MESSAGE

[TITLE SLIDE]

Is the Lord Among Us?
Exodus 17:1–7

[SLIDE — When the tap runs dry]

Waking up in the morning, wanting nothing more than a cup of coffee and a hot shower, to find there is no water at all, is deeply discouraging. Before long, the whole household is asking what has gone wrong.

That gives us a small glimpse into Exodus 17. Like last week, this chapter presents a grave situation: the people are in the wilderness, their flocks are thirsty, and there is no water. Their fear is genuine.

Yet verse 1 tells us that they travelled **"according to the commandment of the LORD."** They were following God's leading and still arrived in a dry place.

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A hard place is not automatically the wrong place.

We may do the right things — follow Christ, act faithfully, try to obey God — and still find hardship confronting us. Difficulty does not mean God has lost his way. The dry place was within his knowledge. We do not trust God because it guarantees an easy path; we trust him because, even in hard places, he is forming us into the people he wants us to be.

[SLIDE — Is the Lord among us or not?]

The people demand water from Moses. That is understandable. But fear quickly turns into accusation: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"

We touched on this last week: crisis has a way of narrowing the memory. They had seen the plagues, crossed the sea, watched Pharaoh's army overwhelmed, and received manna from heaven. Yet now, in the pressure of the moment, all they can see ahead is disaster.

Moses names the place Massah and Meribah — "testing" and "quarrelling" — because they asked, **"Is the LORD among us or not?"** That is the issue beneath the surface.

And that still happens today. We can appear to be arguing about one thing while we are distressed about another. A sharp word over forgotten washing, an uncleaned bathroom, or missed medication may be about more than the immediate problem. It may reveal tiredness, hurt, fear, or the feeling of being alone.

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At Rephidim the need for water is genuine. But underneath it lies the deeper question: **Has the God who rescued us now abandoned us?**

I think many of us know that question.

Not because the water has stopped, but because someone has died, or is in hospital, or faces an uncertain diagnosis. Because a friendship has fractured. Because the future has suddenly become unclear. In moments like that, the heart cries, **"Lord, are you here?"**

The Bible does not condemn that cry. The Psalms give us plenty of language for grief, delay and distress. Psalm 95 warns against hardening the heart, but Scripture teaches us to bring our troubles honestly to God.

The issue is not whether we ask hard questions. The issue is how we ask them.

[SLIDE — Honest prayer is not an ultimatum]

Exodus is clear: the people are thirsty, and at the same time they are testing God.

There is a great difference between saying, **“Lord, I don’t understand; help me to trust you,”** and saying, **“Unless you act precisely as I demand, you have failed me.”**

The first is honest prayer. The second is an ultimatum.

And if we are truthful, we may recognise both impulses in ourselves. We may love God, and yet hear fear whispering that he is not good because he has not acted as quickly, or as clearly, as **we** wanted.

This passage is not here to make us suspicious of another person’s grief. We must not stand at a distance and analyse the tears of thirsty Israelites.

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It is here to ask us gently and personally: **Am I bringing my need to God, or am I demanding that he prove himself on my terms?** Be honest with yourself and God, today.

Then look at Moses. Under enormous pressure, he cries out, **“What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”** That is not a polished prayer. It is the cry of an overwhelmed servant. And the Lord hears him.

[SLIDE: You need not be everyone’s answer]

There are days when “Lord, help me” is enough. God is not deterred by trembling hands or faltering words.

You do not need to carry everything. You do not need to be everyone’s answer. The organiser, the carer, the fixer — all of us need to hear this. Moses could not produce water by trying harder. He had to turn to God.

And grace often comes from unexpected places.

The Lord tells Moses to strike the rock, and water will come out so that the people may drink. Notice what the story does **not** say. It does not say that the people first calm down, apologise, and become spiritually impressive before God helps them. God provides for them while they are needy, frightened and quarrelsome.

[SLIDE: The gift is grace, not wages]

That is grace.

Grace does not mean their unbelief is unimportant. Massah and Meribah remain a warning, and Psalm 95 later tells God's people not to harden their hearts in the same way.

But mercy comes before merit.

Paul later says that the Rock was Christ, and Jesus himself says, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." John tells us he was speaking about the Spirit. Moses stikes the rock and receives water, Christ told us he is the true source of life for thirsty people.

Christ does not promise trust in him will remove all grief, illness or uncertainty, but he does offer forgiveness, peace with God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the assurance that we are not abandoned.

[SLIDE — Come thirsty]

So let us get practical. What should we do in the dry places?

First, name the need. Loneliness. Anxiety. Weariness. Guilt. Uncertainty. Need of forgiveness. Bring the real need to God.

Second, do not struggle alone.

[SLIDE — Scripture text] Hebrews 3:12–15

Hebrews looks back to this wilderness generation and says, **"Encourage one another daily … so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."** Faith is not meant to be sustained in isolation.

Then verse 15 repeats Psalm 95: **"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."**

Do not carry your burden by yourself. Ask for prayer. Accept help. As you are willing to support others, let others support you.

And where fear has begun to dictate the terms, pause and pray:

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“Father, forgive me for measuring your love by my timetable. Help me trust you today.”

If you are exploring faith, you can come honestly:

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Am I bringing my need to God, or am I demanding that he prove himself on my terms?

A dry tap sends us looking for water. And a dry season may become the place where we discover afresh that Christ is the true source of life. Sometimes God uses the wilderness to get our attention and draw us to wholehearted trust.

You do not need to come strong. You do not need to come impressive. Come as you are — thirsty, honest, and ready for Christ.

If you have never turned to Jesus, or if you are carrying a heavy burden, hear his invitation to come to him. You do not need every answer today. Come as you are, trusting his mercy to forgive and lead you.

If this expresses the desire of your heart, you may wish to make these words your own:

Lord Jesus Christ,
I come to you needy and thirsty.
I confess that I have often tried to live without you,
and I have not trusted you as I should.

Thank you that you came into the world for sinners,
that you died for our sins
and rose again to give new life.

Please forgive me.
Receive me as I turn to you.
Give me your Holy Spirit,

teach me to trust you,
and lead me from this day onward.

I place my life in your hands.
In your name, Lord Jesus,
Amen.

And if you prayed that prayer, or want to talk, pray, or ask questions, please do not carry it alone. Speak to me after the service, or to someone you trust here. We would be glad to help you take the next step. AMEN.