

# *Moses*

## **Exodus 17:1-7**

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The Bible is filled with situations where words and names and places are joined together in a way which gives added meaning. Last week we looked at the life of Abraham, our father in faith. When we meet our father in faith his name is Abram, which when translated means exalted father. But one of the promises to Abram is that he will not only be an exalted father, he will be the father of many nations. So after God promises that Abram will have more descendants than the stars of heaven, God changes his name. “No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham.” Abraham means *father of many*. His name describes the promise God has made to him. When Abraham is offering his one and only son Isaac at the altar on Mount Moriah, God intercedes and provides a ram caught in the thicket. In response Abraham calls God Jehovah Jireh, which means *The Lord will provide*.

When Abraham’s grandson Jacob has the vision of a ladder where angels are ascending and descending from heaven, he awakens and realizes that God is in that very place. In response Jacob takes the stone he had used as a pillow the night before, sets the pillow up as a pillar, pours oil on the pillar and names the place Bethel. Bethel means *House of God*. Today the Bible draws our attention to Moses, who is leading the people of Israel on their journey from slavery in Egypt to the land of milk of honey, to the Promised Land. Moses had a precarious beginning to his life, being born when the harsh Pharaoh of Egypt had declared all the baby boys must be put to death. His mother fashioned a papyrus basket and set it among the reeds in Egypt’s great river, the Nile. When the baby boy was drawn out of the water by none other than Pharaoh’s daughter, who literally rescues him, the daughter of Pharaoh names the baby boy Moshe, which means *draw out*.

This morning we find ourselves with Moses and the Israelites as they journey in the wilderness. The episode today will lead to the naming of the place, and the name will forever call to mind the episode that took place. By the time this story concludes the place where it occurs will be named Massah and Meribah. Massah means *testing* and Meribah means *quarreling*. This morning we come hard upon a story where the people of Israel test God and where the people of Israel quarrel with God. About what? About water. They are in the desert and they have no water. So they complain. So they grumble. So what? If you were in the desert and you had no water, would you complain? Would you grumble? A little context helps us to understand why this place became known as Massah and Meribah. A little context helps us to understand why this place known as Massah and Meribah became associated with more than just one stop in the desert.

To put Massah and Meribah in context we can look at what took place immediately before this situation where the people of Israel were in the desert without water. Chapter 16 in Exodus begins with words that are very similar to Chapter 17, where the people are in the desert with no water. In Chapter 16 they were in the desert with no food. Guess what they did? In the desert with no food, we read, “The whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.” They grumbled. They complained. How did God respond to the lack of food in the desert? God gave them bread from heaven, what the Bible names manna. Every single morning God gave manna, daily bread, and every single night God gave meat. Except in Exodus 16 God not only gives manna, God gives the gift of Sabbath, a day when Israel can rest from their labors and simply trust God, enjoying God’s provision. On the Sabbath Day there is no gathering of the bread or meat. God provides enough on the sixth day to tide them over on the seventh, so the people of God can rest and know God is caring for them. Chapter 16 in Exodus concludes by telling us the people of Israel not only had bread for a day and bread for a week, the people had bread for the entire forty years they journeyed through the wilderness.

And yet, when the next stop on their journey finds them without water, their immediate response is...to grumble, to complain, to quarrel, and to test. Well of course they do! They are in the desert...they have no water. To grumble, to complain, to quarrel, to test...those are natural responses to being in the desert with no water. Perhaps, but right before God gave the manna and the Sabbath in Genesis 16, God had given the Israelites clean and fresh water from a well that was bitter. God had already proven he could take care of the water. And by the way, when they came to the place of bitter water, you probably already know what the Israelites did. They grumbled. And right before they came to the place of bitter water, the place known as Marah, for Marah means bitter, they had just passed through the waters of the Red Sea. Hmmm, the Red Sea. You might remember that story. Israel was delivered out of their slavery in Egypt and their first stop was the shores of the Red Sea. Although it might seem nice of God to lead the people immediately to a seaside resort, there was no time to relax. The Egyptian army was chasing these folks who had been delivered from Egypt, and Pharaoh’s army was bearing down on them. The people of God had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. And so they...complained. Why did you bring us out here? If all we were going to do is die, you should have left us in Egypt. There were plenty of graves there. Soon they would find out God’s deliverance extended far beyond the borders of Egypt, and when the waters of the Red Sea parted they passed safely through.

