

God On Trial

Exodus

By Van Morris

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Calvary Christian Center
11829 Highway 44 East
Mount Washington, KY 40047

Website: calvarychristiancenter.net
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/calvarychristian

We have been in the book of Exodus for a few weeks now and we have been following, here's what, I hope you've been with me, we're following, aren't we, we're following God's ancient people Israel. We're watching to see what God did with them, and remember they were in slavery, they were in oppression and then God liberated them and he brought them into the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. And last week we started asking the question: why the wilderness? Why does God's people have to go through the wilderness? Couldn't God have just taken them out of Egypt and placed them into the Promised Land, skipped over the wilderness and all of the stuff that we're reading here, all of the lack of food, the lack of water, all the grumbling and complaining? Couldn't he have just done that? Yes, he could but he didn't and this is important for us and, you know, you're reading this and you're hearing this and you think, "That's not got anything to do with me. It's so far detached from me." Yes, it does. If you are part of Christ's church, this has something to do with you because the church right now is in the wilderness. We are in the wilderness between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ. Jesus is coming again, brothers and sisters. He really is. I mean, again, this comes back to standing upon the word of God. God has proclaimed this and we need to line ourselves up with this because Christ is coming again, but between the first coming and the second coming, the church is in the wilderness.

I heard a fairy tale. I'm not big on fairy tales but this one I liked. You know, this is pretty good. So there was a wicked witch who lived in a remote cottage out in the deep forest and when travelers would come by seeking breakfast, food and a place to stay, she offered them food and a place to stay, and the bed, the bed that she had was the most comfortable bed of all, but it was a bed that had dark deep magic. If you fell asleep in this comfortable bed and you slept until morning, you would never wake up, you would simply turn to stone. Many travelers met their fate in that bed.

The witch had found a servant girl to serve her and this little girl, she had no way of resisting the power of the witch and she was terribly torn over the fate of these people who would come and sleep in this bed and be turned to stone. One day there was a young man who came looking for bed and board. She saw this man, the servant girl saw this man and she did not want him to turn to stone and so she put stones and sticks and briars in the bed and when the young man laid down that night, he could not get comfortable.

He'd turn this way and he'd get stuck, he'd turn this way and roll over on a stone. It was the most miserable, uncomfortable, fitful sleep he'd ever had. In fact, he didn't sleep until morning, he didn't wait until dawn, he got up to leave and as he was leaving he spoke so cruel, spoke so cruel to the servant girl and said, "How could you give a traveler such a horrible bed filled with sticks and stones?" And he marched out of the door, and under her breath she said, "Ah, the misery you know now is nothing like the infinitely greater misery of a comfortable night's sleep would've been in that bed." And then she said, "Those were sticks and stones of my love."

You see, we observed last Lord's Day that by God's grace the Israelites are now physically out of Egypt but we're seeing, aren't we, that internally there is still a problem, or you could just picture it like this: there are thousands of people perhaps in churches today, right here maybe, they're here physically but there are internal issues going on. I've know people over the years that have sat in this church, heard the Gospel, heard of the beauties of Christ and the fairest Lord Jesus, only to leave and turn back to their idols that have destroyed their lives. These Israelites are physically out of Egypt but there's an internal problem within their heart. They've experienced God's gracious salvation, God has liberated them from their enslavement but God's salvation includes that they now serve him. God's salvation is not just a freeing us to fly like a bird. No, it is freeing us from the enslavement of idols and sin that we might serve the living God. God has graciously liberated them but now they must work out their salvation.

So the wilderness, why the wilderness? The wilderness is God's sticks and stones of love for his people, to train them that they might rely upon him. If you're here this morning and you're feeling the sting and the pain of wilderness travel for the church, it's God's sticks and stones of love for you so that we'll be trained to rely completely upon him. There's three things I want you to see this morning. We're gonna see one of the enemies of Christian hope; we're gonna see God put on trial; and then finally we're gonna see a rock that satisfies thirst.

