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Exodus 17:1-7

Twenty-fourth Message

Brian Morgan

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TESTING THE WATERS

BASIC TRAINING: SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL CAMP

We are continuing our series, *Basic Training: Spiritual Survival Camp*, tracing Israel's exodus from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. We have seen that the first three of five lessons which Israel will learn have to do with the basic appetites of thirst and hunger. God uses our most essential and strongest physical appetites to shape our spiritual appetites.

Working through these texts has produced very different reactions for me personally. On the one hand, I find them to be very convicting and extremely revealing, as they force to the surface so many hidden addictions of the human heart. In some ways I feel like I've been preaching beyond my experience. Meditating on these passages is like looking in the mirror with no skin—a rather frightening proposition. But on the other hand, I have also felt a comforting sensation, verging on elation, that all I long for is actually within reach. The wilderness has a way of reducing life to its essentials—hunger and thirst, and the presence of God. And almost without being asked, we are forced to experience what we never thought possible. Last week, I asked Dr. David Eckman about the impact his recent heart attack had on him. In its aftermath, his doctor ordered him to lose weight, which he did, some 37 pounds. He said that in his near-death experience he discovered two amazing things: “The love of God has never been more real; and, when you have no choice, altering your appetites is easy.”

Today we return to the theme of thirst. In chapter 15, Israel learned how to turn bitter waters into sweet, but now she finds herself in a land with no water. The text will teach us how to quench our thirst when we are in a desolate desert. The literary outline forms a concentric shape, which reveals the location of the hidden spring at the center of the text.

The Shape of Israel's Thirst

- a Journeying by stages (*massa*) in daily trust of the Lord
- b The people's contention with Moses (2-3)
 - c Take the elders with you ahead of the people (5a)
 - d Take the staff that you struck Nile (5b)
 - x The Lord will stand before you (6a)
 - d' Strike the rock with the staff (6b)
- c' Moses did so in the sight of the elders (6c)
- b' The place was named Meribah because of their contention (7a)
- a' It was named Massah because they “tested” the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord with us or not?” (7b)

I. Daily Dependence To a Dead End (17:1)

Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. (Exod 17:1 NASB)

After the miraculous manifestation of manna, the Israelites pulled up their tent pegs and broke camp in the wilderness of Sin. They set out again toward Sinai in daily dependence upon the Lord, traveling

each day wherever he led. What an experience this must have been, to patiently, yet expectantly wait each morning for the word of God from heaven; a word that not only gave them bread to feed upon but guidance to negotiate their way through the treacherous wilderness. And God doesn't burden them with more information than they need for each day. In the wilderness, you travel light. By faith they journeyed by “stages” (*massa*), “breaking camp,” “setting out,” “stage,” “journey”), setting out and coming to rest according to the Lord's daily itinerary. Have you ever known such sweet dependence? If God does not speak a word, there will be nothing to eat and nowhere to go. This discipline of daily dependence proved so central to Israel's spiritual formation that we find both elements central to the Lord's prayer: “Give us each day our daily bread...and do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt 6:11, 13).

Finally, they make camp at a place called Rephidim. Its location is unknown, but scholars who prefer the southern location for Mt. Sinai have made various proposals, some suggesting that it was “in the vicinity of Jebel Musa close to the southern tip of the peninsula. Wadi Feiran has been traditionally identified as the location of Rephidim dating back to Byzantine times, but Wadi Refayid has also been suggested.”¹ But we must not plunge our hearts into needless speculation. For even though Israel's geographical footprints have disappeared in the sand, her spiritual navigation remains eternally etched in sacred memory. At the end of the text, Moses renames the location according to Israel's deplorable lack of faith and hardness of heart. Some of Israel's ancient sages saw an ominous clue in the name Rephidim: “A tradition of the sages connected the name Rephidim to the verb *rph* meaning to ‘relax, weaken, dishearten,’ because Israel ‘cast off the commandments of the Torah.’”²

The story reads like a rerun of Israel's earlier journey to Marah. Her dependence has led to another dead end: once again there is no water. Once again we are reminded that God's leading doesn't always take us to where we want to go (Num 20:2-13). He leads us into stark situations where he can test our faith. What appears as a dead end in the wilderness is, by God's design, the opportunity for faith in resurrection. Yet, we have been here before. There is nothing new in this trial to overtax the neophyte in faith. So even the most conservative reader's expectations are running high. After bitter waters had been made sweet, and manna rained from heaven, some residue of faith must have finally taken root in this people. But sadly, dark desolation once again overshadows Israel's vision; faith fades in the desert sand.

