left. But *so far*, each stage of their journey has taken them further *away* from the usual life-support systems of human community: cities and farms, vineyards and orchards. Schools. Temples. In the desert there are no palaces where kings and rulers can keep at bay the forces of lawlessness. And all this is what they need. Life would be so good if they could just

get to that land of promise.

But they're not there yet. All they have right now is a cloud that goes before them, a pillar of fire by night, white stuff called manna they pick off the ground to eat. And they keep packing up and moving whenever the pillar moves because that is how God is directing them *at this stage*. But they're living in a bubble. Just outside the bubble are howling desert winds that would suck the life out of them in a single day. Inside the bubble, they're safe. But who wants to live in a bubble forever?

So the question becomes, "Is the Lord WITH US or not?" "Is he really *able* to take us out of the tyranny and oppression and into the land of promise? Or have we've made a terrible mistake? And the only way that question can be answered is for their bubble to burst and expose them directly to the reality of the desert. Before they could really *know* the God that was leading them, they had to come to . . .

A place where there are no illusions

So they come Rephidim, they find there is no water to drink. At best, this is false advertizing, at worst, a cruel joke, because this place-name, "Rephidim", in Hebrew means "*Support*". They had seen the oasis waters of Rephidim shimmering in the distance, but when they got there, all they found was dust. The "waters" of Rephidim were *a mirage*. This was supposed to be their supply depot, This was supposed to be where they could get what they needed to get on to the next stage. Water. Not a some great luxury, just a basic commodity. Ever been to Rephidim?

Ever come to a dry hole in your life? Just when you get to where you thought you wanted to be, "no water." Doesn't quench a certain *spiritual* thirst. We've got toys and technologies, lots of books to read, we travel, have wonderful experiences, friends, family, . . . but it's a mirage. Maybe you've tried a bit of everything the world has on offer but it's left you dry. You get up each morning, go through the motions but wonder, what am I doing this for?

You are at a place called Rephidim where the question becomes, "Is the LORD with us or not?" And we can only find if our *illusions* are stripped away.

When we come to Rephidim, we do one of two things: trust God when there is no visible sign of his presence or go looking for . . .

Someone to blame

And the Israelites, chose the later. In their case, Moses is an easy target; so they *quarrel* with Moses and say, "Give us water to drink, " because if there was one thing they have learned in slavery it to *always shift the blame to someone else*. In slavery, blame is what gets you whipped. Blame could easily get you killed. Never accept any responsibility or blame. As slaves, if they had a problem, all they really could do was plead with their Egyptian taskmaster for mercy: for food, clothing, or whatever it was they lacked. But Rephidim, they're no longer under the old taskmasters. No one to go to. No one to blame. Either they are under the protection of the God of all creation and, thereby have the resources of all creation at their disposal, or not.

But how they will respond to the water problem will show a whole lot about what they believe about God. This is a test, but not for God, but for them. And if they make a bad choice, they will have no one to blame but themselves. But now, they're outside the bubble where they simply have to learn to solve their own problems. But you don't learn to do that in slavery, so they blamed Moses. This was *his* problem.

By now we've all heard about the absurdly strict religious rule of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan during the 90's. In those days, not only were women brutally repressed, but imagine it was illegal to even listen to music. It was *illegal* under the Taliban for children to fly kites. The Taliban regime was the epitome of an enslaving religious system based on force and fear.

In those days, in the 90's the Mennonite church near us sponsored an Afghan family, brought them out of that terrible oppressive place and put them up in a little trailer beside the church. These people came with nothing but the clothes on their back and settled in this little trailer, and rolled out their bedrolls and there with simple running water, frig and stove *and a telephone* they were already way better off than they had ever been in their lives. But you could see a fear in their eyes that they had yet to escape.

But Mr. Friesen, the kindly old Mennonite elder taking care of them said, "Now, probably Tuesday, in the afternoon sometime, a truck is going to be coming with all your furniture: beds and tables and chairs and quilts and you name it. . . so don't you worry about a thing. "

But, you know, schedules in the backwoods of Northern Ontario are not all that precise, and for some reason the truck with the furniture got delayed.