First, one of the enemies, one of the enemies of Christian hope. You see, we've had the privilege of having a bird's eye view. We always do when we're reading the Bible. You could sit down and you could read the book of Exodus, it wouldn't take you very long at all to read all of the events of the book of Exodus, read it in a fairly reasonable amount of time but what you're reading took years, years to take place. So you and I have a bird's eye view. We're able to see things like God's people being in slavery, God hearing their cry, setting them free. We're able to see in a short amount of time God's miraculous work, how he dealt with his people's enemy at the Red Sea, how he opened up the Red Sea and they got across on dry land but all of the enemies were swallowed up. Then like last week, we got to read in just a matter of a few minutes, we got to read how the people were hungry and they cried out to God and they complained and said, "We're hungry. We've got no food." And God shows up with quail and manna and satisfies their need. We have a bird's eye view of that.

That's alright but it could lead us to be a bit unfair. We can look at the account of Exodus 17 and we might say something like this, "These ungrateful whining complainers." It

would be so easy to do that. I mean, think about it, you're reading this and you're remembering hopefully last week, chapter 16, they whined and they complained, God's patient with them, showed up with quail and manna. It's like they forgot this. It's a whole new, it's a whole new day now of complaining and grumbling and we might be inclined to say, "These ungrateful whining people, what is wrong with them?" But you've got to remember, right, they have a ground view. We have a bird's eye view. We're able to read all this in a matter of minutes and go, "Good grief, what's wrong with you people?" Well, I'll tell you what's wrong with them, they're stuck in their present details, right? They are at a place called Rephidim that means "resting place," and as far as resting places go, this was a major disappointment because there's no water.

Now that might not, you know, there's no way that can really weigh on us of how difficult this is because we can go and get a drink from the water fountain or we can go stop at the store and get a bottle of water. I mean, we just have no way of understanding the situation that they are in. They are in the wilderness. They don't have any water. So before we jump all over them and say, "These bunch of whining ungrateful people," this is a pretty big deal.

On the other hand, though, we can't help but notice that in light of their circumstances there's some things that are suspiciously absent. 1. They haven't prayed. Now again, we're not jumping on these folks because, I'll tell you, we've got our own problems, right? But they didn't pray. I mean, don't you think it might have been a good idea, you know, "Hey, we are in a pickle here. We have no water and maybe it would be a great time for us to call upon the God, remember the God who gave us the manna and the quail? Wouldn't it be a great time for us to call on him, upon him, plead with God to provide for us?" But that doesn't happen. I mean, it seems that they have forgotten what God has already done for them and it doesn't just seem that way, that's actually what happened. How do we know it? Because the Psalmist said in Psalm 106, "And the waters covered their adversaries, not one of them was left." That's the Red Sea. "Then they believed his words; they sang his praise. But they soon forgot his works." Now I want you to listen: one of the greatest enemies of Christian hope is forgetting what God has done for us and has promised to do for us. Now I don't, again, I don't know how you're hearing this but I want you to hear this clearly: I'll assure you, I promise you that one of the greatest enemies of Christian hope, one of the greatest enemies of Christian hope is forgetting what God has already done for us and what he has promised to do.

You see, just ask yourself, "Have I ever fell victim to this? Has there ever been a time that I have complained against God? I have raged against God? I have, it's like I have forgotten everything that he's ever done. I've forgotten all of his goodness. I've forgotten all of his grace. I've forgotten all of his mercy that's new every day. I've forgotten it." Have you ever fell victim to this? Well, I would say that you and I have because, remember, this was written for our instruction. What that means is God said, "We're gonna preserve this. We're gonna preserve all of these wilderness wanderings for my ancient people. I'm gonna preserve them for the church and it's gonna serve as instruction for them because they're gonna face the same enemy and be equally vulnerable as the Israelites were." There are times that we might think and feel like God's help was so long

ago. We're praying now, we're praying, "God, I need your help now. It seems like so long ago when your help showed up and it hasn't been around lately." Or, "God, you've helped others but you're not helping me." And it can lead to serious accusation against God.

