

God On Trial

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Preacher: Jason Webb

[0:00] Exodus 17, and we'll be reading verses 1 through 7. The whole Israelite community set out from the desert of sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded.

! They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, Give us water to drink. Moses replied, Why do you quarrel with me?

Why do you put the Lord to the test? But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses, and they said, Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?

Then Moses cried to the Lord, What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me. The Lord answered Moses, Walk on ahead of the people.

Take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb.

[1:07] Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink. So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel, and he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord, saying, Is the Lord among us or not?

O.J. Simpson is back in court. We're used to court scenes.

Something very fascinating, even if we've never seen one in real life, there's something very fascinating about seeing people in the balance. Will they get what they deserve?

Will they get out on a technicality? Will something surprising happen? And in our passage tonight, we see a court scene.

The Israelites put God, the Lord, on trial, and they put Him in the balance. And that's outrageous. But it's something that we've done.

[2:18] We do it when we complain. We do it when we worry like the Israelites. So have you ever complained? Have you ever worried?

Then tonight's sermon is for you. Maybe you've just started thinking about your soul. Maybe you have just started thinking about your sin and God and maybe wondering if Jesus is what you need. If that is the case, then tonight's sermon is really for you. Tonight we see God on trial. C.S. Lewis wrote something very interesting in his book, God and the Dock.

The Dock is a British word for in the place where the person on trial would stand. Listen to what he said. The ancient man approached God or even the gods as the accused person approaches his judge.

For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. Man is the judge. God is in the Dock. Man is quite a kindly judge. If God should have a reasonable defense for being the God who permits war and poverty and disease, he is ready to listen to it.

[3:38] The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the Dock. Lewis is partially right.

He's not totally right. As soon as man sinned, we switched everything around. We made ourselves judge and we put God on trial.

And then we started demanding that God justify and explain and do everything our way. Ancient man was no better at this than modern man.

The question is, what will God's response be to that kind of outrage? Well, that's what we're going to see tonight. We have four points this evening.

The charge, the verdict, the sentencing, and then the takeaway. So first we see the charge. God's on trial.

[4:38] What is the charge? Look at the first two verses there. The whole Israelite community set out from the desert of sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded.

They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, give us water to drink.

And Moses replied, why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test? The word quarrel in verse two has a legal connotation, has a legal feel or taste to it.

It's used in the Old Testament prophets frequently to describe, to talk about bringing suit. So it's used to talk about when God brings suit against the Israelites for their unfaithfulness, for their breaking of the covenant, for their breaking of the relationship, their idolatry.

But now in this place, it's Israel charging Moses and charging God, bringing suit against God. They're in effect saying, prove that we should believe you.

[5:56] Prove your faithfulness. If you do, then we'll follow. But until then, we're done. They're rebelling. It's more than complaining. They're rebelling against their sovereign to the one who they owe allegiance, to the one they owe faithfulness.

And that's why when they start complaining to Moses, Moses doesn't take it personally or completely personally. He says, why do you put the Lord to the test?

This isn't a complaint just against Moses, a quarrel, a lawsuit against Moses, but it's against the whole structure of authority that God has put in place.

Moses is the mediator and God is their great king. And that's why in Hebrews 3, the author refers to this incident. And he says this, do not harden your heart as you did in the rebellion.

That's an interesting word. Their complaining has gone so far as to now be open rebellion. And that's why there's more at stake here than just complaining and worrying and wondering about water.

[7:12] They are charging God. They're trying to throw off the shackles and saying, God, you are unfaithful. Well, what exactly are they charging him with?

Why are they rebelling? Rebelling. Verse 3, why did you bring us out of Egypt to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst? So you brought us out.

You saved us. Just to die. And then down at the end of verse 7, they tested the Lord. It's the end of verse 7.

They tested the Lord saying, is the Lord among us or not? So here's the charge. God, you're not living up to your end of the bargain.

Are you for us or not? You took us out of Egypt, but now you've left us to die here in the desert of thirst. And a God who's really for his people, a God who's really faithful, wouldn't do that.

[8:15] And we're innocent after all. We've gone where you told us to go. We've traveled from place to place as you commanded. And look at where you brought us.