Placing Exodus chapter 17 in context helps tremendously. If we just read a story about a people in the desert with no water, of course their first response would be to complain, to grumble, to quarrel, and to test. What is troubling about this story is this isn’t their first stop on their journey of faith. They act like they had never been there. And they had. They had. These are a people who had faced numerous trials and tribulations. A desperate mother cast her baby boy out on the waters of the Nile, and

God protected and preserved that little boy, because God had big plans for that baby who would be drawn out of the water. The people cried out to God in their slavery, and in a passage of scripture that foreshadows the salvation and deliverance we have been given through Jesus Christ, we learn that God saw their misery, God heard their cry, God was concerned, and so God came down to help. When Moses entered the halls of power and told Pharaoh that God said, “Let my people go,” what followed were ten mighty acts of God, all on behalf of Israel. So yes, you’re in the desert. Yes, you have no water. But act like you’ve been there. Because God sure has...God sure has been there. God has been there for you every step of the way.

What is especially troubling about Massah and Meribah, is the question that the people of Israel were really asking. As the story comes to an end in verse seven of chapter 17, and it is explained to us why that particular spot in the desert was named Massah and Meribah, the names meaning testing and quarreling, we find out what underlies all of Israel’s doubt and fears, their testing and quarreling, their grumbling and their complaining. What underlies this whole story is a question about God. They are asking, “Is the Lord among us or not?” And there it is. Right in the middle of the desert, this story and this question become our story and our question. We find ourselves in deep waters. Is the Lord among us or not?

Now we’re not just in the desert asking questions about water, we’re in the waiting room asking questions about a diagnosis...we’re at the kitchen table asking questions about our kids and their safety and their choices and their struggles and their fears...we’re in the counselors office talking about our marriage...we’re in the treatment center confronting addictions and drugs and alcohol...we’re in the school hallway asking questions about self-image and peer pressure and wondering if anyone knows how bad it hurts to feel lonely and isolated and rejected...we’re in the nursing home holding the hand of someone who once held our hand, watching over someone who once watched over us, feeding someone who once fed us, changing someone who once changed us...we’re in the darkness asking if anyone is there, and we’re looking high and low and under every rock and every stone and behind every chair and every table to see if someone is with us...if the Lord is with us.

What is so frustrating about this story is that Israel doesn’t seem to be learning from their previous experiences, from their history with God. They are not developing a holy memory that can strengthen them with each new trial, with each new test, with each new tribulation. Their go to response is to grumble and complain, to quarrel and to test. There is a verse from the prophet Hosea that is used in the Gospel of Matthew. When Joseph and Mary have to flee with the baby Jesus to avoid the wrath of King Herod, they go to Egypt and find a place of safety. After King Herod dies the Lord speaks to Joseph in a dream and lets him know it is okay to go back home. Matthew uses that return from Egypt to fulfill the scripture in Hosea 11:1 where God says, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” That verse in Hosea that is later quoted in Matthew, is helpful when we

consider Israel's experience in Exodus. The whole verse as it is found in Hosea reads, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." The phrase in that verse that catches my attention today is, "When Israel was a child..." Israel truly is a child, and each time they face struggle they grumble, they complain, they quarrel, and they test. If that is how a child would act and respond, we might ask ourselves, how can we grow beyond that? How can we mature? How can our faith blossom and flourish, be deepened and developed, strengthened and become sure, so that we no longer have to ask at each new step on our journey of faith, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

It seems like one of the fundamental ways we strengthen our understanding and assurance that God is with us is by reading and rehearsing and remembering the stories of faith we find in the Bible. Each time we walk up Mount Moriah with Abraham, feeling the tugs and pulls he faces, and each time we discover anew that God really is Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides, it builds our faith. When we share that long and difficult journey of Joseph, from favored son to rejected brother, from prisoner and alien in Egypt to miraculously becoming second in command to Pharaoh, we are exploring the depths of that deep theological word and concept called Providence. God has plans and intentions for us that we have no clue about. But God sees ahead of us and makes a way. Remember that when you find yourself rejected and sold down the river, when your hopes and dreams have been crushed, when your best days all seem to be behind you, what seems like harm today might be the very things that God uses for good in the days ahead.