II. Crowd Control (17:2-4)

A. Moses' First Exchange With the People (17:2)

Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water that we may drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” (17:2)

After months of God's daily provision in the wilderness, it seems as if Israel has made no progress in faith. In fact, things have deteriorated, as her “grumbling” (*lun*) escalates to a “quarrel” (*rib*). The term has a

range of meanings, from “strife,” or “contention,” to a “legal lawsuit.” In the face of trial, God is nowhere in the picture, and the people call Moses to account. They are so upset they are ready to “divorce” him unless he meets their demand to provide water. But Moses stands his ground and tells them that they are knocking on the wrong door. He is not responsible to give them water to drink; the Lord is. What their contentious spirit proves is that they have in fact inverted their relationship with God. Rather than Israel being God’s servant, and God using the wilderness to test and purify their faith, they have placed themselves in the driver’s seat and made God the servant, who is responsible to “prove himself” at their beck and call. They will choose to have faith only when God makes himself visible by performing a miracle. This is “testing” the Lord.

This temptation is very strong when a situation turns from difficult to desperate and thirst becomes severe “in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps 63:1). This was the temptation which the devil placed before Jesus in the wilderness:

“Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you’; and ‘on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” (Matt 4:5-6)

The devil offers Jesus a valid promise from Scripture (Ps 91:11-12). On the one hand, the promise was true—God would protect his Messiah—but on the other, Jesus knew that to force God to prove his faithfulness would be blasphemous.

Examining the psalm in its full context, we discover that the devil did not quote the following verse, which explains that the true purpose of angelic protection is not self-glorification, but conquering evil: “You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down” (Ps 91:13). Had the devil quoted that verse he would have signed his own death warrant. Because Jesus was so well versed in Israel’s wilderness tradition, he was able to subdue the satanic seduction by quoting from Moses’ teaching on this incident: “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matt 4:8; Deut 6:16). This tells us that it is not enough to know a few verses to survive the wilderness; you must immerse yourself in whole texts.

Jesus faced the same temptation again and again through the Jewish leaders who constantly prodded him to perform a sign so that they might believe (Matt 12:38-39; 16:1, 4; Mark 8:12; Luke 11:16). Do you test the Lord? Do you hold him hostage to perform in a certain way so that you can respond in faith? Do you violate his goodness by demanding concrete evidence of his presence? We often hear the demonic voice whenever people promise that God will heal you if you just have enough faith; or, you need not take safety precautions on your journey, for God is with you; or, God led me into this relationship, why should I seek godly counsel? or, why should I save or get insurance for my future financial needs? I’ll just trust God to provide for my family.

Moses knows that Israel is treading on dangerous ground. Testing the Lord is a serious offense. Like a good prophet, he calls a spade a spade. But his firm rebuke does little to put out the flames of discontent; their rage continues to burn.

B. Moses’ Second Exchange With the People (17:3-4)

But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, “Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” So Moses

cried out to the LORD, saying, “What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me.” (17:3-4)

Houtman well captures the heated interchange: “The answer does nothing to quench the thirst of the people and it infuriates them ever more. The reader sees the conflict escalate. The people mob Moses and blame him for bringing them out of Egypt, headed for death in the wilderness. They depict him as a failed leader, an unconscionable scoundrel, who does not even stop at leading innocent children and animals to their doom.”³ To impress upon Moses the absolute gravity of their situation, they voice the second line of their complaint in the singular: “To let me, my children and my livestock die of thirst?” The people speak as an individual, painting a heartbreaking picture, extremely poignant and personal. They are on the verge of losing everything.

