

Refuge

*I will say to the LORD,
“My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”
(Psalm 91:2 ESV)*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
(Psalm 42:2 ESV)*

*And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.
(Psalm 9:10 ESV)*

The Day Of Testing

April 19th, 2020

Exodus 17

Psalm 95

Hebrews 3

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Well good morning church! We are jumping back into our Refuge series, so if you have your Bible with you I'd love for you to open it now to Exodus 17:1. Now I know that all the verses are going to appear right on your television screen or your computer screen and so there might be a tendency for you NOT to open your Bibles but today I think it would be very helpful if you did. We are going on a bit of a journey today. We are going to look at a story that becomes in the Bible a sort of boiler plate or template for the day of testing – a day which comes for all of us if we are truly the people of the Lord. J. Alec Motyer said memorably:

“There is no such thing as an untried faith.”¹

So the day of testing WILL COME and this story – the story in Exodus 17 – serves as a sort of “design pattern” in the Bible. All DAYS OF TESTING are in some sense merely a repeating of

¹ Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, ed. J. A. Motyer, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 176.

THIS DAY OF TESTING – that’s how this story functions in the Bible. So we’ll read the story, then we’ll flip forward to Psalm 95 which is a song about the story – and then we’ll flip forward again to Hebrews 3 where the message of the story is turned into a challenge for every ALL people living in the DAY OF SALVATION, however long it may last. So, do please open your Bibles now to Exodus 17. We’ll begin with the story of the water from the rock – or as it is sometimes called, the story of the testing at Meribah. I’ll begin reading at verse 1.

The Story:

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 no water for the people to drink.

We’ll just pause here in order to get our bearings – narratively and geographically. In terms of the story, this episode takes place AFTER the 10 plagues, AFTER the Passover and AFTER the miraculous deliverance of the people through the waters of the Red Sea. Meaning that by this point, they really ought to have been TRUSTING FULLY in the LOVE and CARE of Almighty God. One wonders actually what else God could have done to prove himself. He had just humbled the greatest Empire in the Ancient world. He had just extended his mercy to them in the Passover and he had just demonstrated his POWER even over the forces of nature in the crossing of the Red Sea – what else could he have done? And that’s why their rebellion in this story was so offensive. God wanted to see where they were at – and where they were at was not good at all.

Now, in terms of the geography, Israel has been travelling south along the east coast of the Red Sea and now they are beginning to turn EASTWARD or inland toward Mt. Sinai. About 1 day’s journey short of Mount Sinai – or Mt. Horeb as it is sometimes called, there was an oasis called Rephidim which was usually a reliable source of water - but here we are told that for some reason it was dry. Perhaps there had been less than the usual supply of rain. Regardless of the reason, once again, the people are very disappointed. When you expect rest and relief and you don’t get it - it can be very destabilizing.

I know that some of us are in that situation exactly. My wife and I were very much looking forward to a couple of weeks of vacation and like the marathon runner we were in our finishing kick, as it were, leaning forward with eager expectation of crossing the line and entering into a

season of rest and refreshment – at which point of course, this whole COVID19 pandemic exploded and all vacations were cancelled and so instead of our marathon ending we’ve been put into an indefinite holding pattern which could last for weeks or months or who knows how long.

And many of you are in the exact same situation - hope deferred makes the heart sick – so as I said, this DAY OF TESTING is in some sense a repetition of THAT DAY OF TESTING – that paradigmatic Day of Testing recorded in Exodus 17.

The Israelites were on the finishing kick of an exhausting journey. They were looking forward to a time of rest and refreshment at the Oasis at Rephidim. They had rationed out their water with the thought that they could replenish their stocks there – but when they arrived, they discovered that there was no water and they would need to keep walking for several more miles. They were, quite understandably, very disappointed – some of them were more than disappointed, they were downright angry, and we read about that now in verse 2:

² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to 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 the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” ⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the 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 shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Now remember I told you that this story takes place in Rephidim which is about a day’s walk from Mt. Sinai. So the situation seems to be that God is STRETCHING THEM by bringing them to a place where they expected to find water but did not.

He was trying to see if they could wait.

He was trying to see if they could press through a little difficulty.

Faith is remarkably easy when breakfast arrives on time every day. Faith is remarkably easy when your belly is full and your mind is at ease - but it's significantly harder when you have something legitimate to worry about. It's significantly harder when you are running on fumes - and dealing with anger and disappointment – and that's exactly what is going on here.

