

Rock of Ages

Jonathan K. Dodson | Exodus 15:22-16:7 | September 18, 2019

We are living in an age of considerable confusion. Wandering through a wilderness, where we are often puzzled over what is true and what is untrue; who's trustworthy and who is not. Every media scandal acts as a kind of test: who can I trust—the right or the left? As Israel enters their desert, they face three successive tests. Tests *meant* to clarify who they can trust. Let's take a look.

Marah: Test #1

Israel sets off from Egypt, toward Sinai, passing through the wilderness of Shur, where they're without water for several days. Parched, they eventually arrive at the well-watered Marah, only to discover the water is bitterly undrinkable. So the people *grumbled against Moses*. It's understandable. These city slickers stuck are in the middle of the desert without a hydro flask. And yet, grumbling will become a defining feature. The word is used over a dozen times to describe Israel. How about you? *Are you quick to praise or quick to complain? Do your conversations drift to criticism: weather, politicians, relationships, work, the church OR are you marked by gratitude, praise, joy?* As a pastor, I often get to talk to visitors about some crisis in their life, and on occasion I'll have someone open up to me, allow me to counsel and for them on the spot. It's a true privilege. It's in part why we're here. But the funny thing is that poof; I never see them again. People come to complain or explore when there's crisis but what about coming when things are good? Coming to give God glory for the good things in your life? Some years ago my wife got our family to start a new practice. Around the breakfast or dinner table she would say, Okay everyone, it's time to name your gratuities. And each us had to pick three things to thank God for and share them out loud. That practice helps us cultivate thanksgiving, and its remarkable how it shifts our mood each time. But it's not about an "attitude of gratitude." I used to drive by a sign every Thanksgiving in Minneapolis that said, "Thanksgiving to whom?" That's it. To whom are we grateful—God? Our soul lifts when we express gratitude because God made us for gratitude not complaint. With the grumbling barreling down upon him, Moses *cries out* to the Lord. If you are in need, or people are looking to you for answers, *this is always your best first step*. Cry out. A few weeks ago, God convicted me that sometimes this isn't my first step. I hear a

need, receive an email, and respond too quickly. Instead of pausing to ask God for help, I sometimes respond out of my own resources. Self-reliance. And because of that, I miss out on something God could have done. What if Moses hadn't prayed? What if he said, Guys, look God appeared to me in a burning bush, I led you out of Egypt, and we saw him conquer the evil superpower by parting the Red Sea. We just sang song about it?! Stick with me, let's keep walking and we'll find some water. They would have missed out. *Moses cries out and God shows Moses a log; he throws it into the water, and it becomes sweet.* Bitter, undrinkable water, thirst-quenching, tasty. The word show is the same word torah, which means to teach. What's the lesson: What God provides in scarcity is always better than what we provide in plenty. They long for the Nile; God gives them a river of delight in the desert. *A friend of mine was expecting the birth of a son. But after the boy was born, he was placed in the NICU, so my friend had to drop out of seminary. And two months later, his son died. He was heartbroken. But reflecting on that time he said: I was devastated but it was also the most joyful day of my life. I was more aware of the presence of the Spirit of Christ than I had ever been. He tenderly walked with me through every twist and turn.* You see, this test isn't whether God provides. He's not the one being tested. We are. It's about whether or not we trust the provider. It's about giving up control, complaint, and trusting the Healer: *If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.*" Listen to his voice, do what is right in his eyes, keep his commands: Multisensory trust. Why? He heals the waters to give them health, life. He wants to give us the same, but to enjoy it we must give him our: *eyes, ears, heart, life. He may not give you what you want, but he will always give you what you need and sometimes more.* 12 springs, 70 palm trees, numbers of perfection: oasis of his perfect presence. *What God provides in scarcity is always better than what we provide in plenty.*