At this point, Moses senses he has completely lost control. His flock has turned into an angry mob that will not be reasoned with. In his distress he flees and cries out to the Lord. If God doesn’t intervene, he will most likely be lynched. As always in the wilderness, a simple request brings an immediate response from God. The wilderness proves again and again that this is the domain where God is exceedingly near and available to the needs of his people. Prayer is the turning point from death to life. It makes us wonder why we, like Israel, wait so long to resort to it.

III. Water From the Rock (17:5-6)

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your 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 will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. (17:5-6)

Rather than responding to Israel’s insult with a harsh rebuke, God responds with grace, doing for the people what Moses could not do: He gives them water to drink. To our amazement, he meets their demands without anger, and quietly satisfies their raging thirst. Who is this God who washes over our hardhearted insults and weak faith with springs of living water?

The language which God uses to describe the upcoming miracle is reminiscent of the first and final plagues in Egypt. In the first plague, Moses “struck” (*nakab*) the Nile with his staff and turned it into blood. In the final plague, he summoned the elders “to go” and “take” blood of the Passover lamb and place it on their doorposts, while the Lord would “pass” (*abar*) through to smite the Egyptians” (12:23). Now Moses and some of the elders are summoned by God to the very mountain of God, where Moses was first commissioned by the burning bush (3:1-2). He is to pass ahead of the people and take in his hand the very staff he used to turn the Nile into blood. The memory will cause the people to sense that a miracle is about to take place. But will it be a blessing or an affliction?

The narrator removes all tension for the reader by explaining that when Moses arrives, God will meet him there in full force (lit. “I am standing”) by the well-known “rock” (*tzur*, “height,” “mountain,” “rock”) of Horeb. “The rock, the mountain, is the place where power is concentrated; as such it belongs to the places that have a special relationship with the deity, the holy places, places where theophanies happen.”⁴ This is where the concentrated power of God will be manifest to Israel in response to their “unholy” demands. Moses is told to strike (*nakab*) the rock and water will come out to quench the thirst of his people. A mountain of rock that is struck by Moses’ rod will be the source of water that quenches the thirst of God’s people.

The details of the miracle, though scant, are nonetheless extremely evocative: “The water comes from a dead, dry and arid, monolith which gets terribly hot in the sun, and which is as solid as it is immovable. From such an unlikely place Yahweh is able to cause to flow the cool, refreshing and healing water!”⁵ From this same rock God will speak his life-giving law. Water and law, closely linked in Old Testament theology, become mirror images of each other, one working to restore the creation to an Eden-like state (Isa 35:6-7; 41:18), the other restoring stained, sick souls to serve the living God:

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” (Ezek 36:25-26)

This was the text Jesus referenced to Nicodemus to open his eyes about the nature and necessity of a spiritual birth (John 3:5). Paul identifies the rock with Christ (1 Cor 10:4) who, being smitten by God, provides a constant supply of living water of the Spirit to well up within our being (John 4:13-14). Had Jesus not been beaten, scourged and crucified, and had not water and blood flowed from his side, we would never be able to drink⁶ and would be forever dominated by unfilled desire.

In another sense, we could perhaps press the metaphor a little further, seeing that flinty hardness of Horeb’s rock as a type of our own hearts: inaccessible and formidable, void of feeling, lifeless and immovable, as layers and layers of ache and pain get buried and compressed into petrified stone. After living under decades of unresolved pain, we wonder if we will ever be able love, feel or even breathe again. But in the coming of Christ, these tortured hearts become the very spot where God takes his stand and concentrates all his power. He strikes the rock and the river flows. A friend of mine captured the truth so well as she was contemplating her time in a wilderness:

Is this place an echo of Eden,
the one of Cain’s making?
Or is it Noah’s boat launch—
a pre-deluge, cracked riverbed?
Wandering waiting, wanting, waiting,
Did I alone miss the Sinai wonder?