Hebrew scholar Nahum Sarna says:

“It is one thing to be able to affirm that “when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and his servant Moses” (Exodus 14:31). It is quite another matter to know whether that faith was powerful enough and disinterested enough to be sustained also in times of adversity and misfortune.”²

Well, as we see pretty clearly in this story - they did not do very well with this particular test. They get cranky and demanding and even a little violent - Moses is worried that they are going to stone him. This reveals their essential infancy in terms of their walk with the Lord. Their endurance at this point is pretty much zero - so God sees that and begins to develop that - look at how God responds to this situation.

He doesn't say to the people: open your mouths and I will give you rain to drink right where you stand - no that would only reward their lack of endurance.

Instead he says to Moses - you and the leaders, get out in front of the people and GO.

Keep walking.

Stretch it out.

Give me one more lap.

And so they do.

² Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* in The JPS Torah Commentary, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 93.

They walk a little further and they come to a rock at Horeb – we assume the foothills of Horeb – the foothills of Mt. Sinai - and Moses hits the rock with his staff and out comes a river of water in the wilderness.

J. Alec Motyer calls this anticipatory providence - meaning that God had been preparing this river for thousands of years. It had been carving out a channel in the rock until it was right there, just inches below the surfaces, waiting for an 80-year-old man to give it a tap!

That's the lesson here!

The lesson is that God has planned the supply long before we encounter the need!

He knows the limits of our endurance – far better than we do – and he buries the water right at the limit of our capacity. He has his purpose, but his purpose isn't to destroy us it is to grow us. It is to teach us and it is to know us.

So God TESTS his people – but there is also a sense in this story in which THEY TEST HIM – and that's not a good thing.

The last verse of the story, verse 7, says that Moses:

“called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exodus 17:7 ESV)

Now what does it mean for people to TEST THE LORD? The Lord certainly tests us – and that's presented in the story as a good thing - but what does it mean for us to test God? Apparently that's a very bad thing. Douglas Stuart is helpful here, he says that testing God is essentially:

“an attempt to get something out of him earlier or in greater quantity, or the like, then would otherwise happen.”³

³ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* in Volume of 2 of The New American Commentary, (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2006), 389.

And that seems to be what was happening in this story. God had an abundant supply of water ready to discovered and distributed JUST A FEW MILES DOWN THE ROAD. And notice that no one died between where they started complaining and where God started providing. So they were not at death's door - they were just impatient and tired of waiting. And so they tried to hijack the schedule. They wanted to be in charge. They wanted to turn God into a Pepsi machine. "When we push the button you better give us what we want."

That is what it means to test God.

It is to demand that he dance when we play the tune.

That's paganism.

That's UNFAITH - and that's not allowed - Old Testament or New.

So – that's the story that was later turned into a song; so let's turn there. Flip forward a couple of hundred pages in your Bibles to Psalm 95.

The Song:

While you are looking for that, I'll just tell you a little bit about the Psalm. We don't know who wrote it but it appears to have been composed specifically for corporate worship – it looks as though it was supposed to have been sung antiphonally or in parts. Perhaps a Levite sang the calls to worship and then the congregation responded with the main stanzas. There are three sections to the Psalm – two verses or stanzas followed by a rather sobering warning at the end.

The first section runs from verse 1-5 and it begins with the call to worship in verses 1-2, and then verses 3-5 represent a short hymn of praise, the part likely sung by the congregation as a whole, celebrating the power and majesty of God the Creator King.

The second section is similarly arranged. There is another call to worship, you can see that in verse 6, and then another short hymn of praise, again sung by the congregation, this time focusing on the nearness and kindness of God our Covenant Lord.

So the song focuses FIRST on God's TRANSCENDANCE and then secondly on his IMMANENCE – those are the theological terms. At street level we would say that the song focuses first on how BIG God is and then secondly on how NEAR God is. And of course, you don't really know the God of the Bible until you know both of those things.

The third and final section of the Psalm contains a warning to anyone who would fail to put their trust in this marvelous God. You can see that for yourself in verses 7d through 11. So keep that structure in your mind as we read through the Psalm from start to finish. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹ Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

³ For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

⁶ Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

⁷ For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

⁹ when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways."

