



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Rock Was Christ

Reverend Scott Johnson | August 24, 2025 | Exodus 17:1-7

Old Testament Reading

Our Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 17 verses 1 through 7, Exodus 17, 1 through 7, and this is the inerrant and infallible word of our God. 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. 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. 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? So Moses cried to the Lord, What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me. And the Lord said to Moses, Pass on before the people, taking 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 shall 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. And he called the name of the place Massah 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?

New Testament Reading

Keep your place there in Exodus and turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 10 for the New Testament reading. 1 Corinthians 10. I'll read verses one through five. 1 Corinthians 10, one through five. For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all

passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

You may turn back to Exodus chapter 17. This is our sermon text for today.

When I was growing up, one of the many places where we lived as a family was in a little town in the middle of the Texas Panhandle, a town by the name of Canyon, Canyon, Texas, just south of Amarillo, if you're familiar with that part of Texas. And further south from us was another little town, even smaller than ours. And the name of that town was 'Happy'. And the motto that the people of Happy gave to their town was, 'The town without a frown'. And surprisingly, Happy didn't grow much. It remained a small town. You would think that a town with a name like that would be bursting at the seams. Who wouldn't want to live in a place called Happy? Or, closer to where we live, there's the city of Pleasanton, California. That's another place where you'd think people would be moving to in droves. Everyone wants to live in a place that's happy or pleasant.

As we turn to our passage this morning in Exodus, the Israelites are continuing their journey through the wilderness. And so far, we've seen one place where they stayed in their journey, where they left their mark by giving that place a name. But the name of that place was not appealing as happy or pleasant, rather it was Mara, which means bitterness. Imagine working for the Visitors Bureau for a town called Bitterness and trying to convince people that that's where they need to go to spend their vacation. And in our passage today, we read of another place in the wilderness that had the honor, or perhaps we should say the dishonor, of having two names given to it thanks to the Israelites. And neither one of those names is even, or is any more appealing than Marah. One of those names is Masah, which means testing, and the other is Meribah, which means quarreling. And thanks to these two names, this place in the wilderness would forever be a memorial to the great sin that the Israelites committed there. at Massa or Meribah, the people of God, they both quarreled with their leader Moses and they tested the Lord.

And today, as we look at this passage, first we'll consider how the Israelites sinned there, how they sinned in quarreling with Moses and in testing the Lord. And second, we'll consider what is really the far greater story in this passage, and that is how God responded to the sins of his

people. He did not respond with righteous judgments, but he responded with mercy. His mercy was in the water that he caused to flow from the rock. And so first, we'll consider the Israelites' sin, and then secondly, God's merciful response.

The Sin of the Israelites

The first way the Israelites sinned was by quarreling with Moses, and it came about this way. The Israelites, they're in the wilderness of sin, and they go to a place that had a name already. It was called Rephidim. And like the place they went to earlier in the wilderness, there was no water there. and predictably the Israelites did not do what they should have done they did not trust in the Lord that he would provide water for them somehow neither did they pray for his provision but rather they did what they have already done and what they will continue to do in the wilderness they grumbled, they complained about the lack of provision, the lack of water there and specifically the text says that they quarreled with Moses They quarreled with him. That means they complained bitterly, angrily, even violently, or at least almost violently against Moses.

And by this time you would think that they would have learned the lesson that God will provide for them, but they were slow to learn. And so when they come to this new place with no water, they burst out in this complaining and quarreling with Moses. But if we're honest, we have to admit that we are slow learners as well. Despite the fact that we can look back on our lives and see how the Lord has marvelously provided for us at all times, nevertheless, when we come into a situation where provision is uncertain, we become anxious, fretful, we begin to murmur and grumble in our hearts against God.

