

UNWAVERING FAITH

EXODUS 17:1-7

Rev. Dr. Philip Parker

As the people of Israel began their journey towards the Mountain of God, one of the first things that they discovered is that there are no grocery stores in the desert. There was precious little to eat in that wilderness and almost no water at all. And what water they did find was bitter. Once again they started to complain and talk about how good life had been back in Egypt. Maybe slavery wasn't so bad after all. So once again the Lord had to come to their rescue. The bitter water became sweet when some special ingredients were added and not too long thereafter they came to the springs of Elim where there was plenty of great tasting water. Only now the Israelites complained of being hungry. They reminisced about all of the good things they had had to eat in Egypt. And so in response God provided bread, called manna, that appeared each morning. And then, that very evening while they were still complaining, great flocks of quail descended upon the camp. It was like fried chicken and biscuits at Bojangles. You would have thought that by this time they would have been ready to embrace the Lord with an unwavering faith. Hadn't He taken care of everything they needed thus far?

Well not exactly, because it can get real dry in the desert. I for one am well aware of the danger of dehydration when you're in an extremely hot environment. Years ago, I was heading down the trail on the last day of our backpacking trip at the Boy Scout camp in New Mexico called Philmont. It was really hot and my canteen was really empty. I literally stumbled into the base camp and was about to collapse until I saw a drink machine sitting in an alcove underneath one of the buildings. I stumbled over, put some coins in the machine, and enjoyed the coldest and best Pepsi that I had ever tasted. In fact, I had two of them.

And just in case you're not aware of this, believe it or not, the human body is mostly water. When a baby is born that child's body is 90 percent water. That's why the pediatrician told us when our first child was born that babies are like swamps. They need to be well watered. Even as adults our physical bodies are composed of 70 percent water, and if that percentage drops below 50 percent, we're out of here. So drink lots of water. It's good for you. And perhaps that's what the Israelites were talking about when they once again faced the problem of finding water in the desert. You might have thought, however, that they would have gone about the request a little differently, seeing that the Lord had already provided food and water for them on at least one other occasion. Nevertheless, they were back to complaining again in Exodus 17:1-7. They cried out to Moses, "Give us water to drink." Even when Moses reminded them that they were once again putting the Lord to the test, the people refused to be quiet. In fact, things got so bad that Moses said to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."

Thankfully, God came to their rescue once again. He said, "Walk ahead of the people along with some of the elders to the rock at the foot of Horeb. Then take your staff, the one with which you struck the Nile, and hit the rock. I will be there with you. Water will come gushing out of that rock for all the people to drink." So that's what Moses did and that's what happened. The people had water to drink for themselves and even their livestock. But the story doesn't end quite there. Moses, I suspect, was more than a little perturbed. How many times had the people of Israel started complaining and stopped believing that the Lord would take care of them? In spite of all that God

had done for them, it was not unwavering faith that they possessed but rather a “wishy washy” faith that emerged every time they faced a difficulty. So Moses named that place “Massah and Meribah,” because the people of Israel had once again tested the God, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not,” and then on top of that had started quarrelling with Him.

But I wonder, is there any “Massah,” testing, or any “Meribah,” quarrelling among God’s people today? Do we sometimes doubt that He really cares about us, and do we at times find ourselves quarrelling with Him? There are numerous passages of Scripture, especially in the book of Psalms which clearly indicate that our faith and trust in the Lord can be a bit shaky at times. For example, Psalm 10:1 reads, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” And Psalm 13:1 declares, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”

But to get a little closer to our own day and time, let me share a story with you about Catherine Marshall. She was a beloved Christian author who wrote at least one novel and numerous books about the Christian way of life. One of my favorites is her first one, a biography about her husband, the well known Presbyterian Pastor and Chaplain of the Senate, Peter Marshall. In her book, *A Man Called Peter*, she shares a story about herself. While she and her husband were living in Washington D. C. where he served as the pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Catherine contracted tuberculosis. It was a devastating illness that refused to respond to all available treatments. She was reduced to bed rest and finally to a hopeful convalescence in the home of her mother and father on the Eastern Shore in Virginia.

Even though she was a devout Christian, she wrestled with doubts about what was going on her life. Why had she been struck down with this disease? Why hadn’t she been cured? Why was there no improvement even though over a year had passed since she had been diagnosed? Where was God? Why had He not healed her? Did He not care about her and indeed her husband’s ministry? She searched Scriptures. She repented of all known sins. She did everything that she could think of to find a way out of her illness, but nothing worked. Finally, just before she left for the Eastern Shore, Peter gave her a little pamphlet on spiritual healing that he had found in his desk. She read it. It was about a missionary who had been bed ridden for eight years. This missionary had argued and complained to the Lord about her condition. Why had He not healed her so that she could return to her work as a missionary? Then in sheer desperation, she had prayed, “All right, Lord, I give in. If I am to be sick for the rest of my life, I bow to Thy will. I want Thee even more than I want health. It is for Thee to decide.” It was a prayer of faith, a prayer of submission, a prayer placing herself entirely into God’s hands. It was a prayer that resonated in Catherine’s heart and a prayer that she herself embraced.

