



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

God Teaches Hard Lessons

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Exodus 17:1-7

Clint Pressley

17 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. 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?"

(Pastor Prays)

By 1776, the American Revolution had almost petered out. It started really good with a whole lot of enthusiasm. Early battles were won, but the redcoats were just strong, and it looked as if it would pretty early be snuffed out. But into this low morale walked a man named Thomas Paine. He wrote a pamphlet named Common Sense and the words of that pamphlet had

become famous. This is what he said. "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis shrink from the service of their country, but he who stands by it deserves the love and the thanks of every man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered. Yet we have this consolation with us: the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

What is it then? What is it really? What is it that tries your soul? In the text before us, we find a man named Moses. He has been used by God to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. He was taught the ways of God in the wilderness. God went and lived with the people of Israel and brought them out. We are now deep into that. And this morning, what I want to do is look at his life, especially Moses, and see what it is that God is teaching us. We know that because Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 10, this is written here for our instruction. What does God seek to teach? So if you're going to encapsulate the sermon and you like to write things down, here's what I'm preaching. God is teaching you today so that you can flourish tomorrow. What you're going through, God is teaching you today so that you can flourish tomorrow.

God is Teaching You Today So You Will Flourish Tomorrow

I'll tell you what we'll do. Let's go back to the passage. Let's just walk through it. I'll point out a couple of things so you can better understand it. If you're a guest, this is a little bit of a Bible study. You'll look at it, and hopefully, when you walk out of here, even if you forget the points of my sermon, you remember the passage, and you understand it, and God will apply it to your heart. So join me there in verse 1 of chapter 17. It has been six weeks since the parting of the Red Sea. They have seen God do amazing things. This generation of Israel would see God do more than any other generation in the history of mankind. He's doing unbelievable things. He put all of those plagues on the Egyptians, the most powerful people in the world. God opens up the ocean so that they can walk through it. He guides them in the desert. And yet, in verse 1, we find something strange. If you're not careful, you run by it. **17** *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.* God said to the people, go camp where there's no water. You can't live without water. God has led his people into a terrible existence. Look, if your life is bad right now, it's not by accident. God sometimes takes us where there's no water. Be careful now. Be careful when you have a sense

of complaining. Be careful. Don't think God's not watching. The text implies that it is God that took the people of Israel into the desert to a place where there's no water. What does the Bible say? The Bible says that our God is in the heavens and he does whatever he pleases. When we go to the book of Job, you should read it, you find out that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

But that's not what the people did, is it? They go to the place where there is no water, and in verse 2, notice what they do. This is the fourth time they've been doing this all along; this is the fourth time the people quarreled. They're not just grumbling, they're picking a fight with Moses. I mean, they are now upset with Moses, and they say to him, " Give us some water, " as if he could pull it out of his pocket. He's got a Dasani bottle in his pocket. Here you go, everybody. They're grumbling against him. And notice in verse 2, there's a shift. There is a shift in Moses' attitude. 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?"* Moses, who typically would go to the Lord when they complained, this time, Moses had just about had it, so he turned back on them. Why are you quarreling with me? This is a bad development in Moses' life. You can feel it in the tone of voice. I say it's bad because a little while down the road, when they're near the end of being in the desert land, his sister Miriam dies in Numbers chapter 20, and he's overcome with grief. The death of his sister, she's the one that arranged everything when he was a baby, when she dies, and the people grumble again, and they go to a place like this with a rock, and God tells Moses, just speak this time to the rock. Speak to the rock. And Moses takes his rod, and two times he hits the rock. God provides the water, but God also punishes Moses for losing his temper. The people had provoked him that far. Be careful if you feel the ragged edge of your own heart.

And do you see the word test in verse two? Moses says, why do you test the Lord? If you read Malachi, we are told by God to test God through giving. It's the only time we find that. This test is them saying, we will believe that God is here if he will answer our prayers. Be careful with the arm twisting with God. Then, if you'll get me out of this, I'll follow you. That's an arm twist, and that's blackmail. It blackmailed the Lord. God can test us. We don't test God unless it is in line with what he said to Malachi: giving. So, Moses says, why are you doing that? Down in verse 7,

they're going to say, Is he here or not? So, Moses is upset. They are grumbling. They are testing the Lord.

Verse 3 says, 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?"* Now, if you know the rest of the story, the people that are claiming Moses is trying to kill them, they're the ones that get punished with death because they complain. It's ironic that in verse 3 they would say this and then they are the ones who never ever get out.