¹¹ Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest." (Psalm 95:1–11 ESV)

Now I mentioned that there is a sense in which EVERY DAY OF TESTING is in some sense a repetition of this DAY OF TESTING recorded in Exodus 17 and in fact this day of testing was repeated in the wilderness wandering of the Israelites. God actually gave the people a "make-up

test” in Numbers 20. It is a very similar story – and it covers a lot of the same ground – but it is not the same story – this one happens near the end of the wilderness wandering, when the main leaders of the people are starting to die off. We won’t read the whole story, I’ll just read you the introduction:

“And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there. ²Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron.” (Numbers 20:1–2 ESV)

So AFTER the death of Miriam, late in the life of Moses and Aaron – this whole test was repeated. And once again, the people of Israel failed in spectacular fashion. Numbers 20:13 says:

These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy. (Numbers 20:13 ESV)

That is to say – he judged them. He tested them several times before declaring – JUSTLY – that they were not people of faith and therefore they would not be included in his eternal rest - that is the note that Psalm 95 ends on.

The message of the song is fairly straight forward: God has revealed his essential character and nature: He is THE HIGH KING OF CREATION – and he is the NEAR LORD OF THE COVENANT – therefore his people should trust him.

And we in the New Covenant should be able to sing that song with even more confidence than our Old Testament counterparts. We look at the same stars they look at – but with respect to the NEARNESS of God we know far more than they ever did – for we have seen Jesus – Emmanuel, God with us and we have experienced his tender love and mercy. For God demonstrated his love for us in this: that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

So, brothers and sisters, why in the world, would we not trust him?

That's the message and meaning of Psalm 95 and then that message and meaning is picked up and turned into a pastoral challenge in Hebrews 3:7-19, so flip forward in your Bible another 600 pages or so and we'll have a look at that.

This entire epistle was written to a group of early Christians who were finding it hard to wait for the promise of the Lord. They had started to suffer – not yet to the point of death, according to Hebrews 12:4 – but things were getting hard. Some of them had lost their businesses and all of them were facing pressure and uncertainty and several of them, apparently, were in danger of falling away. We pick up the story at verse 7:

The Challenge:

**⁷ Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice,
⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,
⁹ where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.
¹⁰ Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’
¹¹ As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’”
¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.
¹⁵ As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”
¹⁶ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.
(Hebrews 3:7–19 ESV)**

So, there is your pastoral challenge, given to a people who were enduring a DAY OF TESTING that was in many ways analogous to the ARCHETYPAL day of testing in the Old Testament. And from that story – and from the song that was written and sung about the story – the Apostle offers some wise and urgent counsel.

Let me walk you through it. The first thing he says is this:

1. Do not harden your hearts

Every time we turn away from God and toward something else as if it were God, we harden our hearts. When we binge drink or use drugs to anesthetize ourselves during this crisis – we harden our hearts. When we binge watch 24 hours of Netflix instead of seeking the Lord in prayer and bible reading – we harden our hearts. When we spend hours after hours on Facebook or surfing the internet trying to find ANSWERS in this confusing time – instead of seeking the Lord – we harden our hearts.

Now – some of those things can be good things - in moderation, but when we turn to those things to receive what should only be received from God – that’s when we harden our hearts.

So be careful because people fall away one small step at a time.

So don’t do that – don’t harden your hearts and then secondly, the Apostle says:

2. Do not test the Lord

You can see that in verses 8-9. Remember, to test the Lord is to:

“attempt to get something out of him earlier or in greater quantity, or the like, then would otherwise happen.”⁴

Don’t become a pagan the first time God delays in answering your prayers. Don’t think that you can twist God’s arm. Don’t think that you can threaten him with less attention or less worship. God is not a Pepsi machine and God is not mocked. Be careful how you pray during this trial – be careful how you worship – and I’ll be so bold as to say it – be careful how you give during this crisis.

⁴ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* in Volume of 2 of The New American Commentary, (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2006), 389.

Let me unpack that – if you can't give, if you can't continue to worship God through your tithes and offerings - then you can't. You can't give what you don't have. But you and I also know that human beings communicate with money and what I'm saying is be very careful that you are not trying to punish God or manipulate God with your money right now. The people of Israel threatened to kill Moses if God didn't give them what they wanted when they wanted it. "If you don't give us what we want then we will take what you want. You like Moses? Then we'll kill Moses!" That is blackmailing God – that is TESTING GOD - and it did not go well for the people of Israel.

In fact God said:

I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest." (Psalm 95:11 ESV)

So don't do that.

But do:

3. Take care

You can see that in verse 12. The Apostle tells them to TAKE CARE lest there be in you an evil and unbelieving heart. Now we don't know for sure who wrote Hebrews – that is one of the oldest mysteries in Christendom – some say Paul, some say Barnabas, some say some other Apostle – we don't know, but it does sound like something Paul said elsewhere in 2 Corinthians 13. In verse 5 he said:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5 ESV)

So in both places we are being told the same thing – we are being told to USE THE TEST to EXAMINE OURSELVES to see IF WE ARE IN THE FAITH.