A dead end. God, we want out. We're throwing you out. You have abandoned us. You've left us high and dry. You've been unfaithful to us.

And that's the charge. Now, before we move on to the verdict, I want to point out a few things for you to consider. First, I want you to think about the danger that complaining, the danger of complaining and worrying.

The danger of complaining and worrying. When I was in health class, the textbooks talked about gateway drugs. I don't know, do they still do that or not?

So, for example, in these textbooks, marijuana is a gateway drug to cocaine. And cocaine is a gateway drug to heroin. People rarely jump from no drug use all the way to heroin.

[9:25] Instead, there's a process. There are steps they take to go from one place to the other. And complaining and worrying, in the same way, are gateway drugs, gateway sins to rebellion.

And you see it in this passage. So, the Israelites are following God. They're following Him further and further into the desert. And soon, their water bottles are empty.

And soon, they're further away from any water source than they were before. And now there's dust in their throats. And then something starts to click in their head.

And it's the same thing that clicks in all of our heads. I deserve better than this. We deserve better than this. And then they started worrying, well, God doesn't care, obviously.

Complaining in their hearts. And then complaining in their hearts led to grumbling that came out loud. And then the whole matter caught on fire like a disease in the community.

[10:30] And it spread through the whole community until they rebelled against God. Until they said, God, are you for us or not? We're putting you to the test. And apparently, you're not for us.

So, no one set out saying, I'm going to rebel against God. I'm going to put God on trial and walk away from him. But that's where complaining and worrying brought them.

So, the seeds of complaining, the seeds of worry, grew the tree of rebellion. So, be careful what kind of seed you're planting. Because you do not know what kind of tree you're going to end up with.

You see the danger here in this passage. But you see the danger also in real life. And again and again, I've read about once professing Christians who have walked away from God.

And they've walked away from God into out and out blatant sin. And then you think about and you analyze, how did they get there?

[11 : 37] Well, there's different cases. But so often, most of the time, it's they've suffered something. Something's happened to them.

A lot of times, there was a temptation. A temptation to sin that they didn't like. I've read this again and again with people who have struggled with homosexual temptations.

And for a long time, they say, I fought it. I fought it. And for a long time, they prayed for release. And they didn't want to experience this temptation.

But something happened in the thick of the battle. They started thinking, I'm doing everything that God says. And he's not. And I'm still tempted.

I'm doing everything that God says. But he's not living up to his end of the bargain. I'm still here with these same desires. And for a while, there's the dissatisfaction.

[12 : 39] And then it just becomes easier to blame God. To blame God. He's not living up to his end of the bargain.

And then they walked away. The deceitfulness of sin hardened their hearts. And they left Christ. Now, that's just one example.

We can bring it to many examples. We'll bring it to this one. Men and women. Husbands. Wives. Why have people cheated on their spouses?

Why have they legitimized their use of pornography? Well, so often, they don't get there in a day. It starts with complaining. Complaining about their spouses.

She's not what I want. She's not what I deserve. She isn't living up to what a good wife should be. He's not doing everything that he should do for me. He has this failure.

[13 : 36] He does that. She does this. One thing led to another. Bitterness led to complaining. And then complaining leads to out-and-out rebellion.

Can that happen to you? You better believe it can happen to you. That's why the author to the Hebrews wrote about this occasion.

And his takeaway from this was, See to it, brothers, that none of you have a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily as long as it is called today so that no one of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

See to it, brothers. This isn't for people on the outside. It's for people on the inside. That none of you, you are to take this to heart.

It's for us to take to heart. But it's also for us to help one another with. Complaining and worrying and rebellion. It was a community project here in Exodus 17, wasn't it?

[14 : 40] Everyone got in on it. And the ball started rolling. And the ball got so big it went out of control. And encouraging one another daily. Faithfulness.

Faithfulness to God. Trust in God. Perseverance to God. Is also a community project. Encourage one another daily. One of the best protections that we have is one another.

One of the best protections we have is each other. Now, that was the first thing I want you to think about. This charge. The second thing I want you to consider before we go to the verdict.

Is notice where they did their complaining. And I'm not talking the physical place. I'm talking about the context. They did their complaining in the context of God's loving provision for them.

