

Life Lesson #2

Exodus 17:1-7

There is water in the rock. If you take nothing else home with you from today, I hope you will remember that: there is water in the rock. When the point comes in your life that you find yourself out in the bone-dry wilderness, and maybe you thought your life had been hard before, only now you know for sure what impossible looks like, what it feels like to know that you aren't going to make it out in one piece, remember: there is water in the rock. God will give you what you need to survive.

But that is only part of the message of this story. God will provide, yes, God will give you the very thing that you need to make it, and quite probably from the most unlikely source imaginable, but the story pushes us out of our comfort zone before we can arrive at that comforting conclusion.

I have an idea that even if the Israelites had been able to figure out God was going to give them water,

and that God was going to give them water out of a rock,

and that God was going to give them water out of that rock

about 200 yards up the path on the left side and kind of shaped like the state

of Indiana if you cocked your head to the right about 35 degrees,

and even if they gathered round that rock and stared real hard at it,

water still wouldn't have just come flowing out of it. God was going to provide, but it wasn't as simple as that.

At the very end of the story it says that one of the names they gave this place was Massah, because they had tested God there. What it doesn't say is that God had tested them, too. But it is implied. Look at what it does say explicitly: God led them to this place. God led them to this place where there was no water, the one thing they need in order to survive. They did have food, the manna and quail. That was another test, or maybe that was just the quiz, and this was the chapter test: okay, so you know now that God will give you food, but what about water? Before you were just hungry, but now, if you don't have water, you won't be able to make it; you'll die out here. Now what?

When I graded ordination exams a long time ago they encouraged us not to say things like, *This was the dumbest response to this question I have read all day*, or, *You clearly have no better grasp of this subject matter than my three-year-old daughter does*, but to write more diplomatic responses to bad papers like, *This paper would have been stronger if...*

So the first thing that the Israelites might have seen on their grade sheet was, *This examiner believes that the candidates would have demonstrated a stronger response if they had not panicked or threatened to dismember their leader, but trusted that somehow, God would come to their aid and secure the necessary commodities for survival*. The diplomatic way of saying that they had completely failed the test, in case they couldn't tell by the names they gave the place – complaint and test. Not, *The Lord Provides*, or *God is Good*.

But here's the thing – even if they had believed that God was going to come to their aid, that would only have brought their grade up to a 'C'. That's what I mean when I said that they could have gathered around the rock and sung Pass it On, and nothing would have happened. The parameters of the test don't seem to indicate that the appropriate response is that blind trust on the part of the people will cause God to cough up whatever it is that they need at that moment.

So that takes us back to the story itself. God brings the Israelites out of Egypt to this dry place. The one thing they needed to live wasn't there. He lets them get thirsty. Then concerned. Then a bit desperate. The test? Here's my hunch: God was waiting for them to do something. How would they respond?

There are a lot of wrong answers if it was a multiple choice question. A) Whine and complain a lot. B) Threaten to mutiny. C) Be resourceful and look for alternative sources of water, like edible plants or squeezing the juice out of lizards or something. And then there is the right answer, D), Ask God for help. Cry out. Let God know that you are in trouble and need a little help down here. Show that you have reached your limits and know that there is nothing you can do to get yourself out of this one, but you know that God can.

Actually, this isn't the chapter test, this is the mid-term. Didn't they already go over this back in Egypt? Didn't they learn then that, when they get their backs up against the wall and cry out in desperation, that God hears them and comes to their aid? Didn't they see first-hand already that something as impossible to them as an oppressive government or a life-threatening journey through the wilderness is mere child's play to God? Nothing is impossible for God! But to just go around expecting that God will bail you out is a bit presumptuous. Arrogant. It makes you the master and God the servant.

There is water in the rock. Or somewhere out there. But we have to ask. Cry out. Admit our need, admit our helplessness, admit that God and only God has the power to save us. We need help. I think that's the real test here. It really isn't hard for us to go around saying that we know that God can do anything, that God could make water come out of that rock if he wanted to. The hard part, for us, is asking for help. Getting to that point where we know we are in trouble and we can't save ourselves, and we need God to come down and rescue us.

That's what this test is really all about – not, What do we know about God and what God can do? but Do we really understand just how dependent we are on God, and are we willing to admit it – to ourselves, to each other, to God? Can we humble ourselves and ask for help?

When we are bone dry and completely unable to go one more day,
when the challenges of life are too much for us,
when everything we love and value looks like it is about to be taken away from us,
what are we going to do? complain and whine? pick a fight with life and anyone who crosses us? try extra hard to survive on our own? Or D), cry out.

This isn't a test about what we learned in Sunday School, what we easily say with our brain and our mouths that we believe. It's a test of what our hearts believe, and how we are willing to act on it.

Now, don't get hung up on the testing part, please. The next time someone you love is very ill, or the stress in your life takes you to the breaking point, don't waste the time and energy asking yourself if this is God testing you. You have never, and will never hear me say that God causes your life to fall apart to see what you are made of. But life does fall apart sometimes. We are pushed to our limits sometimes, and beyond them. That's life. Don't worry about whether God did this to you. Just think about how you are going to respond. Do you know that God will give you what you need to survive? Great. You are half way there. Now ask. Cry out, like the Israelites did when they were in Egypt. Let God (and your friends) know that you are backed into a corner or at the end of your rope or squeezed dry, whatever expression you want to use. But you need help. Because help is there, whenever you ask for it.

There is water in the rock. Remember that. But remember to ask for it.