No, the sign was how You struck my heart
and made tears flow from that rock:
Fresh water from the deep below
I was convinced I had cried dry.

Right my world, Lord.
Give me faith
to see the beauty in this desert.

Moses obeyed and the miracle took place just as God said it would. He took his staff and struck the rock, and springs of water flowed out before the elders of Israel. But as Israel was quenching her thirst, Moses made sure the lesson was never forgotten.

IV. A Permanent Placard (17:7)

He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us, or not?” (17:7)

Even though God answered Israel’s test with grace, Moses wanted to make sure Israel would never again presume on that grace. There he left an eternal reminder of her immature faith, by renaming the place. If we ever think we have lost our way in the desert, there is not one, but two blatant billboards pointing the way home. Written on

each is a one-word exclamation that no one can miss. In large letters it reads *Massah* and *Meribah*! The terms serve as a severe warning for how, when facing prolonged “thirst,” appreciation for God’s care can quickly turn to accusation (*Meribah*). And the simple trust of our daily journeying (*massa*) can be quickly transformed into a “test” (*Massah*), where we reverse roles with God.

The narrator has saved the worst for last. It is not until after the miracle which saved Israel’s life that we hear her condemning accusation, “Is the Lord among us, or not?” Perhaps such words were too much for the listener to hear in the midst of the debate. They would have created too much tension for us to remain sympathetic to Israel. So the narrator saves the shock for the end. Like swallowing bitter medicine after drinking water, the terrible taste remains. But Moses wanted these names to become bitter bywords, so that whenever future generations were languishing of thirst in a wilderness, the thought of testing God would be revolting. And it worked, for the memory of Massah was kept alive by Israel’s storytellers (Deut 33:8-11) and poets (Ps 95:8-11) for every generation. And for the faithful who found themselves at the end of rope in a dry desert, instead of testing God, like David, they redirected their thirst towards God:

**“O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly;
My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.” (Ps 63:1)**

It is very important to the life of a congregation that we not only meditate on these ancient texts, but also hear the living testimony of those who have discovered this hidden spring in the desert (John 7:38). To that end, I have asked Karen Borgstrom to share with us how the Lord gave her drink in the desert.

Such a Love — *Karen Borgstrom*

On Good Friday of this year, just a few weeks ago, as I held an iron nail in my hand, the tension of the cross stood before me.

God and man
Death and life
Bondage and freedom
Because of me, yet for me

Tears fell from my eyes, my heart cried out, and love responded. The tension of the cross was washed away by the love of the Father.

Beauty from ashes
Healing in the grief
Life from death
Freedom

On Good Friday of last year, I found out that my mom had unexpectedly passed away. In many ways, my relationship with my mom and her death is the story of God, in the darkest days of my life, giving me the perfect gift of himself.

My entire life my mom suffered from a tremendous amount of emotional and physical pain. Over the course of 20 years she suffered five herniated disks and multiple back surgeries. She tried all sorts of pain management techniques, but always ended up resorting to pain medication. The physical pain was compounded by childhood wounds, so much so that eventually my mom was not able to distinguish the emotional pain from the physical pain. Eventually she became addicted to her pain medications. One of the results of the addiction was that she checked out of being a mother. As a teenager, I was forced to take care of my mom, which reversed the parent/child roles in our relationship. All of this, combined with divorced parents, left me with a lot of bitterness and resentment. By the time I graduated from college I had learned not to expect anything from my mom, and I did a pretty

good job of holding her at arms' length. Looking back on my high school and college days, I recognize those seasons as my time in the wilderness, my time of wondering what God was doing, why he was not changing my circumstances. Like Israel, I grumbled, complained and demanded deliverance.

On Good Friday of last year, as I drove home from work, I called my mom to remind her I was leaving for Romania. That night, my mom did not answer the phone; the county coroner did. I was in shock. What had happened? The coroner's report arrived two months later; my mom had unintentionally overdosed on her pain medication.