So, if we step back and we widen our gaze, broaden the scope. What happens in Exodus 14 and 15? Two chapters?

[15 : 43] Three chapters ago? Well, God parts the Red Sea. And God destroys the entire Egyptian army. What happens in Exodus 16? God provides manna and quail.

Manna was on the ground as they were rebelling against God. Bread from heaven was at their feet and in their stomachs as they were saying, God, it doesn't seem like you're for us.

We want out. God's love. Their complaining came in the context of God's loving provision. And we could ask, how could they do that? I don't know.

Why do we do it? We start focusing on what we want. And our eyes get glued in on what we need or what we seem to need.

And then we forget everything else that God has given to us. Everything gets swallowed up and it disappears in our tunnel vision. And brothers and sisters, we need to catch ourselves when we start focusing and get stuck in that tunnel vision.

[16:56] We need to step back and look around. And so, if you're complaining and if you're worried, you know you have that tunnel vision. And so, you need to step back, look around, hasn't God filled you and filled your life with a million good things?

Hasn't he blessed you in so many ways? We need to open our eyes when we start to complain and start looking around at how God has blessed us and what God has done.

If Israel would have just shut their mouths and pondered the manna at their feet, what would they have done? They probably would have prayed to God for water instead of quarreling with him, instead of putting him on trial.

God was for them. God was among them. God hadn't abandoned them. And yet, in their worry over water, they charged him with unfaithfulness.

So, that's the charge. Next, the verdict. The charge is unfaithfulness. The verdict is guilty. And you'll understand why I say that later. Verse 5.

[18:05] The Lord answered Moses, Walk on ahead of the people. Take with some of you, the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go.

Now, the charge is unfaithfulness. And the verdict is guilty. How do I know that it's guilty? Well, because Moses goes up with the staff.

And that's important. This isn't just an ordinary walking stick. Notice how, in verse 5, how it's described.

It's the staff with which you struck the Nile. So, remember back in Egypt. God had said, let my son go. And Pharaoh said, no.

I won't let your son go. I won't let these people go. What was that? When you disobey God, it's disobedience. It's rebellion. So, what happened next?

[19:04] Pharaoh won't let Israel go. What happens? The ten plagues. And what was the first plague? The Nile turned into blood. Moses took his staff and he struck the Nile.

Now, we have to understand that the plagues were more than just kind of a blackmail or just a way of manipulating Pharaoh, of getting him to do what God wanted.

They were judgment. They were judgment on Egypt and Pharaoh and even on Egypt's gods. They were punishment.

Egypt was guilty and God judged them. And so, the point is very clear here as now Moses walks in front of the entire group of people. He's not acting as a criminal.

He's not acting as the jury or the judge, but as a judge. He's got the staff of judgment. And it symbolized that he is going to strike in judgment.

[20:11] Then we see another aspect to the scene that shows that it's a legal scene. The elders were to go to. These are the representatives of the people. Trials were decided in front of the elders or by the elders.

And so, the elders of the people were witnesses and jury. And they're part of the legal aspect. So, we have a judge and we have witnesses. So, put yourself into the scene.

Put yourself into the picture. Moses is walking with that staff of judgment. Judgment is about to fall. The decision is about to be made.

So, if you remember in 1995, the first time O.J. Simpson was on trial, it captivated a nation.

And the word came out. The jury was out of deliberations. And everyone was on the edge of their seats. The case was about to be decided.

[21:18] What would it be? Guilty or innocent. And everyone had their opinions. But it was in the jury's hands. Now, if you were in the desert that day, the tension would have all been incredible.

It would have been even greater than that. Because it wasn't just someone else on trial. It was this whole relationship between the Lord and His people.

This is a do or die moment. The relationship between God and His people. They're now on a tipping point. The tension would have been terrible. And it would have been clear that something bad is

about to happen.

The charge is unfaithfulness. The verdict is guilty. And you're probably saying, wait, what? Wait a minute. Wait a minute.

How can that be? If Israel is putting God on trial and the verdict is guilty, how can that be? God's taking care of them. God has blessed them. God has loved them. God has saved them.

