

Foreshadows of the Cross
Part 4 – Putting God on Trial
Exodus 17:1-7

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 15, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?”

³But the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

⁴So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”

⁵The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exodus 17:1-7, NRSVUE)



I’m not a great cook, and I don’t much like to cook. My wife, however, is a fantastic cook. So she does most of the cooking, and I wash most of the dishes. It’s a very sustainable arrangement. For over 30 years now, night after night I just show up to an amazing meal. In fact, if I walk into the kitchen tonight around 5:30 and nothing is happening, I don’t wonder to myself, “I think Esther forgot. I think I’m on my own tonight. She probably already made herself dinner, ate it alone, and went on her way!” No, that’s never what I think. When somebody is consistently faithful, you have faith that they will come through again, even when there are not immediate signs that they will do so.

As faithful and dependable as my wife is, the Lord is even more so. A little context. When we meet the Israelites here in Exodus 17 they have quite a story to tell of God’s faithfulness. Just a few months beforehand they were slaves in Egypt, where they had been oppressed for hundreds of years. But then God sent Moses to deliver them. God broke Pharaoh’s will through a series of ten supernatural plagues. The Israelites witnessed them all, from the Nile River turning to blood, to the infestation of frogs and flies, all the way to the Passover when every firstborn Egyptian was killed while all the firstborn of Israel survived. God’s power and faithfulness to his people was on full display.

But it didn’t end there. When Pharaoh finally relented and let the Israelites go, the Lord parted the Red Sea in half so that they could escape, and then closed it up again when the pursuing Egyptian army gave chase. When the people made it into the wilderness on the other side, the only water they could find to drink was bitter. The people griped about it to Moses, and in response the Lord miraculously transformed the water from bitter to sweet. When food was in short supply the people complained again. They even wished they were back as slaves in Egypt, where at least they had food to eat. In response, the Lord made bread fall from the sky, manna as he called it. Then he sent quails for protein. Every day a buffet from heaven was provided for them in a place where there was no food.

It’s not as if all these things took place years and years before we meet Israel in Exodus 17. These are recent events, all within the last few months. God’s track record of faithful provision is fresh in their memories. So you would think that when God then leads them on to the next stage of their journey into the wilderness of Sin, that when they realized that once again there was no water to drink, that they would have expected the Lord to provide just as he had before. It’s a test. The Lord is testing them to see if they will trust him. And I think it’s fair to say that it’s a relatively easy test. All they really have to do is remember.

To be clear, God has a habit of testing his people. We saw that last week in the test that God gave to

Abraham.¹ I hope you will agree that it's right that God tests us. After all, we do the same with our own children! Right?² Our job as parents is to raise children towards independence. So good parents don't spoon feed everything to their kids. At some point you begin to test them, to put them in situations where they have to navigate life on their own. It starts with letting them learn to walk by falling down, and goes all the way until you launch them into adulthood. The parent who never tests her children is the parent who fails to equip her children for life.

God's tests his children too, though with a slightly different goal in mind. God tests his people not to make them independent, but to make them dependent on him. The text is clear here that the Lord deliberately leads the Israelites into a wilderness where there is no water.² This is typical. God regularly takes us to places in life where there is no human way out, and then waits to see if we will trust *him* to make a way forward. Job 1:21 declares, "**The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.**" Indeed. And sometimes the Lord takes away to see if we have been paying attention to his faithfulness all along the way, at least enough to trust that somehow we will see him be faithful and give once again.

Well, maybe because amnesia has set in, the Israelites fail the test. Immediately they quarrel with Moses, saying, "**Give us water to drink.**" The word "quarrel" here is a bit misleading. It gives the impression that the people entered into a back and forth heated argument with Moses. That's not what happened. The Hebrew word actually refers to an act of formal litigation. In other words, the people are putting Moses on trial, wanting to convict him for failing to provide for them,³ Does that seem odd to you? Whose responsibility is it to provide water for the people? It's not Moses. How is Moses going to manufacture water in a desert?

This sort of thing happens all the time. Life doesn't go well, or as planned. Hardship comes. We don't get what we want, or even what we need. So we get angry. Truth be told, we get angry with God. We want to quarrel with heaven, "Why have you allowed this to happen, or kept this from happening?" But not everybody wants to take their complaint straight to God. That's a bold step to accuse God and put God on trial. So instead, we tend to go after God's representatives. As a pastor I've been the recipient of this. To be honest, I've also been the perpetrator of this kind of behavior. We all have. Ask yourself, when have I been angry with God about how life has turned out,

but instead of going to God with my anger I take it out on somebody else? I'm sure a therapist could have a field day with this in my life!

