

Lesson 5
Strife at Rephidim
Exodus 17:1-7

Why Christians suffer is a question every Christian in every generation has honestly asked himself. We can understand why a holy, just, and righteous God would allow an unsaved sinner to suffer due to rejection of Christ, but why, now that we are chosen, redeemed, and regenerated, being children of God and His own dear possession, do we suffer?

According to the Bible, there are at least eight reasons why Christians suffer. We do not have time to mention all eight. However, we will name a few reasons. A Christian may suffer because he is being disciplined for some act of sin in his life (Heb. 12:5-11). He may also suffer in order to fulfill God's plan for his life (Phil. 1:29). He may suffer to glorify God as is clearly seen in the life of Job (Job 1:1—2:13). He may suffer in order to be taught patience (James 1:2-3). He may also suffer in order to develop faith so as to grow strong in the Lord (James 1:2-4). Christians will sometimes suffer to prove the genuineness or reality of true saving faith (1 Pet. 1:6-7). Some suffering is for the gospel and godly living (2 Tim. 3:12).

All suffering is not the direct result of sin. In fact, seven out of the eight reasons for suffering are designed to bring blessing to the Christian's life. Yet even suffering for sin in divine discipline can become a blessing when a person confesses that sin, turns to Christ for forgiveness, and determines in his heart not to do it again.

The children of Israel faced one crisis after another after leaving the nation of Egypt. After crossing the Red Sea, God designed testings for them in order to develop their faith that they might grow strong in the Lord and be able to fight future spiritual and physical wars. God was testing them in order to prepare them spiritually so they might take the land of Canaan, which God had promised them. While in the desert, they were in spiritual training; this was God's boot camp for them. Previous to this incident in Exodus 17, they had faced two other crises. At Marah, they were thirsty, but the waters they found were bitter and undrinkable. The people grumbled in unbelief, but God performed a miracle of grace, turning the bitter water to sweet water. Then they came to the wilderness of Sin. There they had inadequate food, and the people complained in unbelief. God, being very gracious with this infant nation, once again performed the miracle of providing quail and manna, giving the people delicacies better than any food they had in Egypt. In each of these tests, the Israelites failed because of unbelief, and in each of these cases, Moses interceded for the people, and God intervened in grace when He should have severely disciplined these rebellious Jews. Now they come to Rephidim where, once again, there is no water. This is the third test God will give Israel in order to prepare them spiritually to face a minor skirmish with Amalek and his armies.

What is the biblical principle here? God never permits great crisis, adversity, or catastrophe to happen to us until He first gives us spiritual training. When He gives us this training, we may or may not accept it or learn from it. If we respond by positive faith to minor crisis, then there will be victory. If we respond with negative faith, then there will be no victory, and we will not be prepared to fight the big battles of life. As one biblical commentator put it:

“If we learn to deal with the attack of the mosquito, then we will be ready to deal with the attack of the elephant. We must fight and win all little skirmishes before we are ready to fight the big battles.” (Author Unknown)

NO WATER Exodus 17:1

“Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin . . .”
According to Numbers 33:12-14, the Jews made two encampments before reaching Rephidim: Dopkah and Alush. We can estimate that they had been out of Egypt several months and had not had adequate water

supplies for a week or two. On the route they were following, they would not have passed a single spring, and it was late May. In May, the desert can get blistering because of the sun, and they must have been extremely hot and weary. .

“ . . . according to the commandment of the LORD, . . . ” God had purposely led Israel to Rephidim. They were exactly where God wanted them to be, and yet they were suffering with excruciating thirst. The Israelites were not out of the will of God. They were at Rephidim by Divine appointment in order to be tested so that their faith could be stretched and developed. This was not divine discipline; it was divine testing to cause them to grow up spiritually and to learn to operate on faith and not human reasoning. God’s design in this testing was to bless and not to curse the people. There would be tremendous blessing for the Israelites if they would only trust the Lord in this time of severe pressure.