Now not only did the Israelites quarrel with Moses, but they again accused him so slanderously, so falsely, they accused Moses of leading them out into the wilderness so that he could kill them or so that they would perish there. And according to what Moses tells the Lord, the people were so carried away by their sinful anger against him that they threatened to stone him. And this was not just a panicked exaggeration on the part of Moses, but this was really what the people of God were prepared to do. And so often in the scriptures, whenever there is, like the people of Israel here, an unbelieving people, people with evil in their hearts, and they are led by a godly righteous man or instructed by a prophet, so often the time comes when that people are ready to stone the one who is speaking or who represents God to them. And oftentimes they want to kill their leader by stoning. David, he was nearly stoned at one point. Some of the prophets after

him were stoned. Stephen in the New Testament was stoned. Paul was stoned, incredibly he survived that but he was stoned at one point and of course Jesus himself was nearly stoned more than once. And so here the people are so violently enraged against their leader Moses because he has led them to this place where there is no water that they are ready to put him to death by stoning.

But we also learn in this passage that Moses wasn't the true object of their anger. Yes, they directed their anger towards Moses, but their anger, their rage was against another. When Moses asked the people in verse two, why do you quarrel with me? What he meant was, what he was telling the people of Israel was, your quarrel is really with the Lord. Moses was telling the people, you know, who led you here was not me, it was God. He is leading us by the pillar of cloud and fire. You know that He is the one who can provide for you water to drink and food to eat. You know I am just a servant. And so you people, the one whom you would really like to stone and put to death, and you would if you could, is God Himself. So the people of Israel were enraged against God and ready to put Him to death. And so because Moses represented the Lord to the people, he became the lightning rod for their anger against God. And this is not an experience that is foreign to us or unfamiliar to us as Christians today in this world. Perhaps you have had this experience when you have been the object of someone's anger or even hatred when you knew that ultimately it was God that they were raging against, but because as a believer in Christ you represent God, you stand for Him in the world, you become the lightning rod, the object of that unbeliever's rage against the Lord. And that will be the case from time to time, as long as we live in a world in which there are people in unbelief who rage against God.

Now as if the shaking of their fist at God and nearly stoning Moses to death was not bad enough, we also learn here that the Israelites tested the Lord. In verse 2 Moses says, why do you test the Lord? And to test the Lord means to withhold your belief in Him, your trust in Him, to withhold your submission or obedience to the Lord until He meets some demand or requirement that you lay upon Him. Look at verse 7. It says, They tested the Lord by saying, Is the Lord among us or not? Now it's not as though the Israelites were literally questioning the presence of God with them. There was no doubt that that was true because of the pillar of cloud and fire. Nobody could deny that God truly was with the people of Israel. But what they were saying with that question, is the Lord among us or not, or what they were expressing was a stubborn refusal to acknowledge that God was their Lord, that therefore He had rightful rule and mastery over them. For the Israelites here, until God met their demand that they put before Him for water, until He did what they wanted Him to do, they would not render to Him that

submission, that honor, that obedience, that reverence that they owed to Him as their Lord, as their God. And that is how they tested the Lord. And so God, until He satisfied their demands, as far as they were concerned, He wasn't even there among them. He wasn't with them. It's the Lord among us or not.

And the heart of the problem for the Israelite people here was that in their hearts there was unbelief. The author of the book of Hebrews in chapter 3, when he writes about this incident, he describes the hearts of the Israelites as evil and unbelieving. And a person with an unbelieving heart, this is exactly what he will do. He will test the Lord. He will test the Lord. And this attitude of putting God to the test, this is very characteristic of the unbelief of our modern age. This is one very typical way that the unbelief of our world today expresses itself, to put God to the test, to put Him on trial. And if He is acceptable to our preconceived notions of what God should be, if He conforms to what we think God should be like, then He passes the test. If not, We refuse to acknowledge him as God or serve him as God.

C.S. Lewis put it this way, The ancient man approached God as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are reversed. He is the judge, that is, man. Man is the judge. God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge. If God should have a reasonable defense for being the God who permits war, poverty, and disease, He is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal, but the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the dock. And for the Israelites, God was in the dock. He was the one being judged. He was the one being tested. Is he among us or not? Will he prove worthy and qualified to be our God or not? And God is in the dark for the unbelieving world today as well. I will not believe in a God who allows this to happen. I will not serve or acknowledge a God who calls evil and sinful that which I call good. And of course, that is the attitude, the stance of the unbeliever towards God.