Listen to me. Essentially what is happening here is that the people don't trust God. To be clear, it's not that they doubt God's competence. Very few people actually do that. If you believe in God, as these people did, you typically believe that God *can* do whatever God wants to do. You don't doubt God's power, or knowledge, or authority. What you doubt is God's goodness, and perhaps his love. Even though God had already provided for them time and time again, now that the circumstances have changed, they aren't certain that God, who could provide water if he wanted to provide water, will actually do so. Maybe God doesn't really care. Or maybe he isn't even paying attention. Why would he lead us to this place where when he knows that there is no water!

Commentator J.A. Motyer points out that what God is wanting in this simple test is for the people to remember and, in doing so, display a childlike trust in him, that he is a God who does all things well, that even though they may not understand how things will work out, their God has a track record of always making sure things do work out. But they won't do it. Instead, they demand God prove his worth all over again. If he does, if he gets them out of this mess, then perhaps they will consider believing in him. But in the meantime, they will suspend faith and obedience.

Sometimes the word 'testing' in the Bible is translated 'tempting.' That's what the people are doing. They are tempting God, which is deeply sinful. It's like me going into the kitchen tonight after 34 years of my wife faithfully preparing dinner every night and seeing her chopping vegetables and stirring the pot on the stove and accusing her aloud, "Are we going to have dinner tonight or what?" It's an insult. They are refusing to wait for God to take care of them in his way, and instead trying to manipulate him into getting something out of him earlier than he is ready to give it, or in some greater quantity than he will determine is needed. In the very last verse of the passage we see this offensive rebellion reach a disturbing climax when they ask, "**Is the Lord among us or not?**" This is outrageously unfaithful.⁴

Even Moses fails the test. In the last chapter, when the people grumble against Moses because there is no food, he defends the Lord and reassures Israel that the Lord will provide.⁵ Not here. Here he lets the people's

¹ See Genesis 22:1-19.

² I think of Proverbs 20:24, "**All our steps are ordered by the Lord; how then can we understand our own ways?**" Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³ <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7378.htm>

⁴ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 181-182.

⁵ See Exodus 16:6-8

accusation put him on the defensive. He cries out to the Lord, **“What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”** After all the Lord has done to provide for him and protect him, he’s doubting the Lord’s goodness, afraid that God might stand by as the people execute him in the desert. Later on when this event is remembered, the scriptures don’t just remember it as Israel’s rebellion, but Moses’ rebellion as well. In Deuteronomy 32:51, the Lord accuses Moses, saying, **“...you broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.”**⁶

This is a good place to pause and see if we can humbly acknowledge that it’s not just Israel, and it’s not just Moses, it’s us as well. This is the human condition all the way back to the beginning, all of us eventually and consistently failing to trust that God is good and can be trusted. It’s so easy to think that it is just others who have this problem. All of us have this problem.

Pastor Tim Keller, in his commentary on this passage, points to a play called *The Sign of Jonah* written in 1960 by a German Lutheran pastor named Guenter Rutenborn. The play looks back on the unspeakable evil committed by the Nazis in World War II and asks the question, “Who’s to blame?” In the play, it’s the German people who are first accused of these atrocities, but they respond in their defense, “It’s not our fault. We were just taking orders. The people above us, they are the ones to blame.” So then the next level up is brought in and accused. And do you know what they say? “Not me. I was just taking orders too. The fault is with the next level up.” And on and on it goes until everybody in the play realizes that the one to blame is the one at the very top. God is the one to blame. God should be the one on trial here. God could have stopped all this. Why didn’t he? How can anybody believe in a God who would allow such evil and suffering in the world?⁷

Come to think of it, how could anybody trust in a God who deliberately leads his people into a valley where there is no water to drink? How could anybody trust in a God who allows cancer to fatally infect the body of a person with so much life ahead of him, or allows a good marriage to disintegrate, or refuses to help me find a soulmate, or appears silent in response to my constant tears, or allows evil people to amass power in the world and unleash unspeakable destruction against the innocent?

You fill in the blank. What’s your complaint?

