

“DON'T LOOK A GIFT GOD IN THE MOUTH”
Sermon, Fountain Park Global Methodist Church: March 7/8, 2026
Ken Bailey
Text: EXODUS 17:1-7

(READ EXODUS 17:1-7)

THE WHOLE ISRAELITE COMPANY SET OUT FROM THE DESERT OF SIN, TRAVELING FROM PLACE TO PLACE AS THE LORD COMMANDED. THEY CAMPED AT REPHADIM, BUT THERE WAS NO WATER FOR THE PEOPLE TO DRINK. SO THEY QUARRELED WITH MOSES AND SAID, “GIVE US WATER TO DRINK”.

MOSES REPLIED, “WHY DO YOU QUARREL WITH ME? WHY DO YOU PUT THE LORD TO THE TEST?”

BUT THE PEOPLE WERE THIRSTY FOR WATER THERE, AND THEY GRUMBLED AGAINST MOSES. THEY SAID, “WHY DID YOU BRING US UP OUT OF EGYPT TO MAKE US AND OUR CHILDREN AND OUR LIVESTOCK DIE OF THIRST?”

THEN MOSES CRIED OUT TO THE LORD, “WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH THESE PEOPLE? THEY ARE ALMOST READY TO STONE ME.”

THE LORD ANSWERED MOSES, “GO OUT IN FRONT OF THE PEOPLE. TAKE WITH YOU SOME OF THE ELDERS OF ISRAEL AND TAKE IN YOUR HAND THE STAFF WITH WHICH YOU STRUCK THE NILE, AND GO. I WILL STAND THERE BEFORE YOU BY THE ROCK AT HOREB. STRIKE THE ROCK, AND WATER WILL COME OUT OF IT FOR THE PEOPLE TO DRINK.” SO MOSES DID THIS IN THE SIGHT OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL. AND HE CALLED THE PLACE “MASSAH” AND “MERIBAH” BECAUSE THE ISRAELITES QUARRELED AND BECAUSE THEY TESTED THE LORD, SAYING, “IS THE LORD AMOUNG US, OR NOT?”

My Memory is Going. That's bad.

Israel also had a short memory. We'll get back to that in a moment.

So, what happened in today's Bible reading?

Israel was traveling in the wilderness under the command of Yahweh God.

They came to a place called Rephidim and stopped there.

There was no water for people or animals to drink

*There were lots of people (a whole nation)

*And animals, (which constituted their livelihood).

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*Have you ever traveled in the American West, needed food and gasoline, only to be confronted that the town you are finally approaching after an hour of traveling has “no services?”

So, the people turned on Moses and then turned on God.

“YOU. You brought us out here. Where’s our water necessary to survive? You talked us into following you, and THIS is where you lead us? To death in the wilderness? Perhaps we should rethink our decision to let you be the boss around here!”

And, to Yahweh God:

“Hey! God! You want us to believe in You as worthy of our servitude? Well, get with it, please, You’ll have to do better than THIS. Where’s our water? Are You on our side as this Moses guy says, or NOT?”

Moses went to God in prayer.

He didn’t pray, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray my God His promises to keep, amen.”

No. He CRIED OUT: Yahweh God! What am I going to do with these people You called me to lead here? If things get any worse, they will fire me (with a capital “F”) and abandon ship!

Moses prayed a lot. God had appointed him the leader of His expedition out of Egypt, even twisting his arm a bit to get him to sign on – and it had not been an easy journey.

God responded: “Pass before the people, pick up some of the underleaders, and grab that staff I had you use to strike the Nile River in Egypt. I’ll be waiting for you on the rock at Horeb.”

So, God told Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with the staff from the Nile event; he did, and water came from the rock, enough for all the people and their animals. It was not a trickle. It must have been a gusher!

And Moses got to name the place, as it would go down in history.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be in a place as one of the first, and get to give it its name – a name that would stick through generations?

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“Hey, Hans? I tink we have traveled long enough. We need to decide where in dis place we will settle down once – it seems to be a good place, with natural resources an’ the Lake, anso? Where will we start our new town?”