And yet, even as believers in Christ, we can be infected with the same kind of thinking, the same kind of attitude of putting God to the test. And we do this whenever we confuse our desires with God's promises. When God doesn't fulfill our desires, when he doesn't answer the prayers in the way that we want him to answer them, then you and I become tempted to complain, to grumble, to doubt God's goodness or his promises. Where's the good health that I asked for? I've been praying for healing for so long. Why, God, are you not answering? Why haven't you provided me with a spouse yet? Why doesn't God take away my suffering? Why hasn't God answered my prayers for this person? And when we ask those questions from a

spirit of complaining or grumbling or doubting the goodness of God, we're really betraying then that there is within our hearts the same testing of the Lord that the Israelites did here in the wilderness. Is God with me or not? Oh God, if you do what I want you to do, then I know you are with me, but if not, then I begin to doubt your promises. I question that you are truly with me.

I once talked to a man who desired a particular blessing from God, and it was not a bad thing that he desired, it was a good thing that he desired, a true blessing, but for whatever reason, in the providence of God, that blessing was withheld from him. God did not give it to him. And this man said to me, why is God punishing me in this way? In other words, he didn't say this, but what his question was saying was, I've put God to the test and he's failed to deliver. And so obviously he's rejected me. He's not on my side. He's punishing me. But that is the voice of unbelief. That is the same attitude essentially as the Israelites were displaying here in the wilderness.

God calls us to faith, to believe in His promises, to trust that in all things He is truly with us and He is working out our good and that He gives us what we need in His way and in His timing. And He does not withhold anything from us that He deems to be good and necessary for us. And so faith humbly acknowledges that it is God who does the testing. Faith recognizes that God is not in the dock, it is not God who is being tested by us, but we are being tested by God. That the adversity, the suffering, the withholding of the blessings that we desire, that these are means by which we are being tested, we are being tried. That God is working out His good purposes in us and for us. Faith believes that God is worthy and must be worshipped and obeyed even when he withholds some good thing that we desire of him. Faith says with Job, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. And faith trusts that God will give you what he knows that you need. Earlier in Exodus, when the Israelites were at Marah, The Lord knew that they needed water, and He provided for them. Later, the Lord knew that the Israelites needed food, and He provided for them, first quail and then the manna. And even before all of that, even while the Israelites were still in Egypt, the Lord knew His people. He knew what they needed, and He provided for them. And God will give you what you need. He will provide for you, but here's the rub. It is God who determines what you need, not us. It is God who gets to say exactly what you truly, truly need. And faith believes this. Faith trusts in the Lord for this, that He knows what is best for us and He will do what is best for us. And so faith rests in God's goodness and His promise of provision even when at least for a time God in His perfectly and infinitely wise and good purposes for us may withhold from us whatever blessing,

whatever good thing it is that we desire of Him and pray to Him for. Faith believes that God will give us in His timing what we truly need, what is for our good.

So the Israelites lacked faith. They were unbelieving and as a result they sinned. They sinned both in quarreling with Moses and in testing the Lord. And in the process, that place where they were, Rephidim, it lost its perfectly respectable name and from that point on it lived in infamy as Massa and Meribah, testing and quarreling.

Now Moses, he did do the right thing in this passage in crying out to the Lord. After the Israelites quarreled with him, he cried out to God for help. In verse 4 it says, So Moses cried to the Lord, What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me. So Moses, we can commend him for doing what he should have done, crying out to the Lord. But when you hear his question, you hear some exasperation in his voice, perhaps even a bit of complaining himself. What shall I do with this people? You could almost hear Moses saying, perhaps he didn't say it, but he probably thought it. Lord, don't you remember at the burning bush, I told you I was not the man to lead this people. Look what's happened. Complaining is like a virus. It's very contagious. And even Moses is infected with it a little bit.