“ . . . and camped at Rephidim . . . ” The word “Rephidim” means refreshment. Apparently the nation of Israel camped right on the edge of this fertile plain of Rephidim, a dreamy paradise shut in by mountains. Israel did not go into the plain because it was occupied and well defended by Amalek and his desert armies. Rephidim was a valley filled with springs and luscious vegetation and people traveling the desert had to cross this area. It was the military tactic of Amalek to attack enemies who had been crossing the desert right outside of this luscious plain, for they would be hot, tired, and thirsty, becoming sitting ducks for Amalek, the desert fox, and his Bedouin guerrillas.

The Israelites named this place of encampment Rephidim (refreshments) and yet there was no water there. Why? They were going to be refreshed supernaturally there by God, and through it all there was to be great spiritual refreshment. Some of the greatest spiritual refreshments come during a time of extreme pressure when there is suffering, trial, and adversity. God can take every dry hole, every crisis, every adversity, and quench our spiritual thirst, making what seems to be a tragedy a great blessing, when we operate on faith.

“ . . . and there was no water for the people to drink. ” These people were suffering from desert thirst, and there is no thirst like desert thirst. They had dry, parched mouths with cracking lips, and they could hardly get enough saliva to swallow. They had cottonmouths and were miserable. There is no question that they had a need for water. Yet, in light of all that God had previously done for them, we might expect them to fall to their knees and ask God for water. They should have given thanks for their situation, knowing full well God would deliver them as He had done two other times while in the desert. **“... in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”** (1 Thess. 5:18). Had they been operating on a divine viewpoint, they might have said, “Thank You, Lord, for this crisis of no water for it means You are going to make a bountiful provision for us. We will not stagger in unbelief at the promises You have made, but we will be strong in faith that we may glorify You and develop our ability to trust in You more.” But we do not find this attitude at all. Even if the sons of Israel could not bring themselves yet to give thanks for this crisis, they could have at least claimed the promise that all things somehow work together for good for believers. **“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose”** (Rom. 8: 28). But we find there is no faith at all. They, once again, miserably fail this test.

NO DIVINE VIEWPOINT Exodus 17:2-3

“Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, ‘Give us water that we may drink.’ ” Thinking that they were going to die of thirst, the sons of Israel became dissonant, frustrated, and angry with Moses. They displayed an impatient, bitter, and argumentative spirit. They, once again, took their own frustration of soul out on Moses, their leader. They quarreled with Moses because they thought he could give them water, but Moses was as helpless as they were to solve the problem. The children of Israel went to the wrong source, or person, to solve their problem. They should have gone to God instead of Moses. They sought to blame leadership for their problem when they should have blamed themselves for not operating by faith in the living God. Notice how demanding these Jews became: **“Give us water to drink!”** They had ungrateful and unthankful hearts. God had provided everything before this time, but now they demand more from God when

in actuality they deserved nothing from God. They had rebels' hearts.

“And they forgot His deeds, and His miracles that He had shown them. He wrought wonders before their fathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan. He divided the sea, and caused them to pass through; and he made the waters stand up like a heap. Then He led them with the cloud by day, and all the night with a light of fire. He split the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them abundant drink like the ocean depths. He brought forth streams also from the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers. Yet they still continued to sin against Him, to rebel against the Most High in the desert. And in their heart they put God to the test by asking food according to their desire. Then they spoke against God; they said, ‘Can God prepare a table in the wilderness? Behold, He struck the rock, so that waters gushed out, and streams were overflowing; can He give bread also? Will He provide meat for His people?’” (Psalm 78:11-20)

Whenever Christians put their eyes on men or circumstances when under pressure, they are always going to be frustrated and excessively demanding. There will always be an unthankful spirit in the Christian who is operating on a human viewpoint. Christians with a human viewpoint can make it very difficult for leadership because they are unthankful for the leadership God has sent to them. Many a man has left the ministry because he could not put up with rebellious and unthankful people.