In saying that, we do not downplay the deep disappointments and hurts life can bring. When a woman named Naomi endured the death of her husband and her two sons, she had every right to return to her hometown and apply for a name change. Greeted by all her townsfolk who were curious about where she had been and what she had done, calling out to her by name, "Naomi, Naomi," she said, "Don't call me Naomi, call me Marah. For the Lord has made my life bitter." She tells them she left her town full and she is returning empty. That is a bitter story, one that some of you know well, and each of us knows in some way. But by the time you get to the end of the book of Ruth, sure enough God has not only been there, right there in the middle of the misery, God has been at work to bring life out of death. You won't know that story if you don't read it, and reflect on it, and study some about it, and believe, and ultimately trust it to be just what it claims to be. "This is the word of the Lord" we say. "Thanks be to God."

When Israel was a child...they acted like a child. They grumbled and complained and quarreled and tested. In some ways they had an arrested development, or certainly a delayed development. It seemed like a long and extended childhood, marked by lots of grumbling and complaining and quarreling and testing. And yet there are moments when Israel moved beyond being a child. There are moments of deep faith and trust. Habakkuk is one of the minor prophets, one of the last books of the Old Testament. Even though Habakkuk is grouped with the minor prophets, he makes a statement of

faith that is anything but minor. Habakkuk is told by the Lord that the righteous will live by faith. Faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is climbing Mount Moriah and knowing God provides. Faith is sitting in a prison in Egypt and knowing that others have meant to harm you but God intends to bring good. Faith is crying out to God and knowing God sees your misery, God hears your cries, God is concerned, and God will come down to help. Faith is knowing that God keeps his promise, and God's promise is that he will never leave us, he will never forsake us. And so it is that a prophet named Habakkuk learned to trust God, to wait for God, to have faith in God because God does not disappoint.

The prophet expresses his faith in a powerful way at the end of his short book. It is an expression of faith that looks forward and knows that even though today might look hopeless, with God we are never without hope. Is the Lord among us or not? Habakkuk has an answer for that.

“Although the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines  
...Though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food...  
...Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls...  
...Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

—Habakkuk 3:17, 18

That passage from Habakkuk was the favorite verse of a friend of mine named Charles. Charles was a man of deep faith. One of his proudest memories was being ordained as an elder in the Presbyterian Church when he was just a young man in his twenties. He had considered a call to ordained ministry, but he didn't need to be a pastor to do the work of the Lord. He was such a good man of God. By the time I met Charles he was well into his seventies. I led a Bible Study with Charles and a group of men his age on Tuesday morning. I was on 34 at the time, but Charles and the men accepted me as their leader, although they made sure I never got too full of myself. We had been growing as a group, from ten to fifteen to twenty men, and one morning I counted the group and we had a new record, 25 men. I pulled Charles aside after the meeting and said, “I counted and we had 25 men this morning.” Charles grinned and said, “No, we had 24 men and one boy.” And he patted me on the shoulder.

I loved Charles, and when he would quote Habakkuk it would fill my heart with a wonderful sense of calm and peace. I can still see him sitting across from me in that Men's Group as he would say...

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines  
...Though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food...  
...Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls...  
...Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

Then something terrible happened. Charles only son named Bill got sick and died. We had the service for Bill and there were tears and sadness and mourning. Charles tried to keep his big smile, but you don't go through something like that without losing a bit of yourself. Charles kept coming to Men's Group, he kept serving the Lord, but I was concerned about him. Sometimes the bottom falls out and you can't help but ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

It wasn't the first week after Bill's death, and I'm pretty certain it wasn't the first month, but there came a Tuesday morning when we were finishing our discussion, and reflecting on life, and the presence of God in our lives, and the times we don't really sense the presence as much as we might like...and whatever we were talking about and whatever we were thinking, something was working on my dear friend Charles. Something was stirring within him. As our meeting drew to a close, this man of faith...he was not a child, for he had wrestled and prayed and struggled and held tight to God...this man of faith named Charles spoke up, and when he spoke up the rest of us listened. And as we listened we knew we were standing on holy ground.

"Although the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines  
...Though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food...  
...Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls...  
...Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior."

"Is the Lord among us or not?" The children of God know the answer to that question. God will never leave us and he will never forsake us. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.