God's Merciful Response

But God was merciful to both Moses and to the people of Israel. To say he was merciful is a huge understatement. He was amazingly merciful, wonderfully merciful. Once again, he did not deal with the Israelites as they deserved. God was within his rights to respond to their sinful quarreling with Moses, their complaining against the Lord. He was within his rights to strike them down, to destroy them there, but instead he gave them water. gave them water, and he did so in the most unusual and spectacular fashion. He led Moses and the elders of Israel to the foot of Horeb, which is another name for Mount Sinai. And Mount Sinai, as you know, will figure prominently as we go on in Exodus. Then the Lord appeared before them. Most likely he appeared in that pillar of cloud and fire. And we we learned that he was on the rock in some way the Lord himself was either on the rock or near the rock depending on how you translate the Hebrew and then by the Lord's command Moses lifted up the staff of God and he struck the rock and as soon as he struck the rock water started gushing out of it.

Now thankfully for us as readers of the Old Testament thankfully for preachers we have an inspired and infallible interpretation commentary on this passage, and that's in the New

Testament, that's in the passage that we read from 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 10, verses 3 and 4. Paul is speaking about the Israelites and their wilderness wanderings and he says all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ the rock was Christ and so in this passage here is Christ he is the rock and what does it mean that the rock was Christ.

Well, it means that the rock and the water that flowed from it had a sacramental quality. And what I mean by that is that just as in our sacraments, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of baptism, in those sacraments there is a spiritual reality that is united with the physical elements. So here too, with the rock and the water, there is a spiritual reality that is united to those elements for the blessing for the good of the people of Israel and that is this that just as the water itself gave physical life physical sustenance to the people of Israel so it is the Lord it is the Lord who gives spiritual life who gives spiritual sustenance to his people and God gives us the spiritual life through his son Jesus Christ He is the promised Messiah. He is the one whom the Israelites were looking forward to. He is the one who was to come, who would bring salvation and eternal life to the people of God. But even before his coming into the world, even before the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his work of salvation, he was to the Israelites in the wilderness. He was to them the fountain of living waters, the source of eternal life. He was present there with them in this rock and the water that flowed from it.

And since the rock is Christ, it is very significant that the rock was struck by the staff of Moses, because in this way the Lord was teaching his people that the Christ would be the source to them of life-giving water, but only after he was struck, only after he would be struck by the staff of the judgment of God. And that is what took place, of course, at the cross. Jesus was struck down by the wrath of God. As we sing in our hymn, He was smitten, stricken, and afflicted. He was struck down for us sinners. And by His death, He gives us the forgiveness of sins, eternal life to all who believe in Him. He was struck so that He would be to us a fountain of living water. And after He died upon the cross, still hanging there, His dead body was pierced by the Roman soldier's spear, and blood and water came flowing out of his side. And once again, the life-giving water flowed from the rock who was Christ.

And the water that flowed from the rock that Moses struck in the wilderness that day, this was not just a small trickle that barely sufficed to meet the needs of the Israelites. Don't think of just a small stream kind of trickling out from this rock, but rather it was more like the gushing torrent of a swollen mountain stream in springtime. And we know it was like this because Psalm 78 tells

us that. In Psalm 78 verses 15 and 16 we read, He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers. And so the picture that is given to us, the image that is given to us is that as soon as Moses hit this rock with his staff, it was like the bursting of a great dam. Suddenly gushing out of the rock was a torrent of cool, clear water that began to flow across the dry ground and all the Israelites could drink all that they wanted of it.

If the rock is Christ and the life that flows from Christ to you and me is not a small trickle of water, it's not a few drops of water, but it is rivers of living water. Christ pours out his blessings on you, the blessings of joy and life and peace, not in small measure, but in abundance, in super abundance, in overflowing measure. As David says in Psalm 23, my cup overfloweth. and there is fullness of life in Christ. There is a super abundance of life and blessedness and every spiritual blessing that we could possibly desire in Jesus Christ because of who Jesus is. He is the incarnation of God himself. He is the one who is infinite in being and therefore he is the infinite inexhaustible source of life and blessedness. Colossians 2, 9 and 10 says, for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority. In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. And so Christ is to us an inexhaustible supply of every spiritual blessing. Have you sinned? Are you guilty of sin? The blood of Christ is more than sufficient for you and for your sin and guilt. In fact, the blood of Christ is not only sufficient to take away your sin, it is sufficient to take away, if it were God's will, the sins of the whole world, And not only that, but we're at the will of God, the blood of Jesus that was shed upon the cross because He is the incarnate Son of God. That blood is of such inestimable value and worth that it would cover the sins of a million worlds of a fallen people. And so can the blood of Christ cover your sin? Is there forgiveness for you? Well, it is more than sufficient to cleanse and to purify you from all unrighteousness.