So what, Lord, if you’ve been faithful all these years in so many countless ways, things are different now and I need you to prove to me your worth all over again. Until you do, until you get me out of this mess, I will withhold my trust, and certainly withhold my obedience. In the end, everybody puts God on trial. This is the original sin in the Garden of Eden, our original parents listening to the lie that the God who had just provided them with everything they could ever need, most of all his very presence, could not be trusted to be good. God is keeping something from us! And we have been believing the lie ever since, putting God on trial over and over again.

God has a problem here. What does he do with his people? On one hand, he loves Israel, and Moses as their leader. Think of the lengths to which he has already gone to deliver them. He is a God of mercy and compassion and kindness, and has demonstrated these qualities consistently. But on the other hand, he is also a God of justice and righteousness. And so how can the Lord just look past the deeply offensive rebellion that is taking place before him, his very people putting him on trial? Do you see the problem? As one writer put it, “How can God uphold the righteousness of his name while [at the same time] showing mercy to God-belittling, God-despising sinners?”⁸ Can you see how you would be faced with a similar problem if somebody you deeply loved did something deeply offensive towards you, betrayed you willfully and then blamed you for it all? It’s hard to just set aside your love. But neither can just look past the offense.

So how does the Lord handle the problem? In verse 5 he says, **“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.’”** Don’t you see what’s going on here? The people want to put God on trial and God, instead of lashing out in ways that would have been totally appropriate, allows them to do so. God tells them to go ahead and hold a trial. Moses is told to take the staff, the same staff which he used to pass judgment on Pharaoh. You see, a staff or rod like this was a symbol of judgment and discipline. Psalm 2 is a psalm of judgment against rebellious nations. In that Psalm God’s servant is told to punish rebellious nations: **“You**

⁶ I’m indebted to Douglas K. Stuart for this insight, *The New American Commentary: Exodus*, Volume 2 (B&H Publishing, 2006), 390.

⁷ Timothy Keller, “The Judgment on Sin,” *Gospel in Life*, October 20, 2025. Listen at <https://podcast.gospelinlife.com/e/the-judgment-on-sin/>

⁸ John Piper, “Water from the Rock for Undeserving People,” *Desiring God*, June 17, 2022. Read or watch online at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/water-from-the-rock-for-undeserving-people>

shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."⁹ Then there's that famous wisdom in Proverbs 13:24, **"Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them."**¹⁰ One of the purposes of a rod in those days was to punish wayward children, slaves, fools, or rebels.¹¹ Civil rulers or governors held the rod so that they could beat offenders who were tried and found guilty.

Who's holding the rod? It's Moses. He's not the one on trial, though he should be. The Israelites are also not on trial, though they definitely should be. It's God. God puts himself on trial. This is made clear when God tells Moses that he will *stand* before him and the people on the rock. Even in a court of law today, who is it that stands when the sentence is read? It's the defendant. Nowhere in the rest of the Bible does God stand before the people. The King doesn't stand before the people; the people stand before the King. Not here. Moses must have been astonished. God allows himself to stand on trial though he is the only innocent party present, and then puts the rod of judgment in Moses' hands and asks him to do the unthinkable. He tells Moses to strike the rock, to declare God to be the guilty one and then bring the judgment down on God.

Are you starting to make the connection, the same connection we've been making week after week in this sermon series? Am I stretching the story to far, reading in things here that were never intended? Maybe. But if I am, I'm in good company. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he's warning the rebellious church of his day that God's judgment is real. In chapter 10 he points back to Israel, and to this very scene from Exodus 17. He tells us there what the text here doesn't tell us, but what we assume happened next. Paul tells us that Moses struck the rock and that water flowed from the rock and quenched the thirst of the people. Then he says plainly, **"The rock was Christ."**¹²

Tim Keller points out that at the end of the *Sign of Jonah* a remarkable thing happens, a completely unexpected twist. After everybody, unwilling to own the harsh truth of their own sin and evil rebellion, unfairly agrees that God instead is the one to blame for the horrors which have occurred, they decide to sentence God to death. Their sentence takes this form: "Let God become a human being. Let him become a homeless person. Let him become a wanderer on the

earth. Let him lose a son. Let him die, and when he dies let him be ridiculed and disgraced."