[22:19] God has fed them. Time and time again, the Lord has been there for them. And now the first moment of trouble, there's doubting.

From the first moment of trouble, now they want out. And here's the irony. Here's the twist. Here's where we can understand what's really going on here.

While Israel was thinking, God is being unfaithful to us. He's letting us down. He's not living up to his end of the bargain. We were walking the right way. Now he's led us to a dead end. We'll put God on trial because we know all the facts are clear.

So we'll put him on trial. But who was really on trial that day? It was Israel.

And who was really guilty that day? It was Israel. And in their pride and then their unbelief, they failed to see that the whole time that they were in the dock and not God.

[23:25] They had been unfaithful. Not him. They were guilty and not him. And so when we complain and when we worry and we start to think God can't take care of us, God won't take care of us, aren't we blind to the fact that in reality it's not him who's in danger of being unfaithful.

It's us. It's not him who's going to be unfaithful. It will be us. And so the charge is unfaithfulness.

And yet it ends up landing not on God's, in God's lap, but in Israel's lap.

And so the verdict is guilty. But it's not him, it's them. And so what's next? Well, the sentencing.

Justice must be served. Moses isn't carrying the staff for nothing. So verse 6. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb.

Strike the rock and water will come out of it for the people to drink. And so Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. Now there are two prepositions here that will make all the difference.

[24:47] If we're going to understand this passage, if you're going to find comfort in God's grace, this is more than just God providing water for them. And you'll see what I mean.

The first preposition is before. Now remember, this is the God's on trial, the test. It's a court case.

And so in a court case, who stands before who?

Who stands before who in a court case? Well, in Scripture, man always stands before God. In a court case, the charge, the guilty, always stands before the judge to receive their sentence.

Man, the guilty offender, man, the lawbreaker stands before God. Isn't that what we're going to see at the very last day when Christ comes back?

It's going to be man before Christ. And that's why this is so astonishing, what Moses says here.

God says, or what God says.

[25:52] God says, I'll stand before you, Moses. I'll stand before you. Now, God doesn't have a physical presence, so he's not talking just physically.

He's putting himself in the place of his people. He's substituting himself for his people. Justice must be served.

But God has promised Israel blessing. God has promises to keep. God has good purposes to fill.

God has promised Israel to do them good, but justice here must be served.

And so God says, I'll stand before you. The second preposition is in the same sentence. I will stand before you by the rock at Horeb.

Now, this little word by, it can mean before or by, beside. And it also frequently means on.

[27:03] And that's how the New American Standard Version translates it. That's how the ESV translates it. And probably in this context, it's probably better to be translated as on.

God stands on the rock. He's identifying with the rock. Remember in the sacrificial system in Israel, the sacrificer would put his hands on the sacrifice.

He would identify himself with the sacrifice. And so even if we translate it as by or on, I think either case, the point is, is that God is saying, identifying himself with the rock.

He's putting his hand on the sacrifice and identifying himself with it. And so what happens next?

Well, Moses raises the staff of judgment, and he brings it down on the rock.

Judgment falls. And then water flows into the desert. And he gives his people life. Now, doesn't that take your breath away?

[28:15] Israel has the audacity to want to walk out on God, to put God on trial, to say, hey, God, I don't see your faithfulness.

You're being unfaithful. They put him on trial. They put him to the test. They want to divorce him, and they want to kill his servant, Moses, the covenant mediator. They want done with this whole thing. They deserve judgment.

They deserve to rot in the desert. But God doesn't give them what they deserve. He takes their judgment, and he gives them life. Now, brothers and sisters, I think that helps us to understand all sorts of passages in the Bible.

I think it helps us to understand why the psalmist calls God his rock and his redeemer. Do you see why the psalmist in Psalm 95, which is a meditation on this exact incident, he says, Oh, come, let us sing to the Lord.

Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. When the Bible calls God a rock, it's talking more than just he's a firm foundation.

[29:26] It is talking about that. But there is this idea of salvation, rock, and redemption go together all the time in the Bible. And so maybe this helps us to understand, brothers and sisters, what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 10.

Listen to what he says there, that the Israelites all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them. And that rock was Christ.

In Exodus 17, we have played out before us a preview of ultimate redemption. We've all done something horrific, just like the Israelites did.