Instead of grumbling and complaining and arguing with God, trying to come up with a way to make Him heal her, she simply submitted herself into His care. It was no longer a battle as to whether she had faith in Him to heal her. It was not a time of testing as to whether the Lord was really with her. It was just simply a matter of placing her trust in Him without any reservations or demands. She prayed, “Lord, I’ve done everything I’ve known how to do, and it hasn’t been good enough. I’m desperately weary of the struggle of trying to persuade You to give me what I want. I’m beaten, whipped, through. If You want me to be an invalid for the rest of my life, all right. Here I am. Do anything You like with me and my life.” She had come to a place in life that can best be described as unwavering faith. And it was in that place of unwavering faith

that God brought divine, miraculous healing into her life. That very night she experienced the presence of Christ at her bedside, and in the months to follow the tuberculosis gradually subsided and disappeared.

Had the Israelites responded in the same way, Moses would have probably selected another name for the place where water gushed forth from the rock. Instead of calling it "Grumbling and Testing" he may have called it "The Fountain of Faith." But the people of Israel had not yet arrived at such a spiritual summit. They were still slaves to their past, consumed by fears and doubts about their leader Moses and the God whom he served. They had seen what the Lord had done for them, but they really didn't know Him or trust Him. That's what this journey to the mountain was all about. They had been summoned into His presence to worship Him and to become His people. And that's why God had bent over backwards to forgive them for their lack of faith. Once again He had rescued them from their troubles by providing fresh, life sustaining water to slake their thirst.

But what about you and me? If we know the Lord, if we have trusted our lives into His care, should we respond like the Israelites did when they were thirsty? Should we test Him, demanding that He rescue us from our difficulties? Or is there another way, the way of unwavering faith, a total and complete reliance upon our Creator that simply declares, "Lord, I'm trusting in You no matter what!"

Paul and Silas had that kind of faith as evidenced in Acts 16:16-34. Falsely arrested, they were beaten and thrown into jail. In response it would have been all too easy to start complaining to the Lord. Here they were in this city preaching the Gospel and telling people about Jesus, and in response they end up in prison. They could have complained, "Lord, where is your hand of protection? We're trying to serve you and this is what we get for all our efforts." In other words, their fervor and faith in the Lord could have begun to wane. But that's not what happened. Chained to the walls deep down in that prison, they were praying and singing songs of praise. In spite of what they were facing, they possessed unwavering faith, the kind of faith that prompts God to do some marvelous things, like an earthquake that released them from their bondage. But even more importantly, their unwavering faith was so impressive that when the jailor realized that his prisoners had not escaped, he cried out, "What must I do to be saved." And that night he and all of his family were baptized and became Christians. Now that is truly miraculous as well as a tremendous testimony to what unwavering faith can accomplish.

It's also the kind of faith that a man by the name of Horatio Spafford discovered many years ago. He was an attorney in Chicago and was heavily invested in real estate. When the great fire of 1871 consumed much of the city he lost a fortune. To make matters worse at about that same time he lost his only son, age 4, who had succumbed to scarlet fever. Grief stricken but determined to do all that he could to help others, he poured himself into rebuilding the city and assisting the 100,000 people who were homeless. Two years later, in November of 1873, he felt that it was time for a much needed rest. He decided to take his wife and four daughters to Europe. His friends, D. L. Moody and Ira Sankey were holding evangelistic meetings in England, and he wanted to visit them and then go on a European vacation. Arriving in New York, they took passage on the French vessel, *Ville du Havre*, but at the last minute Horatio was called away on urgent business. He promised to follow on the next available steamship.

On the night of November 22, the French ocean liner was struck by another vessel and within two hours it sank. Two hundred and twenty-six people lost their lives,

including his four daughters. There were only 47 survivors, one of them his wife who sent this telegram, "Saved alone." Horatio immediately booked passage to join his wife in England. During the voyage the captain called him aside and said, "I believe we are passing over the place where the *Ville du Havre* sank." Returning to his room that night he found it hard to sleep, and finally he said to himself, "It is well, the will of God be done." Those words became the inspiration for this beloved hymn which he wrote, the first verse of which reads, "When peace like a river, Attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea bellows roll, Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, It is well, with my soul.'"

How about your soul? When difficulties and challenges come your way, like sickness, grief for the loss of loved ones, family problems, or simply that deep down thirst for meaning and purpose in life, can you declare, "It is well, it is well with my soul?" Can you hold on to God with an unwavering faith or are you tempted to cry out with the ancient Israelites, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

In those times and all of us will face them, we need help from on high. We need something that will slake our thirst, restore our faith, and create within us a sense of well-being and peace, even though we do not know what the future holds in store for us. We need the life giving presence of the Lord. That's what the Psalmist was talking about when he wrote, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." And that's what Jesus was talking about when He said, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37-38). Those streams are God's presence issuing forth from our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, the evidence of an unwavering faith, welling up from within us as we trust our lives into the care of the Lord Jesus Christ.