“And Moses said to them, ‘Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?’” Moses asked these people an honest question, ***“Why do you quarrel with me?”*** What had Moses done? Nothing at all. All Moses had done was to be obedient to God and attempt in every way to lead the people in the way of the Lord. Yet, these rebellious people had closed their minds to the truth. These Jews were testing the Lord. How? Exodus 17:7 says, ***“. . . they tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’”*** They questioned whether God was with them in this situation. How blind and forgetful these people were! They had seen God do ten miracles in the land of Egypt. They had seen the miracle of the opening of the Red Sea. They had observed and experienced the miracles of providing water and manna in the desert. The pillar of cloud and fire could be seen by every Israelite at any time and they still questioned God's presence with them. Why? Their eyes were on self rather than on God. They were blinded by self-pity, and all they wanted was their immediate needs met. They doubted the omnipotence of God, for they did not think He could provide for them. They doubted the omniscience of God, for they did not believe God knew all about their problem. They also doubted His faithfulness and goodness. Had God deserted them? Absolutely not! He was very much present with them, but their unbelief brought the bad attitude of complaining, quarreling, and bitterness. This was trying God's patience as to whether He would bring discipline down on their rebellious lives.

How many times do Christians under pressure say, “God has left me! God has forsaken me! If God loves me, where is He? God doesn't care about me!” This kind of attitude is testing the Lord and trying His patience with us.

“Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” (Isa. 41:10)

“Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.” (Deut. 31:6)

“. . . lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20)

God says He is always with the Christian. This promise is true and to deny it is sin and a grave manifestation of unbelief.

“But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, ‘Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’” The people griped against Moses. These people were perpetual gripers, complainers, moaners, and groaners. They never

learned to trust the Lord because they never learned from their past experience. God had always taken care of them, but they could not trust God for the future. They would rather complain than pray or trust God. These rebellious Jews actually accused Moses of plotting against them so as to bring them destruction in the desert rather than blessing. Moses was only doing the will of God as he was commanded, and they had not been brought to this place to be cursed but blessed. Moses, by this time, should have been recognized as God's leader for them, but they distrusted his leadership. If there was ever a man who had God with him, it was Moses, and *yet* these rebellious people would not accept Moses. The sin of unbelief always blinds to the truth, so these people concluded that Moses hated them and wanted to get rid of them.

When a Christian operates on a human viewpoint rather than a divine viewpoint, facts are always distorted and his imagination runs wild. There are always certain Christians who are negative and delight in thinking evil rather than good. However, when they do this, they are not operating on divine truth or biblical doctrine, but on human reasoning and emotions. Whenever Christians begin to distort the truth and make wild accusations, they are always operating in the flesh and with a human viewpoint.

Again these stubborn Jews flunked the test, and Christians also flunk the test every time a testing comes and they panic and fall apart at the seams. Christians must understand that God brings crisis in order to refine them and make them more Christ-like. ***“But He knows the way I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”*** (Job 23:10)

NO LACK OF FAITH Exodus 17:4

“So Moses cried out to the LORD saying . . .” Moses was really under pressure. What did he do? He believed God and went to God in prayer. He did what any believer should do when his back is to the wall. Think how this whole situation must have crushed Moses' heart. He knew he was God's appointed leader, but the people were griping, complaining, distorting the truth, and distrusting him personally. Yet, when Moses got in a jam, he knew where to go--he went to God.

Certainly this teaches us that anyone in a position of spiritual leadership will be falsely accused at times by his followers. Part of being a leader is to receive graciously false and unjust criticism. However, every leader in spiritual matters must learn to go to God in prayer and to intercede for the people who are giving him a bad time. No man or woman can be a great spiritual leader unless he or she can take criticism and is a person of prayer.

“What shall I do to this people?” Moses did not defend himself against the cruel accusations of the Israelites; he turned to God and sought His solution. However, we can see that this prayer of Moses was a prayer of frustration. Moses was beside himself for he did not know how to handle these stiff-necked and rebellious people. The New American Standard Bible translation might indicate that this was a prayer of vengeance when he said, ***“What should I do to this people?”*** However, the New International Version translates this correctly, ***“What am I to do with this people?”*** which is a prayer of exasperation.

Only a person in spiritual leadership really knows what it is like to pray this kind of prayer. Yet, God allows these things to come to drive Christian leadership to its knees in order to get a divine solution to what seems to be a humanly impossible situation.

“A little more and they will stone me.” So frustrated had the Jews become with Moses that they were gathering stones to stone him. Moses did not deserve this kind of treatment, but when people get out of fellowship with the Lord, they do all kinds of crazy and illogical things.