Notice in verse 7, it came down to this, "Is the LORD among us or not?" Wow, that's amazing when you stop and think about it. I mean, it hasn't been that long, folks. It has not been that long since they crossed the Red Sea. Was God with them then? Yeah, he was. Was God with them now? Yes, he is but they don't see it. They have forgotten his works. That's why I love 2 Peter 1:13. Peter said, "I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you," now "you" would be the church, okay? His original audience, "to stir you by way of reminder." You see, I didn't appreciate that verse until later in life because my understanding of church in my early years was always something new, something new, it had to be something new. What new thing are we gonna mine out of God's word? What weird esoteric thing can we find in here that's, you know? Now I see, now I see this: one of my greatest privileges in life, in my life is to remind you. To remind you. One of my greatest privileges, I have a lot of, just I've been blessed so much but one of the things that is a privilege to me is every week to stand before you and remind you, not to come up with something new, not to dream up something new but to stay true to God's word and remind you. Why? Because we forget. We have an enemy that works against our hope. That's why I encourage you to regular worship.

You might say, "Well, I just don't like going to a church where they constantly want you to come." Hey, I want you to come because public worship is the way our memory is triggered and refreshed. I mean, there are so many examples of this but I think about Asaph. Asaph was a man who was a choir director in the temple. He was familiar with all of God's promises and God's word. He was familiar with it because they sang it every Lord's Day and so one time he gets so flustered he begins to look around and see all the ungodly people, how they're prospering, but he's not prospering. They're all doing well and it doesn't seem like he's doing all that well. He begins to envy the wicked and his heart begins to really get off in a bad place. You know how that can happen, right? And so what turned it around for him? In Psalm 73, here's what happened, "until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end." Do you see what happened? You see, he was all out of sort, he was all out of sort. He was forgetting, he was forgetting and when he came together with God's people to worship, when he came there, his mind was triggered. He remembered therein, what that meant was he began to see, "I see where the unrighteous are going. They're prospering right now, things are well for them right now but it will not always be that way." Then he goes on to say, "Lord, you're with me. You're with me always." He got straightened out.

You see, every week when we come to worship, we get our heart and our mind reoriented. Why? Because one of the greatest enemies of our Christian hope is forgetting what God has done and what he has promised to do. That's why when we read this morning in Lamentations 3, it said that, "this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." When Jeremiah spoke those words, Jerusalem, the city that he was in was in destruction. It was in utter destruction. It was

horrible. You can read history about it, it was horrible. It seemed like the bottom had dropped out of the world at that time, and what did he do? He said, "I call this to mind. Everything else is changing, everything else is turned upside down but there's one constant and I'm gonna call it to mind. I've got to remember this, that God's steadfast love for his people will never cease. His mercies are new every day."

Let me ask you before we go on: how will you wage war against the enemy of your heart? I want you to think about this before you leave today, alright? What kind of plans do you have as a believer to wage war against the enemy of your hope? Do you have any plans for that? If you don't, you need to make some plans. Well, one of them will be, "I'm gonna worship regularly with God's people. I'm not gonna try to go this alone. I want to come and have my mind triggered, my memory triggered. I want to remember. I don't want to forget what God has done for me." And friend, you don't need me to tell you over and over and over again, we forget.

We forget. God's ancient people did, this was written for our instruction because we do and it will put you in a bad place. What kind of bad place? 2. You will put God on trial. You'll put God on trial. This is a fascinating set of verses here. I want you to look at verse 2 with me. Remember there's no water, okay, and they are upset, "Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink.'" Notice that word "quarreled." We do not see this in the English translation that we have but in the Hebrew the word "quarrel" is a legal term. It is "to bring a formal charge against someone." I want you to feel the weight of this. The Israelites are calling God's willingness and ability to take care of them into account. They are actually taking God to court, okay? Now stick with me, this is fascinating. They are taking God to court. "God, we can't trust you anymore. You haven't kept your promises. You haven't kept your agreement. You haven't kept your part of the deal."

They are taking God to court and if you think this is some odd, strange thing, and in a way it is, but let me give you some contemporary versions of it that sounds like this, "Why did God make a world like this? This world stinks! Why did he make a world like this?" Friends, the world we see right now is not God's fault. It's not God's fault. We don't have time to elaborate on that but why did God make it? You see, the accusation is, "God, why did you make a world like this? You could've done better! You could've done something different!" Or it might sound like this, "If God's so good, then why does he allow evil?" That's an accusation. That's putting God to the test. That's putting him on trial. Or, "If God is love, then why did he come up with such a narrow way of salvation? Why is there only one way? Why is it just Jesus? Why can't there be more?"

