

Exodus 17:1-7

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After the provision of food (manna and quail) had been established, the Israelites continued their trek toward Mt. Sinai, also called Horeb, moving to a place called Rephedim. Here, they found no water to drink. The people complained to Moses, who in turn cried out to the LORD for guidance. The LORD told him to go to a rock at Horeb and strike it with the same staff that he used to strike the Nile River in Egypt. The people got water, and the location received two names—Massah and Meribah.

In chapter 15, the LORD provided water in the wilderness. In chapter 16, He provided food in the form of manna and quail. It was time for the Israelites to continue their journey to Mt. Sinai, called here *Horeb*. So, *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*. The phrase “in stages” probably means that they moved from one unnamed location to another until they arrived at Rephidim. [Numbers 33](#), which is a recollection of the exodus, mentions Dophkah and Alush ([Numbers 33:12 – 14](#)), the locations of which are currently unknown. The Israelites moved “according to the command of the Lord” (literally “by the mouth of the LORD”), implying that they moved and camped at each place by direction of the LORD Himself.

They finally arrived at a place called “Rephidim,” which some scholars think is a wadi (an oasis) in southwest Sinai, not very far from the traditional site of Mount Sinai. After all the moving in the dry wilderness, the people probably hoped that they would find water. But *there was no water for the people to drink*. In chapter 15, the water was bitter and undrinkable. Here, there is no water at all, which probably added to the tension and their sense of desperation.

In verses 2 – 3, a tense confrontation occurred between the people and Moses. In fact, the text says that *the people quarreled with Moses*. The word for “quarreled” (Heb. “rib”) can also be translated “contended with” and is used often as a legal term for presenting arguments in a court of law. The word is also used for confrontations that could lead to violence, such as in [Genesis 26:20](#) and [Psalms 35:1](#), where the word is used to describe a dispute that is a prelude to fighting or war. It was apparent that the people were very upset with Moses and, by extension, the LORD.

Here, they demanded that Moses *give us water that we may drink* which might have implied that they thought that Moses was deliberately withholding water from the people. Responding to their accusation, *Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?”* Moses gave a stern response, saying that they were not just questioning Moses’ motives, they were also testing the LORD’s intentions. The people have seen substantial evidence that the LORD would and could meet their every physical need while in the wilderness. But when they suffered discomfort, they still questioned Moses’ leadership and the LORD’s abilities.

Though it is common for God to test His people ([Exodus 20:20](#); [Deuteronomy 8:16](#); [Jeremiah 20:12](#)), it is not acceptable for humans to test God ([Deuteronomy 6:16](#)). Why? Several reasons. First, for me to test God implies that I can set the standard by which He passes or fails. Second, it implies that I am smart enough and good enough to be the standard by which God is to be evaluated. The logical end to this is that I would be thinking of myself as the one whom God must obey. In short, I would be removing God from His throne and enthroning myself instead. One of the foundational principles of the Bible is that He is God and we are not!

In spite of Moses’ words, *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?”* Once again their faith in the LORD faltered. Notice that they did not even acknowledge that the LORD was the One who brought them out of Egypt, only Moses. Just as in [Exodus 14:11](#) and [16:3](#), the people seem to be accusing Moses of trying to kill them by forcing them into the wilderness where they would experience a painful death.

Exasperated, and perhaps somewhat fearful of what the people might do, in verse 4 *Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me.”* Moses was correct in going to the LORD. He seemed to sense that the people had developed a mob mentality. It is interesting that Moses used the phrase “this people.” It implies that he sensed a separation between him and the people (i.e. the people vs. Moses).

In verses 5 – 6, Moses was given instructions. The LORD showed patience and seemed to ignore the complaints of the people and *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.* In a show of authority, Moses was instructed to “pass before” the people as their leader. The “elders” followed Moses, showing the people that even the elders were

under Moses' authority. The "staff" Moses used to strike the Nile reinforced the fact that the power of the LORD was with Moses.

The LORD also told Moses *behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb*. For the LORD to "stand before" Moses showed that He was the authority over him as well. The people did not mention the LORD at all, and they needed a visible demonstration that the LORD was the ruler over all and He had given Moses authority to rule them.

Next, the LORD instructed Moses to *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*. Here, Moses was instructed to "strike the rock." In a similar incident in [Numbers 20](#), Moses was told to "speak" to the rock. He struck it anyway, and that led to the LORD disallowing him to enter the Promised Land. Here, though, he was obedient in striking the rock. Though not explicitly stated, it seems likely that water came out of a rock, which was a miracle. That *Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel* was meant to be yet another visual confirmation that the LORD would and could take care of His people in every way.

As a result of this confrontation, *he named the place Massah and Meribah*. The word "Massah" means "testing," and the word "Meribah" means "strife." The two names probably resulted from the fact that the people were guilty of two things—first, *the quarrel of the sons of Israel*, and second, *they tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us, or not?"* The people must have wondered why the LORD would deliberately lead them to a place with no water knowing they were desperate for it. In their minds, it could only have meant that He had abandoned them. Of course, He had not. It was another test of their faith ([Deut 8:3](#); [Psalms 81:7](#)).

This incident is mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. It was used as a warning against rebelling to another generation of Israelites in [Psalms 95:8](#). Later in the psalm, the LORD stated that the generation "shall not enter My rest" (v. 11). "Enter His rest" referred to taking possession of the Promised Land as a reward for remaining obedient until the task was completed (which is when you rest). [Psalm 95:11](#) is then quoted in [Hebrews 4:3,5](#) to teach New Testament believers to remain faithful to the LORD in spite of difficulty, so that they can remain faithful until their mission is completed, at which time they will receive their full reward (entering His rest.)

A separate use of this event as a New Testament illustration comes from the pen of the Apostle Paul. In [1 Corinthians 10:4](#), Paul identifies the rock at

Horeb that yielded water as a picture of Christ who provided spiritual water and “followed” them through the wilderness. Paul makes the point in [1 Cor 10:11](#) that all these Old Testament stories were recorded for the specific purpose of teaching us, so that we can learn from past mistakes. Then Paul makes this admonition:

“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”

([1 Cor 10:13](#))

This passage in 1 Corinthians makes it clear that all humans encounter the same basic problems. We can look at the experience of others and say “Why don’t they understand and trust God?” But when we experience difficulty ourselves, we struggle with the same sorts of doubts. This is “common to man.” But what is also true is that God is always faithful, and has our best interests at heart, no matter the appearance in the moment.

Biblical Text:

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. 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?” ³ 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?” ⁴ So Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me.” ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. 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?”