

Man's Demands and God's Grace

By Brad Allison on 8/31/2003

Scripture Reference *Exodus 17*

Once more, God has led his people to a place of need in the desert. Many people have a problem with the theology behind verse 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 not water for the people to drink.” Our instinctive problem with this verse is that we think if we are following God and obeying him, that he leads us to prosperity and success. We see a church that has the ABC’s of success—attendance, bodies and cash—and we think, “God is surely blessing that church.” Or we see a family whose portrait could be used as an advertisement for Christianity—four beautiful and well-behaved children, a smiling and attractive wife, and a successful and handsome husband—and we say, “God has surely blessed them.” It just doesn’t seem to fit to think that God’s blessing can be seen in the woman whose husband left her for a younger woman when she got sick, and now she lives out her days in poor health and poverty.

God leads his people into the needs and deprivations of the wilderness for their blessing. There are two kinds of needs in the desert, typified by the two needs the Israelites encountered there. There is the need for food and for water. Some of our needs are like the physical need for food. If you’ve ever gone without food for more than a few hours, you know that the hunger pains are usually worst during the first few hours. After that, there is just a dull sense of emptiness. Many of our needs are like that—they don’t scream at us, but the general sense of emptiness is always there. For example, sometimes I feel like my life is just like that of a hamster running inside the wheel of his cage. There is a great deal of activity, but not much productivity. That’s a deep need experienced by many in the wilderness. The sense of isolation and loneliness felt by so many today is also of this type. The need for water typifies another kind of need in life—an urgent need that cannot be ignored. Time will not dull thirst like it does hunger. Quite the opposite happens. Thirst grows stronger until it is addressed by the only thing that will remove it—water. While a person can live without food for quite some time, the absence of water will take a life after just a few days. There are such urgent needs in our lives: things like unemployment, sickness, and many types of relational crises.

Desert times are from God, and desert times are inevitable. Each of us here this morning is either in a desert right now, or will be sometime in the not too distant future. This passage is referred to repeatedly throughout the rest of the Bible as a warning to us about how we respond to the desert times of life. Psalm 95 is quoted extensively in Hebrews, and it says this. “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” (v. 7-9). Wilderness times can either harden us or break us in a healthy way. I want us to look this morning at the difference between those by looking at a response to the wilderness that brings hardness, and one that brings the Lord’s blessing. We all know people in each of those categories. I can think of a family right now who experienced a rather significant disappointment with one of their children, and it produced a hardness and bitterness against the Lord. I can think of others who have suffered greatly, and whose sufferings have led to a gentleness and sweetness that is attractive. Let’s look this morning at the difference between those.

I. A Response to the Wilderness that Leads to Hardness

Moses makes it easy for us not to miss the point here when he tells us that this place was named after the wrong response of the Israelites. It was called Meribah, which means

quarrelling, and Massah, which means testing. The two wrong responses to hardship are to quarrel with people and to test God.

Let's consider first this idea of quarrelling. The Israelites were quarrelling with God's leader, Moses. They made a demand of him, saying, "Give us water to drink." When water was not immediately forthcoming, they judged his motives, saying, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" What we have here is an ancient version of a recall vote. Not only are they judging his motives, but their judgment is an irrational one. Would a rational person honestly think that Moses sat in his tent in Midian dreaming up a plan like this one? He would arrange for all these plagues in Egypt, after which the people are released from bondage, and then bring them out into the desert just so they could die. Not a very likely thing.

Where does this quarrelling originate? It stems from the unbelief of the Israelites. Their unbelief caused them to look to Moses instead of to the Lord, and it was this feature that was the primary cause of their bickering with Moses. Or to say it another way, they were seeking refuge from the hardships of the wilderness in the wrong place. They were looking to Moses instead of to the Lord. It is still the case that much of our fighting and quarrelling stems from looking to another person to do for us what only God can really do. The most common example of this occurs in marriage, where one spouse looks to the other to do and be more than they really can. For example, a wife looks to her husband's love to be her source of life. She knows she counts as a person because he loves her. A marriage relationship cannot bear that kind of weight, and quarrelling is bound to erupt. The kind of love she really wants can only be given by God, and looking to another person for it leads inevitably to difficulties such as Moses was experiencing here.

I have experienced this as a pastor. Some people have a tendency to make a savior out of their pastor. They look to him to solve their problems in a way that only God can really achieve. The inevitable result is for the pastor to be either the hero or the villain. He becomes the hero if he manages momentarily to satisfy people in the right way, but then the villain when he disappoints. Here's the application for this. In areas where you're having conflicts with others, ask yourself this question: does my conflict with this person stem from the unbelief of looking to them to do for me what only God can do? That was the case with the people of Israel with Moses.

The second response to hardship that leads to hardening instead of blessing is to test the Lord. More specifically, their testing of the Lord took the form of asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (v. 7). That's an amazing question when you consider the fact that on the very day they asked this question, God had rained down manna from heaven that they had picked up and eaten that very morning. If you've ever been through a difficult trial, you know how tempting it is to think that you have been abandoned by the Lord. It's easy to look around and see people whose lives run smoothly, and you think that if God were really in your life, he would make things run just as smoothly. The Bible says that this constitutes a testing of the Lord.