That night my entire world stopped. Sleep eluded me, but God did not. In the darkness of the night, the reality of the situation sank in. My heart began to ache, and the tension mounted. Death and sin were so real, and yet God engulfed me. It was as if he was standing over my bed saying: *Don't move from this place. I know the pain is intense, but I love you and I will not leave you. I walk this road with you and give you all that I need because I love you. All will be well because I love you.* In those moments I wrote these words:

*I sit among the ashes; that is your delight
You bring life out of death*

*You swoop in and rescue me from this present evil age
You have been faithful in the past*

Your love; everything rests on that

Your faithfulness

Your providence

Your deliverance

Your design

Your plan

Everything rests on your love for me

I wrote those words with confidence and boldness...I was in the valley of the shadow of death and God met me with his love; he met me with himself. For the first time in my life, I finally understood the term "God is love."

In the weeks and months to follow, as we planned memorial services, scattered ashes, and experienced Mother's Day, the divine intersection between my heart and God's love was a repeated event. I remember the day we started cleaning out my mom's house. I came across some things that gave me a deep glimpse into the heart of my mom the weeks before she passed away. My mom was being eaten away by circumstances in her life that are evidence that we live in a fallen world.

That night I lay in my bed, and for hours I cried from the depths of my soul as my heart wrestled with the reality of sin and the love of God. I was grieving over the sting of death, the power of sin, and the very real nature of the cross. God was giving me a very clear picture of life with Jesus and life without him. In response to the grief I wrote these words:

*My grief arises from the depths
My tears are a watershed*

Sin prevails in every corner

It presses in on every side

How can I bear it; I am consumed

Your cross of love reigns high

It moves into every crevice

How can I deny it; I am freed

*My tears wash your feet
Your love cleans my heart*

Throughout the last year, in my dark hours, I made a choice to sit in the pain and open my heart to the realities of my life. I made that choice by God's grace, and while the pain cut deep, God's presence made it worth it. I never want to experience that level of pain again, but more than never wanting to experience the pain again, I never want to miss the opportunity to know God so intimately.

Today, as I think back on my encounters with God in my pain and suffering, there are two things that I am struck by: First, God is the only one who can and will redeem our pain and suffering. I think our pain and suffering, when we fully enter into it, puts us in a place where we are completely exposed and completely helpless. We can't fight any more, our guards are down, we can't try and do it on our own; our bootstraps have snapped.

We give up and God says, finally, I'm free to do my work. Second, God's redemption of our pain and suffering gives us hope. As I stand here today, a mere 29, single, and with no kids, I know that if I live to the ripe age of 70 or 80 that I still have a lot of pain and suffering to endure. But God has given me hope, for I know that he won't waste my suffering.

I must close by telling you that my encounters with God over the last year have brought new levels of healing and clarity and freedom to my heart. His love leaves no room for bitterness and resentment, and it has allowed me to see how much my mom truly loved me. My mom did the best she could with what she had. I remember as a ten year-old breaking my mom's favorite sugar dish. With fear in my heart and tears rolling down my cheeks, I walked into my mom's bedroom to confess my failure. She pulled me into her arms and asked me if I was hurt. When I said no, her response was, "Oh, I am so glad! Sugar dishes I can replace, Karens I can't." Today, there is no doubt in my mind that the only person who loves me more than my mom is the God who knit me together in her womb.

Such a Love

Life giving love learned in grief and despair

How can it be that such a love is for me?

Steadfast love for an ugly heart

How can it be that such a love is for me?

Powerful love, consuming my pain

How can it be that such a love is for me?

Satisfying love, my sweet satisfaction

How can it be that such a love is for me?

1. Jo Ann H. Seely, "Rephidim," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:677-78.

2. Jo Ann H. Seely, "Rephidim."

3. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 1996), 2:356.

4. Houtman, *Exodus*, 2:364.

5. Houtman, *Exodus*, 2:367.

6. This is Origen's observation, cited by Houtman, *Exodus*, 2:367.