I was working on this message this week on the very day when this passage showed up in our daily readings from Mark's Gospel. In Mark 15 here is Jesus, the only innocent one to ever live, standing in the place of judgment among sinners. Mark records this,

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.¹³

Can't you see that this scene in the waterless desert, just like every last scene in the Old Testament, ultimately points us to Christ. Was God judged guilty that day in the wilderness of Sin? Yes. Though he was the only innocent one present, he was the one who received a guilty sentence, a sentence of death. Was the sentence carried out that day? No, not that day. Moses struck the rock with the rod and we can assume that water flowed out to quench the thirst of the people. Nobody died that day. It wasn't until many years later when the sentence was eventually carried out. And when the Rock of Ages was struck on the cross and the righteous Son of God paid the price for a terribly wicked and rebellious world, water flowed out once again. I can't help but think of Jesus' words to the thirsty crowds in Jerusalem, **"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink."**¹⁴ Earlier he said to the thirsty Samaritan woman at the well, **"Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."**¹⁵

Do you see how God solves the problem before him? He cannot set aside his love and compassion. God is, in fact, love by nature. He can do nothing other than love. But God also cannot set aside his justice and righteousness. He cannot turn away and ignore the

⁹ Psalm 2:9

¹⁰ This carries over into the New Testament. See, for example, Paul's teaching in 1st Corinthians 4:21 when he is rebuking the Corinthians church – **"What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick or with love in a spirit of gentleness?"**

¹¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, edited by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III (InterVarsity Press, 1998), 734. Note that the rod can also be used as an instrument of comfort and protection.

Think of Psalm 23:4 – **"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."**

¹² 1st Corinthians 10:4.

¹³ Mark 15:16-20 (New International Version).

¹⁴ John 7:37-38.

¹⁵ John 4:14

wretched sin before him in his people. So God does what nobody would have ever expected God to do. He passes judgment on the sin of his people and then steps himself into the place of judgment and allows the rod to be brought down on himself. At the cross, both the love of God and the justice of God are fully poured out and fully satisfied.

I do not understand the ways of God. I certainly do not understand the mind of God. I don't expect I ever will, at least in this lifetime. Though I don't understand it, however, I have come to realize that the Lord will continue to lead us into places of testing, into proverbial valleys where there is no water to drink, into circumstances in life where there is no human way out. Some of you are in such a place even now. In those places the ancient temptation will come, the temptation to believe that God cannot be trusted. If we are honest, some of us today are not so sure that God can be trusted.

It's instructive that this story does not end in resolution. Did you notice that? The people don't repent. Faith is not reawakened. In fact, the scene ends with the Israelites wondering if God is even present. We aren't even told that the water flows from the rock. Though we can assume it did, we don't get to see it happen. And so when Moses names the place, he doesn't name it "The Lord Provides." He names it instead Massah, which means "testing", and Meribah, which means "quarreling." He names it after the failure of the people to trust that God is good.

This has led some to suggest that this place and this story are therefore meant to stand as a timeless memorial to the coming generations that says, "Don't do that! Don't be like them! Trust him! Trust him! Remember! Remember!"¹⁶ Remember that there is nothing in all creation, not even your own sin and failure to trust God, that will stand in the way of the Lord faithfully demonstrating that he is good, and loving, and gracious, and willing to go to any lengths to prove it. You do not see a way forward. You do not see how the deep thirst in your soul will ever be quenched. Trust him anyway. Remember he is trustworthy. Remember that he has even given himself to quench that thirst, and in time you will see him do so in ways you cannot now imagine are possible.

I end with these words from Psalm 95, which essentially make this same plea:

**O come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture**

¹⁶ I'm borrowing here from John Piper.

and the sheep of his hand.

**O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me
and put me to the proof, though they had
seen my work.¹⁷**

Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Exodus 17:1-7 again. What do you notice here? What stands out to you?
2. After all that the Lord had recently done to deliver his people Israel when there didn't seem to be a way out, how is it that they so quickly lose faith when the next obstacle comes up here in the wilderness of Sin? Are their complaints valid?
3. When was a time in your life when you realized God had allowed you to come to a place where you were stuck with no way forward? How did you respond?
4. The Israelites put God on trial here, wanting him to prove to them that he is good and trustworthy. Do you/we do the same thing? When have you come to a point in your life when you questioned whether God could be trusted?
5. Why does God allow himself to be put on trial?
6. In referring back to this passage, Paul declares in 1st Corinthians 10:4, "**The rock was Christ.**" Is he right? How can this be?
7. Is God good? Whatever your answer, how can you be sure you are right? And if we believe that God is good, how can we make sure we don't forget this is the case?
8. What is one thing you believe that Christ is teaching you here through this message? How will that change the way you think or live?

Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.



Can we trust God? Can we trust that everything God does is good? What makes us believe that God is good?

