

No Longer Slaves: water from the rock

We have water problems aplenty in our fair city, but the prospect of real, desperate thirst is not among them. In the desert, thirst is a constant, and death only a failed spring away. In this study we catch up with the tribes of Israel, now deep in the dry wilderness, as they arrive at a place with no water at all.

Read Exodus 17:1-4. The Lord has led the Israelites “by stages” to Rephidim, and there they camp. Faced with growing thirst, they begin to panic. The early signs are a deterioration in conversation. The Israelites demand water of Moses – as though he could deliver! Moses replies with challenges, and the Israelites in turn with accusations (v.3); anxious, Moses appeals to the Lord (v.4). When panic “triggers” us, we are no longer listening. Questions become rhetorical; we criticize and blame; anxiety spreads.

1. What drives you to panic?
2. How does panic change the way you speak and act?

We learn from a parallel account in Numbers that the situation is even worse. Read Numbers 20:7-12. There we find Moses in deep anger, speaking with dismissive contempt to God’s people then striking the rock twice. In Numbers God had told Moses to “command” the rock to yield water; his physical actions are tokens of rage.

3. What do you do when you become angry?

Return to the account in Exodus 17 and read verses 5-7. In this passage Moses is told to strike the rock (once), deploying the staff famous in Israel from its use in cursing the Nile and parting the sea. Though its use should remind Israel that God has been with them and can be depended on, verse 7 tells us they have lost perspective in their panic. Disregarding the ever-present miraculous pillar of cloud they pose the question, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Triggered and panicky they are kicked into their “limbic” brain, which feels intensely but reasons poorly. In this space they forget the good history they have with the Lord; their feelings of panic write God out of the story, quenching faith. Not surprisingly, this is said to test the Lord (verse 7).

4. How have you tested the Lord?
5. How do you go about restoring a perspective of faith when you are feeling anxious or panicked?

Although we all face times of rising panic and anxiety, such strong emotions as these are not to govern our perspectives on the situations we face, much less the choices we make. It can be hard to escape their grip, but we must surely do so, calling on the Lord to enable our choice. We test the Lord when we refuse to stand by faith, electing to trust our own emotions rather than the truth we have come to know. This generation of Israel perished in the wilderness as a consequence; Moses, surrendering to anger, is told he will not enter the promised land (Numbers 20:11-12). The consequences of a refusal to choose to trust, having known the provision of God, are real. This way of being is critiqued in Psalm 95, which remembers the episode we’ve read. Read Psalm 95:7b-11.

6. Reflecting on Israel's actions at Massah, what does it mean to "harden your heart"? In what way did they fail to "listen to [the Lord's] voice"?

The opposite way of being is a considered choice to trust the Lord, risen and present; a choice exercised even in the midst of rising panic. Read Psalm 95:6-7a. As offered here, the biblical model of trust in the constant, effective presence of the Lord is pastoral: the Lord is the shepherd, and Israel his flock. Psalm 23 is all about this. The shepherd travels with the flock, leads them to water, protects and delivers them.

Although we've focussed on the failures of Israel and of Moses, the bottom line of the story is God's provision, made once again. Read Numbers 20:11, where the miracle is simply described. And finally, read 1 Corinthians 10:4, where God's regular, miraculous provision of water to Israel has become the tradition of a rock that *followed* Israel to give water. And that rock, Paul tells us, speaking to Christians, was Christ. Christ with them, a source of life-giving water in the desert. With them, always. With us, always.

Conclude by reflecting on your history with the Lord. How has he intervened for you in times of crisis and panic? Give praise and thanks and renew your choice to trust in him, whatever you face in years to come.