So the Afghan man picks up the phone and phones the police and reports that the Mennonites had stolen his furniture! And poor old Mr. Friesen had the police at his door. . . It was obviously a case of culture-shock on both sides. And the Mennonites went to the Afghan family and asked, "*Why did you do that to us?*"

Why indeed? Those poor refugees were ruled by fear. They were afraid that they would be blamed if the furniture didn't show up. What they needed to discover is that they had come to a different place in their lives, a place provision and abundance and grace.

So whenever I think of the people grumbling to Moses, I think of these poor Afghans phoning the cops on Mr. Friesen who was doing nothing but trying to help them.

But **I** think that Moses, quickly realized what was happening. They were reacting out of fear. And that's why I hear. . .

Gentle tone in Moses

"*Why* do you quarrel with me? *Why* do you put the LORD to the test?"

Their quarrel is not with Moses. He's not the one who can make water appear. No doubt, Moses is irritated by their complaint. He's alarmed by their lack of trust and their quickness to blame him. But he not just firing back and angry response. Moses really just trying to figure out what makes these people tick? *Why?*

You see, we don't really know the *tone* of Moses' voice. But what is clear is he takes this situation very seriously – even personally, and really believes that they are in deep danger trying the patience of God. Why are they worried? Has not God has already met their every need in every way. That very morning they had picked up manna off the ground. God has led them here, by a mighty hand, so why the continual murmuring when the graciousness of God in all the resources of creation are available? A thoughtful person, would've figured this out. God would find a way to give them water. Maybe the water truck got delayed. Maybe there's a reason why they had to trust and pray a little longer?

But we see that what is starting to take over is . . .

The Murmuring (KJV)

They *murmured* against Moses. Did they really have a right to *murmur*? No. But they're

thirsty. . . Their children are in misery. They're desperate. "Why did you bring us out here," they ask. In such terrible circumstances, people are no longer governed by a sense of right and wrong or reasonableness. Out of such desperate murmurs come failed states, genocides, mob rule. We see it on TV and wonder how people can be so mean and senseless. But if we put ourselves into this story, we will find that such impulses are never really that far from the surface in any one of us. We too can be quick to *murmur*.

So imagine for a moment that *we* are the refugees: we sleep in tents in the howling wind. It's crowded. There's no privacy. It stinks. And we have to go down to the tap at the end of the path to just get water. And we always need water.

But, still, it's OK. We're under military protection. We're fed. If we're sick, there's a doctor, and if we get there early enough we only have to wait, maybe four or five hours, but at least we can get some basic care. If one of the women gives birth, they're given you some baby clothes that compassionate ladies in another country have sewed and shipped to us. But are we having fun yet?

Well, no. This *camp* is not a *home*. We may say in our darkest moment that we want to go back to where we came from, but do we really mean it? No. We'll be killed. There's famine. A war. Ethnic hatred. Enemies. No, there's no way. We *can't* go back. And we *should* be glad we're here. And we *should* be grateful that *some* one cared enough about us to make this camp a possibility and shipped these tarps and bags of grain.

But let's face it, in such circumstances, it's only human to *murmur*.

Think of the Church as a refugee camp

Nobody *likes* to leave home. Nobody ends up in a refugee camp by choice. They're driven there by powers beyond their control. They flee there from uprisings and hardships. Refugees are *not tourists*. They're escaping tyrants and disasters. Refugees by definition are *displaced* – looking for *sanctuary*.

No one in this camp will tell you that they came here looking for a little adventure. O yeah, we packed up and left our happy little farm to make this dangerous trek because we just wanted the experience of life for several years in squalid camp way out in the desert. . .

The church is a place of refuge. We flee here from the tyrannies of this world. So is it any wonder we might hear our neighbours *murmur*?

But what God shows *Moses* is that he has to remember where these people have come from – places of abuse and pain and fear. What they need right now is not a harsh rebuke, but . . .

A gracious reminder

So the LORD tells *Moses*, ". . . *take in your hand the staff* with which you struck the Nile, and *go*."

The stick was a powerful object in the hand of *Moses*. It had turned the Nile to blood, been turned into a serpent then back into wood.

The same stick in the hands of an Egyptian was the very symbol of dominance and force. But God had turned the stick into a symbol of grace and protection. And as *Moses* held forth his rod he reminded them who the REAL Boss is.

Can you think of one time when *Moses* held out that staff, that God's grace did not flow to the Israelites? He held forth the rod and the plagues slowly pried his people from Pharaoh's brutal grip until one night as the blood of a lamb covered their doorposts, the angel of death

passed over the people. By the blood they are saved and passed over.

