

Strengthening the Soul Your Faith

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Exodus 17.1-7

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I. Introduction to this Study

This week we continue our summer series, Strengthening the Soul of Your Faith, engaging the importance of intercessory prayer - especially in times of difficulty!

II. Connecting with One Another

What do you think of when you think of prayer?

How do you usually pray?

Has your understanding of prayer changed at all through your journey of faith? If so, how?

III. Study the Text

- a. Read Exodus 17.1-7, taking time to jot down any thoughts or questions that come to mind. If you're working through this study in a group, compare notes with others. See if others have the same thoughts or questions you do - or, if y'all have helpful responses to one another's questions!

- b. Reread Exodus 17.1-2. (That the Israelites "set out from the Desert of Sin", should not be read in any reference to moral failure. "Sin", in this instance, is merely the Hebrew word for "wilderness.")

Who is leading the Israelites during this time? The LORD - or Moses? What prompts you to answer the way you do? Is it an either/or - or a both/and?

Terence Fretheim writes, "The wilderness is a place where it is often difficult to sort out perceptions and reality. It seems like a godforsaken place, but it is not. The people are being led by God himself; in fact, through Moses, God has commanded what the route shall be." How, if at all, does this alter your response to the questions above?

- c. In verse 2 Moses asks, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?" Is it fair for him to ask this?

These two questions seem almost contradictory: Are they quarreling with Moses or putting the LORD to the test?

- d. In verse 3, the Israelites ask, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" This is not the first time such questioning has taken place (see others at 14.11, 16.3), though it may be the most ruthless of the accusations, as they now include the children and cattle!

Why do you think the people accuse Moses so audaciously? Are they right to do so? Why or why not?

- e. Ruth Haley Barton wonders whether Moses understood that "people tend to project idealized expectations onto leaders - expectations that are often unspoken and held subconsciously - and then become angry when the leader does not meet those expectations," and that "Moses refrained from taking responsibility for what was ultimately God's responsibility."

Do you agree with these statements? Why or why not?

- f. Reread Exodus 17.4-7.

Moses often engages in intercessory prayer (praying to God on behalf of others) in times of difficulty. Read other instances of Moses' intercession in Exodus 15.23-25, 17.3-4, 32.11-14, 32.32, Numbers 11.2, 12.13, 14.19, 16.46-48, 21.9. What catches your attention in these passages?

- g. While some understand the water from a rock to be a miracle, others see it as a result of God's providential ordering of creation. J.A. Motyer writes that during Creation God thought to himself: "One day I will lead my people to Rephidim and they will be in desperate need of water, so in anticipation of that day I will provide an underground water supply and mark it with a great rock so that it can't be missed." He concludes, "Our needs have already been anticipated in this foreseeing, farseeing grace, which is ever on our side."

What do you think: Was this a miracle - or did God create an underground water supply marked with a rock? (If you're drawn to the latter, is it any less a miracle?)

- h. Read James 1.1-8. How does James pick up on themes of testing and prayer in these verses?

Ruth Haley Barton writes, "Cowardice keeps us double minded - hesitating between the world at God. In this hesitation, there is no true faith - faith remains an opinion. We are never certain, because we never quite give in to the authority of an invisible God. This hesitation is the death of hope. We never let go of those visible supports which, we well know, must one day surely fail us. And that hesitation makes true prayer impossible - it never quite dares to ask for anything, or if it asks, it is so uncertain of being heard that in the very act of asking, it surreptitiously seeks by human prudence to construct a make-shift answer."

- i. Read Romans 8.18-27. How does Paul's thoughts on the Spirit's interceding for us reshape your understanding of prayer?

- j. Read 1st Corinthians 10.1-4. Paul engages Exodus 17 in these verses, but notice how he understands the Rock!

Rob Bell writes, "Paul... reads another story in the story, insisting that Christ was present in that moment, that Christ was providing the water they needed to survive - that Jesus was giving, quenching, sustaining."

How does this transform your understanding of the times you've been in the "Desert of Sin"?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. Who has led you through times you've spent in the "Desert of Sin"? How were they used by God?
- b. Are you ever tempted to quarrel with someone else when you really need to lift up your cares and concerns to God? How could you develop the discipline to discern between the two?
- c. Do you ever take responsibility for things that are God's responsibility? How could you develop the discipline to discern between the two?
- d. In what ways have you seen God's miraculous hand or providential care at work in your life?
- e. Ruth Haley Barton writes, "I realize now that intercessory prayer is not primarily about thinking that I know what someone else needs and trying to wrestle it from God. Rather, it is being present to God on another's behalf, listening for the prayer of the Holy Spirit that is already being prayed for that person before the throne of grace, and being willing to join God in that prayer."

What do you think about Ruth Haley Barton's "realization"? Do you agree with her? If, in a way, you had this "realization" as well, how could it alter your prayer life?

V. Pray

- a. Thank God for those who have led you in times of wilderness wandering, and that Jesus, the Rock of our Salvation, can be present with us in such times of difficulty,
- b. Lift up our ongoing dismissal process with the PC(USA), that our thoughts, attitudes and actions would be characterized by grace, especially now!
- c. Spend some time in silence, allowing the Holy Spirit to intercede for you, leading you in prayer.