Meribah: Test #2

From Marah, Israel continues onto Sinai, passing through the wilderness of Sin. And the whole congregation grumbles, again, but this time everything *intensifies*. Israel grumbles, not just against Moses but Aaron. They line up their leaders, file complaints. What started

in the camps, over a fire, at the coffeeshop, spilled into the whole congregation: The elders don't do this. Moses doesn't do that. I wish my CG leader. *Gossip is how division starts.* And it's often based on a half-truth. In Egypt we had pots of meat! Really, as slaves? Whatever they ate I'm sure it was better than nothing. But that's not the point is it? *They are romanticizing the past instead of trusting God in the present.* They've hitched their imagination to grumbling not multisensory trust in their Healer-Provider. Moses cries out: "What are we? **Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD**" (16:8). He pinpoints the issue. *Their complaints about leadership are really complaints about God,* who put the leaders over them. Are they perfect, no. Are they are trustworthy, yes. And that should be enough. Don't tolerate gossip. Interrupt. Halt it. Repent of it. At the end of the day, you're grumbling is against the Lord. Now what if someone has a serious concern? 1 Timothy 5 says: Unless there are two witnesses, it shouldn't be entertained. Otherwise, elders would be fending off charges from dissatisfied complainers all the time. But, if there is a real persistent sin issue, we want to know about it. Everything is intensifying: expanded accusations, complaints against God, believing half-truths, so God judges them. No, he *provides* for them. Manna from heaven, meat from the sky. Now what are they eating? It's really impossible to say. Some say the manna was formed from aphids that fed on the sap of tamarisk trees, others the hammada plant, but even this natural explanation is inadequate to account for the scale and omniseasonal production of manna. Quail nested on the ground, but everywhere they went? It's a miracle any way you slice it, and it's *undeserved*: complainers, grumblers, accusers. Despite receiving very clear instructions from Moses on when and how to gather it, people try to hoard it; others try to gather it instead of rest. It's all a lack of trust; self-reliance. His provision also a kind of test. Will you trust my command or your intuition? Will you trust your own views on tithing, the sabbath, sexuality, gender, marriage *or* will you trust *God's* commands? When your moral sense runs counter to his moral will, who should you trust? Complaining, grumbling, distrusting, undiscerning me or holy, gracious, wise Healer and Provider? If all or most of your views align with our culture's views, you're not trusting God you're trusting in yourself, really, the cultural powers. But if most of your views align with God, and even the ones you struggle with you're submitting to careful study of his Word, then you're trusting Wisdom himself. You see, God isn't teaching Israel to be a proud, independent, self-defining individuals; he's

teaching them to be an interdependent, God-defined, worshipping community. At the end of the story we discover that God commands Moses to preserve some manna in a jar and place it before him, which is eventually placed inside the ark of the covenant. Why is a jar of manna in the ark? The ark was the golden box symbolized God's presence and was placed in the holy of holies. It was there as a reminder that God's holy provision can always be trusted. *God's will is always better than our way.* They gathered for *forty* years.

Rephidim: Test #3

Israel moves on from Sin to Rephidim, but they find no water. *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?"* Instead of embracing God's test, they test God. Instead of complaining, they quarrel, "Is the Lord among us or not?" The word *quarrel* is a legal term that means *to lodge a formal complaint*. The Israelites are prosecuting Moses, evident from his fear of stoning, the final step in communal prosecution. Commenting on Israel's actions Hebrews warns, *Do not harden your heart as Israel did in the wilderness. Have you hardened your heart to the things of God? Do you trust your intuition more than his inspired Word?* They're acting like their oppressor who hardened his heart to justify oppression. And here they are oppressing Moses, God. So God brings down the hammer of justice. He instructs Moses to pass before the people, the angry mob watching how God will respond, he brings some elders to witness God's decisive judgment and stand by it. The grand jury is gathered, tension fills the air, the verdict comes down like a hammer...*on God!* *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"* (17:6). Standing before the rock, God is struck in Israel's place. In no other place in the Bible does God stand before man. It is always the accused who stands. But God in his great mercy, stands in our place and is struck for our complaining, gossiping, quarreling, accusing spirit. *The rod of judgment lands squarely on the rock of Christ, and a river of mercy spills from his side.* It's why first Corinthians says, *"They drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ"* (10:4). The rock struck in our place. That's a God you can trust, even when things are confusing, when his will doesn't suit your intuition. It is we who are confused, not God. It is we who complain and don't give thanks. It



is we who rebel when we should trust. And how does God respond, struck to give us a sweet river of healing forgiveness! Confess your sins, drink from his side, and behold, Christ, *the Rock of Ages cleft for me!*