Misinformed, rebellious, and ungrateful Christians have spiritually stoned many a godly person in Christian leadership because they sought to guide their people in the way of biblical holiness. When unjust criticism comes to God's leadership, they must follow the example of Christ. ***“... and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously . . .”*** (1 Pet. 2:23) They must also cast themselves on the Lord and not try to defend

themselves. ***“Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him” and He will do it.***” (Psalm 37:5)

NO LACK OF GOD’S FAITHFULNESS Exodus 17:5-6

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel . . .’” Notice carefully that God told Moses to go right out in front of the people who were at that moment planning to stone him to death. Moses was their leader and God would protect him. What faith it took for Moses to step out in front of that angry multitude.

If Moses had ducked this responsibility by hiding or refusing to face the people, he would have been finished as the leader of that group. Leaders are to have courage in the face of adversity, and they are to go before the people no matter what the people are threatening to do.

“. . . and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.” Moses was to take elders in Israel to observe the miracle God was about to do. He also was to take his staff. Moses’ staff or rod was a symbol of God’s power and judgment. This was “a shoot out at high noon”. Moses and an angry crowd were face to face in confrontation. Who would win out? Moses or the people? With his rod in hand, Moses had a “big stick” policy, for his confidence was in God.

Every person in Christian leadership knows that in the ministry there are times of tense face-to-face confrontation with angry people who do not like the way he is doing things. This is all part of the ministry, but if the leadership is doing what is biblical, then God will bless that leadership, and the voracious lions in any Christian group will not swallow up leadership.

“Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; . . .” We do not know for sure where the rock of Horeb is today, but it must have been a large rocklike mountain by which the children of Israel could shade themselves from the blistering sun. The word “Horeb” means “dry” or “parched”. Wherever this rock was, there was not an ounce of water in it or on it. God promised to be with Moses as he stood there on the rock of Horeb.

“. . . and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” Moses was told to strike the rock with the rod of divine power. When he did this, water flowed from the rock. Apparently, a river-like stream came out of the rock forming a huge pool (Psalm 114:8) and their thirst was quenched. There was sufficient and abundant water for all. All who drank were satisfied. Once again we see that God performed a miracle in grace when Israel deserved nothing but judgment and discipline. God is so gracious, so compassionate, so patient, so understanding, and so loving towards His people. He puts up with His people and provides for His people because He loves them, not because they deserve anything.

NO FAITH IN GOD Exodus 17:7

“And he named the place Massah and Meribah . . .” Massah means “testing,” and Meribah means “strife” or “contention”. At this place, the Jews tested God and contended with Him and Moses His leader. These Jews never seemed to learn anything from their spiritual history, and they continued to gripe, complain, murmur, and mumble. Consequently, God never blessed these people, as He wanted to as their Heavenly Father.

“. . . because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” These Jews doubted the presence of the Lord with them in a time of crisis. What is this but unbelief, and unbelief is sin! God will not bless unbelief in His people. God always blesses faith in His people, and the life of faith is what pleases God.

CONCLUSION

The New Testament tells us clearly that the rock, which Moses struck, was none other than Jesus Christ Himself. ***“... and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.”*** (1 Cor. 10:4) That rock in the desert was the preincarnate Christ. The typical significance of the rock represents Jesus Christ dying on the cross for sinners. Moses struck the rock with God’s rod of power and judgment. God struck Christ with the sins of men so that men could have eternal life.

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Cor. 5:21)

“. . . and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.” (1 Peter 2:24)

We are told that this rock followed the Israelites wherever they went in the desert, so Jesus Christ is with each individual Christian and never leaves him or her. The water, which flowed from the rock, was abundant, free, and sufficient, so Jesus Christ offers a free and abundant salvation to all who will believe in Christ. Notice also that the water was sufficient for all. Everyone, without exception, who drank of the water, was satisfied. Everyone who drinks of Jesus Christ by faith is satisfied spiritually and will be saved.

In the Old Testament, God said to an apostate nation, ***“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters . . .”*** (Isa. 55:1). Jesus Christ said, ***“. . . He who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.”*** (John 6:35) One of the greatest offers of a free and gracious salvation is found in Revelation 22:17, which says, ***“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”*** (KJV)