“I dunno, Brinker, how ‘bout in dat little cedar grove over dere?”

So, Moses got to name the place where the people quarreled and argued with him over his ability and right to lead them. And where they put God to the test, demanding that He prove His worthiness of their trust.

He named it, Meribah (“Quarrel”) and Massah (“Test”).

(Can you imagine being associated with such a place in the generations that followed? You know – “Where are you from?” “I’m from Massah” “Oh, you’re one of THEM guys!”)

Now, obviously, Moses was not very happy with the way his flock was treating him. And, apparently, neither was God. Listen to these lines from **Psalm 95, (verses 7b to 11)**:

“TODAY, IF ONLY YOU WOULD HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS YOU DID AT MERIBAH, AS YOU DID THAT DAY AT MASSAH IN THE WILDERNESS, WHERE YOUR ANCESTORS TESTED ME; THEY TRIED ME, THOUGH THEY HAD SEEN WHAT I DID. FOR FORTY YEARS I WAS ANGRY WITH THAT GENERATION; I SAID, THEY ARE A PEOPLE WHOSE HEARTS GO ASTRAY, AND THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN MY WAYS.’ I DECLARED ON OATH IN MY ANGER, ‘THEY SHALL NEVER ENTER MY REST.’”

To make it worse, God would have them repeated in the New Testament book of **Hebrews (Chapter 3, verses 7-11)**.

Why did God get so upset with the people in this episode?

After all, He is a Father. He knows what difficult children can be like.

And He’s forgiving. Slow to anger. All that stuff. So, what’s up?

To help us understand the fuller meaning of what happened at Massah and Meribah, we need to know the bigger picture.

To do that, we are going to have to look back at some history and context – from the Old Testament – and look forward for any additional insight on the matter given later in the Bible – in this case, from the New Testament.

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Firstly, to the Old Testament, for the context.

What was the bigger story going on at the time, that led to this incident from today's reading?

You know the bigger pieces of the story:

- Earlier humanity on Earth had grown so overwhelmingly evil that God had found it necessary to destroy them with a worldwide flood.
- In grace, he had preserved enough people through the Flood to survive it and start the Human Race over again.
- In a very short time, however, the new Human Race had again rebelled against him and turned back to embracing evil (as personified by their refusal to disperse and instead to build a great religious tower to signify their own might, apart from Him).
- Instead of destroying them again with a second cataclysm, God instead decided to raise up from nothing, from a single old couple, a nation special to Him as a people of His own possession, to bless the entire Earth through the knowledge of Him that He would give them;
- That this earlier journey had not been without problems, either. Long story, yet mighty in content, with God raising up one of His own to become the Saviour of Egypt (and others) in the midst of a great famine.
- Of Egypt over time going from gratitude and respect for this man and his offspring to the decision to enslave them cruelly,
- How a dude named “Moses” had been spared from death as a baby, raised in Pharaoh's court, found out he was of the people who were enslaved, convinced himself he was able to save them, and had failed miserably and been rejected after his first valiant attempt to come to their rescue.
- How, having fled into the wilderness and become a shepherd, this same Moses was approached by God forty years later to indeed be the “saviour” of Israel.
- How, now humbled, he had refused the offer, but God had persisted until he changed his mind and agreed to do it.
- How he had then marched into Pharaoh's court and demanded that Pharaoh and his gods release the slave nation to himself and his god, Yahweh.

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- How Pharoah had refused, repeatedly, and Yahweh had then, using this same Moses, sent repeated and increasingly severe plagues into Egypt that Pharoah and his gods were unable to fend off or extinguish.
- How Pharoah had relented, and Moses had led the whole Isralite nation out in great victory, with the common people of Egypt giving them a giant sendoff and many gifts as they left.

It had been a story of great promise and victory at Yahweh's hand. We can imagine the peoples hope when, after groaning in slavery for generations, they were sent a saavoir, a man who told then he had been sent by the God of Israel, who was ticked and was about to mop the floor with the Egyptian leader and his gods and set His own people free with a mighty hand.