Verse 4, ⁴*So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."* You see, the heart of their question was whether or not God is actually good. Is he actually as good as we see? They weren't questioning his timing. They were questioning his goodness. And so look at Moses' prayer. Moses cries to the Lord. See how it's changed a bit? Now Moses is concerned with himself. What am I going to do with these people? In fact, they're trying to kill me. It used to be that Moses would say, Lord, these are your people. Now it's about Moses. Be careful now. Moses could probably use a vacation. I mean, he probably needs to go somewhere sunny and hot. Wait, no, he has that. He needs to go to the mountains of North Carolina or somewhere like that. He needs to get away.

Verse five tells us, ⁵*And the LORD said to Moses.* Okay, I'm gonna fix it for you. Here comes the fix. *"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.* So this is gonna be public. God tells Moses to take some of the elders, the leaders among the people, that are on your team. Make sure you have brothers and sisters around you. Take that staff that you used back at the Nile. This is a continuation of God's working as he worked with the plagues. This is a reminder of God's presence.

And then you get to verse 6. Verse 6 is where all the action is. If you're following along and you like to write in your Bible, I would circle verse 6. I'll circle it in mine because there's the gospel. If you have a Bible with footnotes, the Bible tells you that Paul looked over at this and said the rock was Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:4. So, how is it Christ? I'll tell you in a little while, but let me just read verse 6. ⁶*Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb,* Horeb is also Mount Sinai. We're going to be there in a couple of weeks with the Ten Commandments, *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. There you have the gospel. So we're not even told they get to drink. We're just told that Moses struck the rock. We don't even get the description of the water coming out.

What we have is a little bit of an epilogue down in verse 7. Verse 7 is a follow-up and tells us that this event in Moses' life and the people of Israel's life, this event was an abject failure for them. Let me show it to you. 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?”* Massah means testing. It's not a good place. So this is Testingville. And Maribah is Complaintown. He gave it two names. It is a double failure because of the quarreling, because of the testing, and then it ends in a negative. I like the story to end with a happy ending. We'd like a happy ending. This is not happy. This is no good. This is a failure. The people are saying, is God with us or not? And why is this here? Paul says it's here so that we might receive teaching. God is teaching you today so that you might flourish tomorrow.

Let me offer up a couple of ways you can apply this. What would be the application? There are several ways you could. I'll just give you a few. Here's the first one that I found helpful, number one.

Hard providence is still providence

It's still God. You get that in verse one. You see, at the very end of the verse, that they're leaving by stages. They have moved out of the wilderness, and they're going to a place called Rephidim, and the text says God told them to do it. Be careful when all of the good things happen, and you post on Facebook, isn't God good? He is, of course. You know what else, he's good at the scene of the car accident. He's good at the miscarriage. He's good at the gravesite. He's good just because it's a hard providence. Don't forget, it's still God. He's still responsible. Sometimes God is going to take your life and take you right down into the place you don't want to be. I don't want to be in the desert with no water to drink. That's where God took them. They didn't just wander out there. God did that. So why? Why does he do that? That's our question, oftentimes when we go through hard times. Why would God do this to me?

Sometimes it's to mature you. Sometimes God does this to soften your heart because we're prideful and think we achieve, and God reminds us. Sometimes God takes us there so that we might release all those aspirations and dreams and longings for something or coveting something else. God takes us where there's no water to release that.

So how do we get through it? A couple of ways that have been helpful to me is to learn how to pray. You need to learn how to pray. What does the Bible say? Be anxious for nothing, but instead by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God. And the answer is this: you receive the peace of God. He still might die. He still might be paralyzed. You still might lose the baby, but the peace of God that surpasses understanding will guard your heart and mind. Learn how to pray.

Here's something else that's been helpful to me. I don't know if this is a good application or not, but I have found it helpful to think through hard providences and to go do something. Don't sit there. If you sit there and stare, if you sit there and brood, you get inside your own head and make it worse. Get up and go for a walk. Go climb a tree or something if you're young enough. We are created to actually be in action. If you can do it, go do that.

What else? Here's something that I found helpful, number three. Find someone to serve. Part of our issue, why the anxiety weighs so heavy, is we think so much about ourselves. It's good for you to turn your attention outward to see someone who is in trouble and hurting and needs ministry. You go and serve that person, and your eyes get off of your difficulties and on being used by God.

