

Exodus 17 is not ultimately a story about thirst—it’s a story about the heart.

Israel’s grumbling in the wilderness reveals a relational posture toward God. Grumbling exposes a heart of distrust, a craving for control, and a reach for idols. What begins as complaint soon escalates into accusation and demand: *“Give us water to drink.”* Lament turns into entitlement.

Though their anger is aimed at Moses, Scripture names the real issue clearly: *“They tested the LORD.”* Israel places God on trial, demanding proof of His presence and questioning His goodness—*“Is the Lord among us or not?”* They are no longer voicing need; they are saying, *“We will not trust You unless You meet our demands.”*

This is not just Israel’s problem—it is ours. A demanding attitude flows from a self-exalting heart that turns God and others into a means to an end. It is the same old lie we bought into in the garden of Eden resurfacing in the wilderness: *I know better than God—life should revolve around me and what I think is best.* And if that heart issue is not exposed—if we do not see our need for a change of heart—we will keep putting God and others on trial whenever life doesn’t go our way. Israel’s thirst brings this deeper issue to the surface so that something can be done about it.

The surprise of Exodus 17 is how God responds. He does not walk away in disgust or strike His people down. Instead, He takes the place of the guilty. God stands before the rock where judgment should fall. The rock is struck, and life-giving water flows. Grace flows from the place where judgment was deserved.

Paul tells us this Rock was Christ. Jesus is the true Rock—struck for our unbelief, our grumbling, and our demanding hearts. On the cross, Jesus bears the blow of our accusations and gives life to those who do not deserve it. This is the only cure for a demanding heart.

The solution is not trying harder or ignoring the problem. The solution is a radical recognition of our own self-centeredness and a turning to the gospel of grace—which frees us from bondage to our self-serving purposes and delivers us from our impossible demands. God uses the wilderness to expose our hearts and lead us to the Cross.

So whatever wilderness you’re in today—confusion, strained relationships, financial pressure, exhaustion, or disappointment—you are not in a place where God has left you; the wilderness is the place where God is forming you. The wilderness has a way of exposing our hearts so God can shape them and change them.

Often, that exposure shows up in our responses to leaders, parents, teachers, and bosses. The way others lead is not our biggest problem; the deeper issue is how we respond when they don’t act the way we want, don’t give us what we want, or don’t deliver it when we want it. Our responses reveal our hearts.

How many times have we shown up in life with a demanding heart toward God and others?

A demanding heart does not flow from the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God allows us to experience the wilderness, not to beat us down, but to help us see our need for a change of heart. The thirst of the wilderness is an invitation to meet Jesus at the foot of the cross—to drink deeply of His grace, turn from our sin, to become more like Him, and to live as his unique family that reveals God’s wisdom in this world.

The wilderness is where we meet Jesus and discover that He is full of grace and truth.

Questions to discuss with others:

1. How has God used past ‘wilderness experiences’ and conflict to expose your need for a change of heart?
2. How does seeing Jesus as the Rock who was struck for you change the way you respond to difficult people or unmet expectations?
3. What step of repentance and belief is God inviting you to take today?