I'm sure it was a great day to be part of that Freedom March out of Egypt that day, with the enemy's will broken and the common people of the oppressive land showering them with cheers and gifts on the way out.

But even before they departed Egypt, the captive people soon found that the road to Moses' and Yahweh's freedom was not a Fast Train to the Promised Land...

... it was a roller coaster.

Did you ever sing songs on long school bus field trips as a kid? You know, how “the Ants Go Marching, One by One” and “One-Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall (or “Coke on the Wall”) ...

Growing up in Rangely, I was on a number of field trips; I was manager for the wrestling team as well, so there were LOTS of bus trips.

One of the songs we would all sing was titled, “Parties Make the World Go Around”.

While the chorus instructed how parties were a big important thing, and that one should have one, the verses were... strictly improv.

One student would shout out a problem: “PARTY WITH NO FOOD!”

The entire bus congregation of kids would reply, “BOOOOOO!”

Then a second student would improvise a quick solution: “COLONEL SANDERS COMES!”

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The group would respond with an affirmative reply: “YAYYYYYY!”

And then, the process would repeat, with a new challenge.

Well – we are going to play that game – you, I all of us. Except I will do the improv. You all get to do the two responses.

I give a negative, and you reply, “BOOOO!”

Then, I give a solution, and you reply, “YAYYYYYY!”

We are going to do several rounds here. Ready?

- 1) A WICKED RULER ENSLAVES GODS PEOPLE IN EGYPT! (BOOOO!)
GOD SENDS MOSES TO PROCLAIM A RESCUE! (YAYYYYYY!)
- 2) PHAROAH SAYS “NO” AND MAKES THE PEOPLE WORK HARDER! (BOOOO!)
GOD SENDS PLAGUES TO CHANGE HIS MIND! (YAYYYY!)
- 3) PHAROAH KEEPS GOING BACK TO SAYING, “NO!” (BOOOO!)
A FINAL PLAGUE MAKES HIM SAY “YES!” (YAYYYY!)
- 4) THE PEOPLE GET TRAPPED BETWEEN PHAROAH AND THE RED SEA! (BOO!)
GOD PARTS THE SEA FOR THEM AND DROWNS THE ENEMY ARMY! (YAYYYY!)
- 5) BITTER WATER AT MARAH! (BOO!)
GOD PURIFIES THE WATER WITH MOSES AND A TREE! (YAYYYY!)
- 6) NO FOOD TO EAT IN THE DESERT! (BOO!)
GOD RAINS DOWN MANNA FROM HEAVEN! (YAYYYY!)

I think you will get the point. All of these things had happened BEFORE we get the part of today’s reading. It should be apparent by now that there is a pattern to being taken out of slavery:

- A) The people cry for deliverance, and wonder if God cares.
- B) God sends His leader and promises deliverance.
- C) Before the deliverance comes, things actually get temporarily worse.
- D) God sends the deliverance.
- E) The people rejoice and rally behind God and His leader.
- F) A new, unexpected problem develops.
- G) The people cry for deliverance, wonder if God cares, and rebuke His man.

... and, ominously, a new final step becomes part of the routine:

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H) They fight with the leader and make demands of God to prove Himself worthy of them.

This went on and on and on as the book of Exodus continued: Need, Promise, Delay, Complaints, Delivery, Restoration ... until the next problem surfaced.

It was the last step that was the most damning: each time, “God Brought Us Out Here to Kill Us All!”

Was there NO ONE among them to say, “Wait a minute. This has happened before. God promised to be with us and take care of us, then a big bad problem develops, we ask Moses to beseech the Lord for us, and God rescues us. Every time.”

“Why should this new problem experience be any different?”

I think God finally had had enough of “We now know your true colors, God! This new problem PROVES to us that You don’t care if we live or die!!!”

Remember that saying from the prophets, “The Just Shall Live by Faith?” And what is that faith? **“THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN” (Hebrews 11:1)**. That is, the learned conclusion that the new problem, whatever it was, did not (if God didn’t immediately fix it), UNDO His past proofs of His love and faithfulness!