We've all had the audacity to throw off God's commands. He says, do this, and we say, no, I'll do that. And we say with Pharaoh, who is the Lord that I should listen to him?

Who is he that I should listen to him? Or are you among us or not? Are you for us or not? Prove yourself. And yet here is God full of grace, taking the place of his people.

[30:40] And B.B. Warfield put it like this, God reached out loving arms and gathered to his own bosom the forest of spears which otherwise had pierced ours.

We deserve the pain. We deserve for judgment to fall upon us. But God sent his beloved son, his one and only, the heart of his heart, the one that he loved, and he sent Jesus, God incarnate, and in love, Jesus took the place and the punishment for his people.

So he is our rock. He is our redeemer. He rescues sinners and gives them life by taking their punishment for them. From him, the living water flows.

And from his death, we have life. That's the charge. That's the verdict. That's the sentence. Now here's the takeaway. What should you take away from this passage?

Well, this should be the death of complaining. This should be the death of complaining. How can we ever complain about our place, about our lot, like we sang about, like we heard from Psalm 16?

[31:59] Our lot, our place, about this person, about that person. How can we chafe under God's providence when God in his son, in the son, has taken the judgment for us?

how ugly complaining looks when you're next to the rock that's been riven, cut for you.

How ugly complaining looks when you're sitting at the foot of the rock with everlasting life flowing to you. This should be the death of complaining.

So what should you do with your complaining? Tie ropes and hooks around it and you should drag it to the cross to die. Take your complaining to the cross.

Take it there to die. What should you take away from this passage? This should be the death to worry. The death to worry. When we worry, we ask in our hearts the very same question that the Israelites asked.

[33:04] Is God among us or not? Is God with me or not? Is he for me? Is he really for me? Don't you see how committed God is to his people?

Just how committed he is to his people. If he and the son will go so far as to take the judgment for you in order to love you, in order to care for you, in order to provide for you what you most desperately needed, how will he not also along with him give you everything else?

He's not going to withhold any good thing from you. He didn't withhold himself from you. So take your worry to the cross. Put your worry in the light of the cross.

In the light of God's committed, faithful love for you. And take it there to die. And then finally, to my dear lost friend, is God worth following?

Is God worth following? Is he worth trusting? Yes. Yes, he is. Look at how he loves his own.

[34:16] Look at how he loves all those who hide in Christ. He's committed to them. He'll stand in for them. And so you have sin.

Christ died for sinners. You have guilt? Jesus took the judgment for all those who would trust in him. Are you thirsty? Christ has the living water.

God gives you the living water. And so why would you die of thirst? Why would you die of thirst in the desert when the rock has been struck and the water and the blood from his riven side is flowing?

So there's life for the taking. There's life for the taking. So come to Jesus and live. Come to Jesus and live.

God is worth following. He's all in for all those who will trust in him. But if you do not come, then know this, there is still a staff of judgment.

[35:20] And it's not going to fall on Christ. It is in the hands of Christ. And if you do not make peace with him, then that staff will fall on you.

And you will die under his wrath. And so while you're thinking, should I follow him or not? You need to realize that that might be backwards.

God is not on trial. You are. Your life is in the balance. And will you live or will you die?

I don't know. What will you decide? Let's pray. Our Lord, I thank you that you have shown us your great love.

Thank you that you've recorded it in the Bible for us. That here we read in your sacred word of your great love for sinners.

[36:33] The coming judgment. you encourage us to flee from the wrath to come. Lord, I pray for my brothers and sisters that in the midst of all their temptations to complain about this or that or whatever it might be, in their temptation to worry under financial concerns or health concerns, that though those problems are real, I pray that you would help them to take that complaining spirit, that worrying spirit and bring it to the cross and let it die there.

I pray that you would help them then. For those who are outside of Jesus, I pray that you would waken them to their condition and their situation, that you would give them eyes to see that their life is in the balance and that they need Jesus.

Jesus is all they need and he is enough. I pray that you would, by the spirit of God, give new life, give open eyes, give open hearts and save sinners this evening.

and we thank you for your mercy. We ask that you would please bless us as we go. In Jesus' name, Amen.