Are you fearful or anxious? The peace of God that is yours in Christ is a peace that surpasses understanding. Are you hopeless? Are you despairing? Every promise that God makes to you in Christ is yes and amen. Do you feel that you are unloved? If you have Jesus Christ by faith, you are not unloved, but the breadth, the length, the height, the depth of the love of God that he has for you in Jesus Christ surpasses knowledge. It cannot be measured. Just as Jesus himself cannot be measured, just as he himself is infinite and divine, so the love that he has for you is infinite and divine. In whatever way you are at need, you are like a thirsty person who comes to God and holds out an empty cup to God, hoping for just a few drops of water to wet your mouth, but instead of filling your cup, God leads you to the base of Niagara Falls and he says, here is

the water that you need. Will this be enough for you now? Because if not, this is just a droplet of the fullness that I will give to you.

If you ask how can I come to experience this all-surpassing fullness of life in Christ, the answer is by faith. It is by faith, it is by coming to Jesus Christ as who He is, the Son of God who became man, entrusting yourself to Him, believing that He and He alone is the one and true source of eternal life by resting in Him as your Savior. And this is exactly what the Israelites failed to do. What a tragedy for these Israelites. Because God had been so good to them. He had made himself known to them. These Israelites were delivered from their bondage to Pharaoh and their bondage to Egypt. And after their deliverance, they received blessing after blessing from the Lord. He provided for them this flowing water. He provided for them the manna day after day. These Israelites witnessed and benefited from His miracles in the desert, and yet so many of them died in their unbelief. What a tragedy that they should then die because they failed to believe in the Lord. And what a tragedy it would be for you and me, for any one of us, to have Christ so near to us throughout our lives and yet never come to Him by faith and so to perish without Him. What a tragedy it would be for you and me to have heard the gospel week after week, to know the truth, to know that Christ is there, that He is our Savior if we but come to Him and yet fail to come to Him because of our unbelieving hearts.

Christ offers himself to you. He offers the fullness of life to you in the good news of the gospel. Hear the words of the psalmist, Psalm 95. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart as at Meribah, as on the day at Massa in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. Do not be unbelieving as the Israelites were. but put your trust and your hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and be filled with his life-giving waters. And don't be satisfied with just a few drops of that life-giving water, but ask the Lord that he would give you a great thirst, a great thirst for Christ. Ask him for a thirst for Christ like the thirst that is described for us in Psalm 42 of the deer who pants for the stream. Psalm 42, 1 and 2, is a deer pants for flowing streams. So pants my soul for you, O God, my soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

Many years ago, I went on a week-long backpacking trip in the mountains and to help us carry all of our gear, we took along with us two or three llamas. And if you're not familiar with a llama, it's kind of a strange-looking creature. They must be related to camels in some way because they kind of look like camels, and they have this amazing ability to need very little water. And so after hiking uphill for hours and hours in the summer heat, we had our gear on our backs, but

we also put a lot of gear and weight on the backs of the llamas, we'd come to a mountain stream flowing with ice-cold, crystal-clear water and You'd think that these animals would plunge their heads into the water and just drink and lap up as much as they could possibly drink, but instead they put their heads down to the water and they'd take one or two tiny little sips of water and they were good to go. That's all they needed. They definitely weren't thirsty. They were not the deer who pants for flowing streams.

But why should you and I be like that? Why should you and I settle for a few paltry sips, a few droplets of the life-giving water that flows from Christ? He offers us flowing rivers of living water. And make the delight, the treasure, the joy of your hearts. Make that the abounding spiritual life that Christ gives. Ask God for that thirst for Christ, a thirst that you just cannot quench, but you continually go to Him for more and more and more and want to be filled more with His life. And Jesus gives you this promise. If you seek Him, if you seek that living water that flows from Him, This is the same promise he gave to the woman at the well in John 4. Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life. Let's pray.