This is why, when we face a present problem, we must go beyond LOOKING AT NEED to LOOKING TO READ – that is, to review, re-read, and reassure ourselves of God’s faithful rescues in the past – to US and to OTHERS.

... to be “DILIGENT TO ENTER (the) REST (endure ‘till the victory), LEST ANYONE FALL THROUGH FOLLOWING THE SAME EXAMPLE OF DISOBEDIENCE.” (Hebrews 5:11).

Well, that is our history lesson. God was upset with what happened at Massah and Meribah because of the pattern to which it was an example, the continual refusal of people to give Him the credit of past victories and instead to go right back to square one with each new challenge, accusing Him of apathy, unfaithfulness, and unworthiness to be their God.

DON’T BE LIKE THEM!

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Now, I had earlier mentioned that there was a further reason for what these people endured in the wilderness at God's hand that we modern folk are given additional clarity in the New Testament.

Listen to **First Corinthians 10: 1-5:**

“FOR I DO NOT WANT YOU TO BE IGNORANT OF THE FACT, BROTHERS AND SISTERS, THAT OUR ANCESTORS WERE ALL UNDER THE CLOUD (of God's presence) AND THAT THEY ALL PASSED THROUGH THE SEA (The Red Sea, being delivered from the land of Egypt in Exodus). 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 THE SPIRITUAL ROCK THAT ACCOMPANIED THEM, AND THAT ROCK WAS CHRIST. NEVERTHELESS, GOD WAS NOT PLEASED WITH MOST OF THEM, THEIR BODIES WERE SCATTERED IN THE WILDERNESS.

What does this mean? Jesus Christ was a ROCK in the Old Testament? A literal ROCK?

A rock that moved along with the sons of Israel when they moved, like the other presences of God with them, the CLOUD and the PILLAR of FIRE?

Well, no. Not literally. SO, what does it MEAN?

Jesus was a SPIRITUAL rock. The literal rock was merely a PICTURE to the people of the REAL Rock that would give them what they needed to survive.

Remember how, when the Messiah DID come, He used “word pictures” to lead people to the deeper truths?

He fed 5000 people with literal food and then went on to explain when they came seeking more food that HE HIMSELF was the REAL food, the sustenance they were to most truly seek rather than just filling their stomachs and being content.

Well? What about the Rock of our Old Testament story in Exodus.

The people were in need of water for survival. God let that need develop to teach them a truth that went deeper than just physical thirst.

He let them become aware of their need. He put them in a place where they could not just fix it themselves.

Then, He instructed their leader, His leader, to strike the rock, and their need was met.

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Need. Inability to just fix it themselves. Appeal to God. Trust. And then, a solution from a source bigger than them: a rock that is struck and gushes water to meet the need.

They could not see it at the time, but God was painting a much bigger picture here than just a “magic” rock that gushes water.

The rock was a picture of CHRIST. HE was the One who followed them. He was the “outside source”, bigger than they, who was the agency God would use to meet their need when they came to Him for help and respected Him and trusted Him to do it.

That wasn’t clear at the time, but it would become clear later.

Do you remember Jesus saying to His trusting followers, in the Upper Room just before His arrest and death, that some of the things He was saying wouldn’t make sense at that time, but that the Holy Spirit would reveal and explain them later? (**John 13:7, 14:25-26**)

It is interesting that Moses would confront a rock as a solution to desperate thirst LATER in that same Exodus account.

Only, THIS time, the requirements would be a bit different: SPEAK to the rock, and the water would come. Not “STRIKE” the rock this time. Just “SPEAK” to it.

Moses forgot that God’s instructions were crucial. That, though they may have seemed trivial to the present moment, that the Almighty might be drawing a bigger lesson in them than was apparent at time.

Moses was angry. Just speaking to a rock didn’t seem dramatic enough. And, “Striking” had worked last time.

So he STRUCK the rock.