William Cooper, a great hymn writer from another age, he and John Newton have lots of hymns that they wrote. We actually toured his house when we were over there. His biography, you can find it online, one of the places you can go, if you'd like to listen to things, is the Desiring God website. John Piper does biographies in his messages; all kinds of biographies of all kinds of people that have walked through trouble. He uses that to teach lessons. He does one on William Cooper, and he talks about his struggle. William Cooper wrote the song, God moves in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps on the sea and rides on the storm. That song's famous, but there's one line that seems to be forgotten. Let me read it to you. Deep and unsearchable minds of never-failing skill, God treasures up his bright designs,

and he works his sovereign will. God is molding you; God is refining you; God is training you; God is teaching you. Just because it's a hard providence doesn't mean it's not providence. That's one thing I've learned. Let me give you a second thing you might get from the passage, number two.

It's good to know your limits

So, after I wrote the outline, I had a little bit of preacher's remorse. I wish I'd done it better. Then I said, it's good to know your limits. Then I thought, you know what, I need to put a comma there. So, I woke up this morning and put a comma in there. It's good to know your limits and get some rest for your soul. Your soul needs rest. Why did I say that? Because in verses two and three, you hear the change in Moses' voice. You hear the tone changing, and the people are getting to him. I mean, a lot of you here, if you have children, you've been there. Or you've got an irritating spouse, you've been there. People are getting on your nerves, and it's happening to Moses.

At the end of Numbers, in Numbers chapter 20, when Miriam dies, and the people are grumbling, and the situation gets away from him, and he sins, and God keeps Moses from going into the Promised Land. Now, if Moses could fall over into that, so can you. So, what can you do before you get to the breaking point? Let me just offer a couple of practical suggestions. One is that you need to take a day. If you can do it, if you can afford it, take a day, get away from whatever it is that's on you. Just get away from it for a minute, even if it's just for a minute.

The second thing is you need to remember the great deeds of God, the great things that he's done. Now, these last six months, or these last two years, it's not the sum total of what God has done. In the last 10 years, think of all God has done. If you have an enemy that maybe is a part of this, someone that you just can't get past, you pray. What does Jesus say? Pray for your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Something that's helped me is to preach and pray Psalm 23. Preach Psalm 23 to yourself, to your own soul. This is what David did. He spoke to his own soul. And then pray the Psalm. It's good for you to know your limits and get rest for your soul. You are not Superman or Superwoman. I'm going to give you a third application, number three.

No matter what, don't panic

Panic, it's what you see in verse 2. You see it again in verse 4. Moses is panicking now. Listen to his prayer in verse 2. In verse 2, the people quarreled with Moses and said, give us water to drink. Listen to his argument, I should say. *And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"* And then comes the prayer in verse 4. ⁴ *So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."* There is a sense of being self-absorbed and exaggerating the problem. This somehow became less about God and more about Moses. Be careful that you don't find yourself in that category because that's going to lead to panic. What do you do then? What do you do? Here are a couple of suggestions. If you can learn to do it, maybe say it out loud, not where people can hear you, but somewhere where you can say it out loud, where you are. Lord, I turn all of this over to you. I have tried to do it on my own. I have tried to take control. Please take this. Turn it completely over to the Lord and leave it there. Trust that God is a good father who will look after his child, that's you. He is going to do what is going to be best for his glory and your good.

If that's not helpful, then if you are philosophical, think like this. Think on the sovereignty of God. Explore in your mind what does it mean for God to be in absolute control. We don't mean that God is in control in that he made the clock, wound it up, and is just letting it run. We mean that God is in it, like with his people. He took them there. So what does that mean? Does that mean you can trust where you are in life? Or what's helped me sometimes is to think of this situation in light of eternity. So if you are redeemed by Christ, you put your faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, you've been saved, the Holy Spirit awakened your heart to see, and you believe God will save you by what Christ has done on the cross, you now are a child of God, a son or a daughter of God. If that's the case, you live for eternity. This is just a scratch. Just 70, 80, maybe 90 years on earth is just a blip in eternity. So, you think about the last 5 years or 10 years or six months, or however long it's been that you've been walking through something. Think of this in light of eternity. It's helped me not to panic. Let me give you a fourth thing, number four.