You see, there's nothing wrong with questions, by the way, okay? There's nothing wrong with asking questions. Would be to God that God's people would ask more questions. There are some people caught up in some cultish religions, there are some people caught up in such a crazy mess they need to ask some questions. They really do, so I'm not against questions, in fact, I think it's a great idea. You know, it's crazy to go through life and never question the foundations. That's terrible.

We need to ask questions but it's the motivation for asking the questions that makes all the difference. These people are asking some questions, "Is God with us or not?" Nothing wrong with questions but their motivation, there's a problem there. God is being accused of breaking his covenant. He is being taken to court. Now I want you to pay close attention because in these verses it would sound like this, God would say, "You want a trial? Then let's have one. You want a trial? We're gonna have one." How do we know that? Verse 5, "And the LORD said to Moses, 'Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.'"

Now let's stop there for a moment. Go before the people, all the people are watching now, things are at a fever pitch. They're so bad, Moses says, "These people are gonna stone me. Lord, these people are ready to stone me. They are upset." The Lord said, "Alright, Moses, go before the people and take the elders and get your staff." Get your staff. Remember the staff? Remember the staff? If you've forgotten the staff, remember here in verse 5 it said "the staff of which you struck the Nile." Remember Moses taking the staff in his hand, God told him to strike the Nile. What was he doing? He was executing judgment. You see, the staff was a symbol of judicial authority that God had placed in Moses' hand. You see, when he walked out with that staff and all the people were there, they must have thought, "Uh-oh, somebody's gonna get it. He's got the staff. He's got the staff, somebody is gonna get it." Oh yeah, somebody's gonna get it, alright.

Then he said, "Take the elders with you." Now the elders were those who would pass judgment upon disputed matters among the people and so when God said, "Take the elders with you," that was gonna be the jury. That was gonna be the jury. There's a trial taking place here, okay? It's being set up.

Then in verse 6 which ought to blow your mind, it ought to blow your mind, I hope it will, verse 6 he said, "Behold, behold, I will stand before you there on the rock." That word "before" in all other places in the Bible is language – now listen – is language of an inferior in the presence of a superior. So what's happening here, God is saying, "I'm the inferior. I'll stand before you. I'll be the defendant. I am the accused. You're accusing me. You're calling me to task." God is placing himself as an inferior in the presence of superiors and we're not given specifics on how God appeared but we notice in verse 6 it said he was standing there on the rock which means he was identifying with the rock. God was standing on the rock, identifying with the rock, submitting himself to judgment. Just take a moment to let that sink in. I mean, it seems ironic after all God has done, that he would be subject to trial and judgment?

So is God guilty? Let me ask you is God guilty? No. No, he's not. But he is standing in the place of the guilty. God is standing in the place, substituting himself in the place of these guilty complainers, these guilty forgetters, these guilty people that call out to God with their bad motivation. God could have struck every one of those guilty people dead but what does he do? He steps in and takes judgment in their place. How do we know? Because he said, "Moses, take your staff and strike the rock. Bring judgment down. Use

your judicial authority and bring the staff down on the rock." And when Moses strikes the rock, in an epic display of grace water comes out.

What does that water mean? What does all this mean? Well, first it proved everything about God that the Israelites were calling into question. First, it proved that God did have the power and the willingness to provide for his people. You see, all along it was, "We don't think God's able to do this. We don't think he's willing to do this. Why would he leave us like this?" Water comes out, proving God's power and willingness to provide. Secondly, it provided proof of his presence. Remember they said, "Is God with us or not?" Oh yeah, he's right there. Thirdly, it proved that he was his people's protector. Instead of judging his people for their sins, he submitted himself to judgment so that they could live.