When we demand that someone prove himself to us, we reveal that we don't trust him. For example, over the last two weeks both of the air conditioners in our house developed problems. When the air conditioner repairman diagnosed the second problem as the identical thing that happened to the first unit just one week earlier, I tested him. He said that we had a Freon leak, and I made him show it to me. I had been given no reason not to trust him, and he seemed like a really nice person. But I have lived long enough to learn that the best cheats always seem like such nice people. So I tested him by making him show it to me, which he gladly did and thus demonstrated his own honesty. Such testing is fine for an air conditioner

repairman, but not for God. Whenever we make a demand of God, we are testing him. If we say to him, "God, if you really love me, then you will heal me" (or "give me this job", or "fix this problem in my life", or any other demand), then we are testing God. Whenever the creature asks the Creator to jump through his hoops, it is inappropriate and arrogant. Furthermore, it leads to a hardening of our hearts.

II. A Response to the Wilderness that Leads to Blessing

I can't help but notice how the solution to quarrelling and testing the Lord that is offered in this passage isn't to give three tips on getting rid of such things. Instead of solving this problem by giving them advice, God leads them to water. Essentially, the response to the desert times of life that brings blessing is to drink deeply of the water God provides. According to God's instructions, Moses took several of the elders and marched directly to the rock God singled out. There he took the same staff that had ruined the waters of the Nile when he struck it, and caused water to stream out of this rock when he struck it. This teaches us three things about responding to the wilderness times of life.

The first thing we learn is our need to wait on God instead of demanding of God a hasty solution. Do you think God had planned on letting Israel die of thirst here? I don't think so. The timing of God's provision was one of the big issues involved here. Israel wanted water, and they wanted it immediately. There was an unwillingness to wait on the Lord for his timing. God has a just-in-time delivery system, and we want instead a large warehouse that is filled with everything we will need for the foreseeable future. Living in the desert requires that we wait on the Lord.

The second thing I see here about responding to the wilderness times of life is that we must learn to trust the wisdom of God. The Israelites tested God because they didn't trust him to do it his way. We trust in the desert times of life when we believe that God has things to teach us that can only be learned in the desert. That's what Moses learned from this incident. He records it later in Deuteronomy 8:15-16. "[He] led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end." God's purpose was to do them good in the end, and this is what they needed to trust.

I think one of the difficulties we have in trusting God in the wilderness is the fact that life in the desert feels like growing weaker instead of stronger. But we need to remember that God works on our spiritual muscles in much the same way that our physical muscles get a workout. When you go to the gym for a workout, what does the process of getting stronger feel like? As you do the bench press, do you say, "Oh no, this is not working. With every repetition, I'm feeling weaker." Experienced exercisers learn to delight in that feeling of weakness because they know it's the only way to get stronger. Life is the same. God uses the weakness we feel in the desert times of life to make us stronger, but we need to trust his wisdom in the process.

Illustration: A great illustration of this is in a story I heard recently about a lumberjack who was scheduled to fell a stand of trees in a particular area. As he was surveying the site prior to his work, he noticed a bird's nest in one of the trees. Being a tender-hearted lumberjack, he wanted to save the bird's lives, so he took out his ax and began beating on the tree with the flat side of the ax. After a while, the bird couldn't stand the vibrations any longer and left to build her nest in another tree. So the lumberjack did the same

thing all over again, and repeated this process through several trees. Undoubtedly, the bird was saying to herself, "Why is this man making my life so miserable?" The man doesn't stop making her life miserable until she flies away to a high rock of safety and begins building her nest there. Is it possible that you have misinterpreted God's actions in bringing difficulties into your life? Like that bird, you just think God is making your life miserable. But the truth is that every single tree in this life is coming down, and God's work is aimed at getting you to build your life on the rock that will last. That brings us to our final point.

The third truth we learn about responding to the wilderness times of life is to enjoy the presence of God. The apostle Paul has an interesting comment on this passage. "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" (1 Cor. 10:3-4). The rock that was struck and that gave them drink was Christ. We enjoy nearness to him in the wilderness. Jill Briscoe tells the following story about one of her grandsons.

Not too long ago I was babysitting one of our three, 3-year-old grandchildren. In our family, we had twins and a single birth all within 24 hours. We call them Search, Destroy, and Demolition. I was to babysit Demolition. As I waved good bye to his parents, he looked perfectly all right. We had a little story out of his favorite book Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. I put him to bed and went to sleep.

In the middle of the night, I felt a little hand, and I turned on the light. I looked at Drew: chicken pox from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. "Nana," he said, "Me's having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Why should some things like this happen to I?"

I thought how like Drew we all are. Why should something like this happen to me? We cannot believe it. As Miss Piggy says, "Moi? Not moi." We cannot believe that God would allow something to happen to such nice people like us.

I gave Drew a bath in porridge—oatmeal. It's a wonderful remedy. It takes away the itch. He swam around in this porridge bath, and then I took him out and wrapped his bumpy, little body in a great, big white towel. As I held him against my heart, he just kept saying, "Hold me, Nana. Hold me, Nana. Hold me, Nana." I thought of Job as I held my little Job to my heart.

CONCLUSION:

We have the opportunity today to eat spiritual food and drink spiritual drink as we partake of the Lord's Supper. As we eat and drink, I want to remind you that Jesus promises to feed us in the wilderness, but not to deliver us out of the wilderness just yet. Would you feed on him now? Drink deeply of his love for you. Believing that he loves you and has forgiven you, you can wait on him rather than demanding that he deliver you immediately. You can trust his wisdom and enjoy his presence. May God help us to do so!