And got in BIG TROUBLE for it.

Not speaking to the rock as he had been told to do cost Moses the chance to enter the Promised Land.

You see, God was painting that rock as a picture of the later Christ.

The first time, to get the people’s request to Almighty God addressed, the Rock had to be “Struck”. This was a picture of Christ being “struck” by death and crucifixion to “break open” the way for God to meet the needs of sinners.

The second time, this having been done, all Moses needed to do was the “speak to” the Rock to get the needs met.

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Once the Rock had been struck once, it didn't have to be “struck” again.

The work had been finished for all time with that initial “striking”.

Do you see? God was showing that His Christ would be “struck” to open the way to His help for humanity, but just once. For all time. It would be finished with the “once”. He never had to die again to open access to God for His people. After that, He was always available for those who followed Him. They just had to speak to ensure His response ... just to ask, to pray.

Brothers and Sisters, I wish I could tell you that the Christian life is a one-time “get on board” moment for the Gospel Train, and then it is just “clear track ahead” until we reach the Promised Land.

But that is not how it works.

And the stops and hazards and dangers along the way cannot be simply attributed to the World, the Flesh, and the Devil.

Many of them are put in place by God Himself.

To test us. To draw us out of our mistrust. To seek Him deeper. To look for His purpose, even if at the moment we are not able to “see” any good in where we are.

Will we trust Him next time this happens? Or will we cry out in accusation to Him?

When it happens to others among us, will we rally around them? Or will we back away if in their despair they become too weak to hold up the “Company Face”?

“NOW, THESE THINGS OCCURRED AS EXAMPLES, AND WERE WRITTEN DOWN AS WARNINGS FOR US, ON WHOM THE CULMINATION OF THE AGE HAS COME.” (Hebrews 10:11).

Let us not fail to hold one another up, to push onward, to seek God in our hurt and perplexity not with accusation but with trust, feeble as it may be – that in the end we may enter His rest, stronger for having stayed the course, and finished the race.

Let's pray.

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OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION: READ EXODUS 17.

1) TAKING APART TODAY'S READING

- a. Brief History of Israel up to this point.
- b. Illustration: The Town With “No Services”.

2) MOSES NAMED THE PLACE

- a. Massah (Test) and Meribah (Quarrel)
- b. Naming Cedar Grove

3) THEY COULD NOT ENTER GOD'S REST (Ps. 95) (Heb. 4)

- a. Why was God so Unhappy?
- b. Because this was part of a pattern.
- c. They erred in their hearts and did not know His ways.

4) NOT A FAST TRACK BUT A ROLLER-COASTER

- a. “Parties Make the World Go Around”
- b. The people groaned and God sent a Savoir.
- c. It took a while for him to be prepared for the job.
- d. When he appeared, things then just got worse.
- e. It took a whole bunch of plagues.
- f. They finally went out in victory, but then a Sea happened.
- g. And then there was bitter water.
- h. And then there was no food to eat in the desert.
- i. And then there was Massah and Meribah
- j. And then there was more stuff, and more stuff, and more stuff
- k. Finally, God had had enough of being insulted and tested.

5) THE REASON FOR OBEDIENCE: GOD'S DEEPER PURPOSES

- a. God paints word pictures behind the stories He weaves.
- b. These have deeper meanings to some than what appeared on the surface.
- c. These may not be understood at the time, but were revealed later.
 - i. Daniel was told not to worry about understanding Revelation.
 - ii. Jesus told Peter (foot washing) and all the apostles that they would understand later.
 - iii. Parables and feeding of the 5,000.
 - iv. We need to obey even if we don't understand at the time.

6) CHRIST WAS IN THE ROCK

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- a. **Whaaaaaaaaaat?????**
- b. **The rock that met the need was a spiritual picture of the coming Messiah.**
- c. **Moses got into trouble in “Rock, 2.0”**
- d. **Jesus only needed to be struck once**
- e. **We are used by God to teach angels and the world.**

CONCLUSION: THESE THINGS HAPPENED FOR OUR INSTRUCTION