

Exodus 17:1-7 Then all the congregation of the children of Israel set out on their journey from the Wilderness of Sin, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped in Rephidim; but *there was* no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people contended with Moses, and said, "Give us water, that we may drink." So Moses said to them, "Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the LORD?" ³ And the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses, and said, "Why *is* it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!" ⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, "Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. ⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ So he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

There are certain times and certain situations where we benefit from the guidance provided by those around us. Maybe we're lost in a strange city and someone gives us clear directions to where we are going. Maybe a wise teacher gives good advice to a young person in danger of going the wrong way in life. Maybe mountain climbers are assisted by a capable guide.

Our text is part of the account of Israel's journey through the wilderness to the promised land after being set free from slavery in Egypt. Our lives as Christians may also be seen as a journey through the wilderness. We have been liberated from slavery to Satan. We are traveling to the promised land of heaven.

Let's look at this text before us and see A PICTURE OF GOD'S GUIDANCE FOR OUR LIVES. Here we see: 1. The way He leads us. 2. His patience along the way. 3. The remarkable ways He provides for us along the way.

A person walking through a dense jungle can't know for sure what lies ahead on the path. The thickets and leaves and branches block his vision. He can't see the crocodile sunning himself along the path or the boulder blocking it 15 minutes ahead. On the other hand, a person floating over that same stretch of jungle in a hot air balloon can clearly see where the path begins and where it ends, and everything in between.

On their journey the people of Israel had come to what seemed the worst of all places. "Then all the congregation of the children of Israel set out on their journey from the Wilderness of Sin, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped in Rephidim; but there was no water for the people to drink."

When they realized they'd come to an arid, waterless place, they panicked. They feared they would all perish at that place in the desert. It looked as though God had made a terrible

mistake. "Therefore the people contended with Moses, and said, 'Give us water, that we may drink.'"

Sometimes it seems the Lord has led us to such a place in life. The journey makes some strange stops and turns along the way. We get sick and wonder if He cares, or if He's able to help us. We face a sad loss and we question His judgment. We begin to wonder if He really knows what's best for us. Judging from our limited vision and understanding, like Israel in the desert, we conclude that God has made a terrible mistake.

After all, why did He lead them to such a place? Why, after freeing them from Pharaoh's grip and after opening up the waters of the Red Sea, and after providing manna for them in the wilderness, did He now bring them to this place without water? That's the very question the people confronted Moses with- "Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

Here's the answer: God was testing them. He wanted to see if they would remember His help of the past and whether they would draw strength and patience from those memories. Would they trust that God would still provide for them in that desolate place? Would they trust, despite evidence to the contrary, that He really would keep all His promises - including the promise of the coming Savior?

God permits such testing in our lives. His purpose is the same now. He wants to strengthen our ties to Him. He wants to bring us to see that He Himself is our greatest need. That's why it says in Hebrews: "Do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a Son." Through hardship God brings us to say with the Psalmist who prayed to God: "It was good for me to have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes." And, "Who have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Next we are reminded of how patiently God guides us. At Rephidim the people complained bitterly. They completely forgot about His help from the past. They even expressed the desire to return to Egypt and live once more as slaves. They were so angry that Moses feared for his life.

We should consider this from the Lord's perspective. He led them out of captivity in Egypt. He preserved their lives from danger and death as they escaped through the desert. He promised to give them their own special land to live on. Over again He proved His loving faithfulness. But the people forgot all that and were living as though they had no God.

But see God's patience! He didn't walk away from them for their lack of faith. Like a kind and longsuffering teacher, He gave them another chance to learn their lesson.

Rather than break out in anger against them, the Lord showed Moses how He would solve this dilemma. "Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. I will stand there before you on the rock in Horeb." Instead of turning away in disgust, the Lord would give them another example of His power.

How we need such a patient God! We admit that we fail His tests by questioning His will and complaining about our troubles. It's easy enough to trust Him when everything goes well for us. But how easily we panic when some misfortune enters our lives. How quick to conclude that He has forgotten us and failed to care for us. But His patience is amazing. Time after time He stays with us and grants His loving care despite our unfaithfulness. If we doubt that, look to this incident remember His great patience.

We're looking at a beautiful picture of God's guidance for our lives. He guides us according to His perfect wisdom, and He guides us with divine patience. 3rd, see how He provides for us along the way. There at Rephidim the Lord said to Moses, "You shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel." Those elders would serve as witnesses to this miracle. In case someone would say that Moses merely stumbled on a hidden stream, they could all vouch for the fact that God had once again come to their rescue. Out of a rock He provided water to drink.

"So he called the place Massah and Meribah, because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'"

When we reach such places in our lives, we should recall God's providence. He gives us everything we need for our bodies and lives. He who provides a home for the sparrow and a beautiful coat for the flowers of the field, knows how to supply us with every good thing.

We trust that to be true, for He promises something even greater – He takes care of our immortal souls by giving us Jesus who is the rock of our salvation, the rock we get up on as enemies encircle us, the rock we cling to as the flood waters of sin and death rush by, the rock from which springs the living water of redemption.

Just as He provided water from a common but unlikely source, a rock in a desert, so He pours out His forgiveness and salvation in common and unlikely ways. He makes known and gives His salvation by His word which we read and hear. He bestows it on us through the water of baptism. He distributes it to us so personally in the bread and wine, with the body and blood of Jesus Christ for our rescue from sin and hell.

You might look at a graduation diploma and remember how God guided you in pursuit of a degree. You might look at a photograph of a relative who was guided safely by the Lord in military combat. You might look at photos from a family vacation and remember how God guided you to some exotic location and brought you and your family home again.

In the same way, our text today stands for us as a beautiful picture and reminder of God's guidance over all our lives.

So we can only marvel and say, "Thank You God, for the way you lead me. Thank You for being so patient with me and forgiving me along the way. Thank You for providing all that I need for this life, and for the life to come! For Jesus' sake." Amen.