These tests are our FRIENDS. They tell us the truth in a world where no one else tells the truth. You think you are saved? Well bully for you. But here is the thing – it doesn't matter whether or not you think you are saved – Jesus reminded us that many people who think they are saved are not.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven”
(Matthew 7:21 ESV)

So you think you're saved? Good for you. Doesn't matter apparently. All that matters is whether Jesus thinks you're saved. So don't listen to yourself, and don't listen to your friends – RARE is the friend who will tell you, “Dear sister, I just don't think you're saved”. If you have a friend like that, hold on to them – but chances are you don't – so USE THIS DAY OF TESTING.

Use it.

Use it like a mirror and look deep inside and deal carefully and honestly with what you see.

Do you see FEAR on your Facebook page?

Well fear is the opposite of faith.

Do you see grumbling against your leaders – in the church and in government?

Well – that didn't go over very well for the Israelites in this story.

So take a careful look at yourself.

And then fourthly, the Apostle says:

4. Encourage one another

You see that in verse 13. Help yourself in this challenge, and help one another. Call each other. Email each other. Find ways to connect over the Scriptures. Find ways to pray with one another –

via Zoom or on the phone – whatever, figure it out. We need each other. So encourage one another, as long as it is called today.

Fifthly, the Apostle says:

5. Stand fast

Look at verse 14:

“For we have come to share in Christ, **if indeed we hold** our original confidence firm to the end.” (Hebrews 3:14 ESV)

Listen to me brothers and sisters, PERSEVERANCE is DEFINITIONAL to saving faith. I know that some of you have heard from TV or radio preachers that “once saved always saved” – and I just want to tell you that that is not an adequate representation of what the Bible says about salvation.

Now hear what I said, and not what I didn’t say.

I didn’t say that people can lose their salvation. I said, that “once saved always saved” is not an adequate representation of what the Bible says about salvation. It isn’t adequate because people hear what they want to hear when you say “once saved always saved” is that if they said the sinner’s prayer with any sort of enthusiasm or emotion – then no matter how they live the rest of their lives – they will be truly saved.

But that is not what the bible says.

Let me read Hebrews 3:14 again:

“For we have come to share in Christ, **if indeed we hold** our original confidence firm to the end.” (Hebrews 3:14 ESV)

Remember friends:

“There is no such thing as an untried faith.”⁵

You see “the sinner’s prayer” is just you saying “Lord, Lord”. But Jesus said:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven”
(Matthew 7:21 ESV)

So how is this even a matter of controversy in the church?

The Bible is remarkably clear that TRULY SAVED PEOPLE PERSEVERE THROUGH TEST AND TRIAL. That’s one of the main reasons God sends TESTS AND TRIALS – because it reveals the reality or unreality of the narrative that we are telling ourselves with respect to our salvation.

So use it. Are you persevering – or not?

The last thing the Apostle says here is this – and it probably occurred to him to say this because what we just talked about was probably about as popular in his day as it is in ours. He ends by saying this:

6. Don’t think for a second that this challenge does not apply to you

Look at verse 16:

For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? (Hebrews 3:16 ESV)

Was it not people whom the Lord had passed over during the 10th plague? Was it not people who had passed through the waters of the Red Sea and who had drunk from the rock who was Christ?

⁵ Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, ed. J. A. Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 176.

The Apostle Paul makes this same point in 1 Corinthians 10. He says:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,³ and all ate the same spiritual food,⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (1 Corinthians 10:1–5 ESV)

So there Paul says – who were those people who were excluded from the final rest of God? They were people who had been baptized, people who had taken the Lord’s Supper – in an Old Testament sense. People who thought they were saved – people who looked like they were saved – and people even acted in the church as if they were saved.

Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. (1 Corinthians 10:5 ESV)

That’s in the Bible, brothers and sisters.

So don’t think for a second that this challenge does not apply to you.

This DAY OF TESTING – like every DAY OF TESTING has been sent by Almighty God for the good of his people and for the cause of his ultimate glory in Christ.

It has not come to destroy you – but it has come to try you. So do the work, trust in the Lord, examine yourselves and encourage your brothers and sisters. If you do that, then when this is over you’ll be stronger, more assured and more ready to sing and to celebrate the goodness of our God when next we come together.

I am eagerly waiting for that day and I pray that by God’s grace you will join me. So let me do that – let me pray for you and encourage you and I pray that you would do the same for me and for all your brothers and sisters as you watch along at home. Let’s pray together.