This rod of Moses was raised at the Red Sea, and the waters parted. And they walked through and were saved. Every other rod raised against them had delivered only cruel pain and punishment. But this rod in the hands of Moses had delivered only grace. It was a reminder of . . .

God Compassionate Presence

God says to Moses “I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb.” This rock was also a potent reminder. It was at this very rock at Horeb that the LORD had first appeared to Moses in the burning bush. There, the unseen God became visible for a moment and told Moses his name:

Yahweh, which means **I AM**.

There is a lot of interpretations for this mysterious Name, but it seems to say, “when God says I AM he is saying all you need to know is that I exist.

But at Rephidim, the Israelites are testing that NAME.

For them, the provision of water could be only proof that God is with them and a lack of water proof he was not.

In difficult times we often are tempted to say “God, if you do this for me just this once, then I’ll . . . whatever” Isn’t testing the LORD all about seeking proof that God really cares in some *miraculous act* to save us from some extreme danger.

But let me suggest to you that our “testings of God” are usually a little more subtle. In this story, after all, God *does* solve the problem and they no longer are thirsty. But did the provision of water really move them on any further in their faith development?

Every day we are bombarded with a ton of advertisements for “water” O, it may be a car or an investment plan or, laundry soap or french fries . . . But it always comes down to some “commodity” that becomes the substitute for God. Because in the subliminal messages of advertisements, they’re never really trying to sell you a car, investment plan, laundry soap or french fries. What they are really saying is that the commodities they are trying to sell will provide the answer to loneliness, depression, popularity, joy, well being. It’s never about the water.

But : Is God with us or not? At Rephidim, the proof is never in the miraculous appearance of water or the new car or the investment plan or the laundry soap or the french fries.

. The proof of God’s presence among us comes through . . .

A faithful act

“Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses *did* this in the sight of the elders of Israel.

How shall we prove God’s presence among us? What is the Christian take on this story? Moses struck the rock, the water came out, *and so the Gospel was proclaimed*. The church’s one faithful act is “striking the rock” – preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The death and resurrection of Jesus mark the turning point of the ages. The “bubble” of Old Testament faith burst and Christ set in motion a timeless salvation for all humankind. It is the cross of Jesus that gives these Old Testament stories their tremendous power for us today as the New Testament people of God.

So it’s not at all surprising that the apostle Paul used the story of Rephidim in teaching the Corinthians:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into

Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They 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. 1 Cor 10:1-4

This this story is an example faith that couldn't survive outside the bubble. At Rephidim, every generation learns that

Actions have Consequences

And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Because the Israelites didn't exercise the self-discipline in spiritual life: eat the manna, follow the cloud, trust the LORD for everything. . . *they failed*. Htat generation, for the most part perished in the desert. The Corinthians knew the story of the Exodus, but what they just didn't get was how it related to *their lives*. So Paul warns them that they are on the same path that caused most of the Exodus generation to perish. They were, he says, "our ancestors." We are those people – the descendants, the people of God – the Israel of God. Like them, we too have been baptized into Christ like going through the Red Sea. We too eat the manna, drink the water from the rock. "*And that rock was the Christ.*"

But like the people in the wilderness, the Corinthians were in danger of rejecting Christ for idols. (Leaving the Lord's Table and eating in the pagan temples) Walking away from the nourishing sustaining presence of Christ knew when they gathered in the Spirit to hear the Word, eat the bread, drink the cup, *be the people of God*. Actions have consequences. But there is

Hope in this story

Maybe *we* are at a place called Rephidim today. But failure in our walk with God is never inevitable, not for Israelites, Corinthians, for us, as long as we continue to respond to the common everyday testings, with God's help. Because God has already committed to take us on to the next stage of our faith development. He's waiting for us beyond Rephidim in a promising future. But what we are called to is "*a long obedience in the same direction.*" But we can expect "water from the rock".

Yes, there are behaviours and life-directions so incompatible with life in Christ that persistence in them will result in a loss of connection with God. But this is not about a moment of weakness. A singular moment when we are duped or lured. That would be a deliberate life-direction based on the assumption that there are no eternal consequences. But when we come to Rephidim, between a rock and a hard place, there is a God who stands before us and speaks his name: **I AM**.

And that's *all we need*.