Don't be the Lone Ranger

I maybe should have found a better way to say this because on the way here, someone sent me a picture. You could do all kinds of stuff with whatever you do on the internet, and they have now a picture of me in a Lone Ranger suit and a mask. So maybe I should find a better way to say it. But you get the point. When I say Lone Ranger, here's what I mean. You'll notice him in verse 5. Notice what God tells Moses. God tells him, you're not by yourself in this. Verse 5, *⁵And 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.* We're going to do this in public in front of everyone. You go and get some of the elders, people you can trust to go with you, and take the staff. It's the presence that symbolizes the presence of the Lord. So, what is the practical application? What do we need to do? You need to make sure you are enlisting brothers and sisters into your life. Watch out if you're an introvert. Don't use that as an excuse. Don't say, I'm an introvert and want to be left alone. It's true. You do need some time alone. That's fine. We're not going to leave you alone. You're part of the body of Christ, a family now. There's formal and informal accountability. We do it with community groups. D-groups will structure it so that there are men and women speaking into our lives. You also have, if you come to a Baptist church, you get some informal accountability. You sit in the exact same spot that you sat in last week. And the good thing about that is somebody that usually sits there, when they aren't here, and then they show back up the following Sunday, you are saying to them, where were you last week? That's accountability right there. Accountability, by the way, needs to be positive, not accusative. Positive, but it also needs to be intrusive. Don't be afraid to ask a question. Where were you last week?

Okay, so enlist brothers and sisters into your life. Another way is just recall, we need to recall God's previous faithfulness and provision. If you can't think of anything, reflect back on how God saved you. You walk through your testimony. Tell your story, who you were before you became a Christian. Don't glamorize your sin. Don't stay there too long because it's terrible. Go quickly to the cross and what God has done for you at the cross. Think about Jesus dying in your place at the cross. Think about the victorious resurrection. You tell how you put your faith in Christ and Christ alone and what He has done, how you were converted, changed, and then what God has done in your life since then. I want to make sure that you understand you are not, you don't need to, God has not designed you to walk in this world by yourself. I'm going to give you a fifth one, number five.

Get a handle on the gospel of grace

You need to understand the gospel of grace, that you are saved by God's grace. It's a gift. You are saved by God's grace through your faith, you trusting that only Christ will save you, his life, death, and resurrection. Now, I get that from verse 6 because Paul did this. So you read the passage in verse 6. *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. So how do we find the gospel there? Well, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 that the rock was Christ. How? Well, let me take a run at it. Like the rock, Christ was struck with divine judgment. There at the cross, Jesus Christ bore the curse for our sin, and God struck him with the rod of justice. That's what Isaiah said. He was pierced through for our transgressions, that by his stripes we are healed. And as the rock flowed with water, so Christ is the water of life. What did Jesus say in John chapter 4? Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never thirst again. Or in John chapter 7, on the great day, the last day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried with a loud voice, 'If any man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, from his inmost being will flow rivers of living water.' It's the gospel. You see, the gospel is that God is a holy Creator who created you in his image. The image of God in your life has been so covered and disfigured by your sin that it's hard to even see it anymore. You are not just far from God. You are dead in sin. But God doesn't leave you there. Although under condemnation and an enemy of God, God comes after you. He loves his enemies. He comes to you in Jesus. Jesus, who is fully God and fully man, lives a righteous life. Adam blew it. Jesus fixed it. Jesus kept every intention of God the Father as a human. And there at the cross, he then trades, he gives you the righteousness he earned and takes the filthiness of your sin, all of that sin, every bit of it. Just see it in your mind, Christ taking it on the cross, and see in your mind you're putting on this brilliant white garment of righteousness when you trust that he did that for you. It's the gospel. And the gospel is that Christ will save any of you. He will cleanse you; he will nourish you, he will save you. That's a really good place to stop, but there's one more verse I want to pick up before we go. Just let me walk by and point it out to you. Verse 7, this is the last point, and maybe this is designed for most young men from 13 or 14 to about 24 or 25. It takes us a long time to get our minds formed right. So, here's the sixth point for you, son.

You don't have to learn every lesson the hard way

Some of them you will learn the hard way. Running into something, you understand it hurts, and you don't do that again. Or you can stand and watch somebody else do it. See, that it was dumb for them to do, and you don't do it. Here's where I get that. Down in verse 7, this is a failure. Like, there's nothing good about this. It's gone poorly. In fact, you get the double bad name down at the very bottom. This is Complainville and Testville. Just put the two together. There are two towns merged, and they're both bad. Why is this here? Paul says this is here to teach us something. You don't have to learn the lesson by living a terrible life. You don't have to learn by being a complainer and testing God yourself. This was written here for you to know. I don't need to do that. You see, God is teaching you today so that you can flourish tomorrow. That flourishing begins with your repentance and trust in Jesus Christ.

(Pastor prays)