I know people in our culture don't like to hear about judgment, don't like the idea of judge and judgment, but listen, do you want to live in a world, think about it, do you want to live in a world where there's no judge? Which means that all of the wrongs that have been done against you, the people you love, are never gonna be corrected, they're never gonna be dealt with, is that what you want? Of course not. You say, "Well, yeah, yeah, I want a judge. Yes, I want a judge. I want a judge." But then we've got to deal with the fact that if we have a judge, we're going to be judged, right? But what we're seeing here is the God who is the Judge comes as the Judge and took judgment upon himself. God proved himself to the Israelites.

Quick question: has he proved himself to you? Really, has God proved himself to you? Well, if he hasn't, then just listen with me one more thing and let's look at the rock that satisfies thirst. You ought to be so thankful for chapter 17 of Exodus. I know we're nowhere near as thankful as we should be but we should be thankful for chapter 17, and we look at this story and we think, "Good grief, I'm having trouble at work, I'm having trouble with my family, I'm going through a divorce. Things could not be worse. How in the world can chapter 17 be of any consolation for me?" Because of the rock. Because of the rock. You see, we would not really understand what is happening here if it were not for the Apostle Paul writing under the inspiration of the Spirit of God in 1 Corinthians 10. Notice this one phrase, "for they," he's talking about the Israelites, he's looking back now, redemption history, looking back remembering, "for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ." Now what is Paul saying there? Let's just take the rest of our time. What is Paul saying? Is he saying that Jesus was a literal rock? Well, no, no. One thing he's saying is this: 1,500 years before the birth of Christ, God was thinking about you and me. Isn't that amazing? 1,500 years before Christ was even born, God was thinking about you and me. That's why we should be thankful for chapter 17, because what we see is this: the rock was Christ. What does that mean? It means that God sent his Son into a thirsty world. Some of you are sitting here this morning and you are thirsty and you thought that this person, or this thing, or this trip, or this job, or this thing, that somehow, somehow it was gonna fix everything. You were thirsty and you drank from that well but in truth it didn't satisfy the real thirst of your heart.

God was thinking about you and me 1,500 years before Christ was born and he finally sent his Son to a thirsty people, to a thirsty world. The rock was Christ because like the rock, Christ was struck with judgment. "Moses, strike the rock." And Jesus on the cross was struck with judgment and Christ was there bearing the curse for our sins. It's chapter 17. Chapter 17 is pointing to Jesus. It's pointing to hope for every forgetting, complaining, broken sinner. Every thirsty soul. Chapter 17 is pointing us to Jesus and what does it prove? What does it prove? God proved himself. What does this rock prove? It proves that in Christ God is for us, God is for us what he was for Israel, our provider, our ever-present Lord and our protector.

That's what he's saying and so why is this a big deal? I'll close with this. As the church travels through the wilderness, we need Christ the rock. As we go through the wilderness and we deal with the sticks and stones of God's love, as we go through the wilderness and we experience the temptations that says, "You know, this will satisfy. This will satisfy." We have to keep coming right back to Jesus, we need to come right back to him, turn back to our first love. This will be repeated over and over again. It will. "Just come to Christ. Just come to him one time and that's it." No. No, that's why the book of Revelation says, "You've gotta return to your first love." Why? Because we stray away. We go after broken cisterns, broken wells, empty wells. Let us hold fast to Jesus in this wilderness that the church is in. Let us hold fast to Jesus. He is the rock of our salvation.

If you are in a hard place today, if you are feeling the sticks and stones of God's love for his people, it's only when we get in a hard place it seems that we begin to evaluate the well that we've been drinking from and we find that it's not sufficient for us, so God throws in the sticks and stones of his love. Church, hold fast to Jesus. Hold fast to Jesus in this wilderness journey. For others, if you're here this morning, if you're here today, you might be running from God, you might be here today and you really haven't come to Christ and you've got all these complaints and you're mad, your world is falling apart and, hey, look, it happens but, look, how can you run away from a God like this? How can you run away from a God like this? A God who is patient? A God who will take judgment in your place? How could you run from a God like this? Don't run from him, run to him. Run to Christ today. Run now, today. Today. Today is the day of salvation. Run today to Christ and he will satisfy all your thirst because that rock was Christ.