

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Thirst

Lesson: Exodus 17:1-7

17 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. ² 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?" ³ But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" ⁴ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD answered Moses, "Go out in front 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. 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." So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ 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?"

Thirst! Today's lesson is related to thirst. Normally, people feel thirsty when they are in a situation where they cannot drink water despite being dehydrated, and when the dryness in their throat persists. We don't only use the word "thirst" to simply describe the physical symptom of not being able to drink water. If we expand the meaning of thirst a little further, we also use it to describe a feeling of deficiency or lack in our lives.

If we express the word "thirst" a little differently, it could be replaced by expressions such as deficiency, lack, difficulty, and hardship in life. Most people have probably ever experienced such thirst at least once in their lives. Some may have felt a thirst for financial hardship, some may have felt a thirst for recovery from illness, and some may have a thirst for the love they did not receive from their parents in childhood. In addition to these, we may have experienced various types of thirsts caused by deficiencies.

In today's story of the Exodus, the Israelites were feeling thirsty in the wilderness. They had moved from Egypt to the wilderness according to the word of the Lord and Moses' leadership. They had experienced and witnessed many miracles that God had shown them during their journey to freedom from slavery in Egypt. And when they were hungry in the wilderness, they experienced the grace of God who gave them manna and quails.

However, when they camped at Rephidim and had no water to drink, they forgot how God had protected and led them all and began to blame Moses without any hesitation and started to complain to God, saying "Give us water to drink."

When we see the Israelites forgetting the miracles and grace that God had shown them and starting to blame Moses and complain against God for not giving them water to drink when they camped at Rephidim, we may think that they lacked faith. Yes, they received God's grace, but they had no understanding of who God was. However, on the other hand, we can also understand their feelings. They followed Moses into the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea. When they first escaped from Egypt, they were probably relieved not to have to work hard for the Egyptians anymore. They might have hoped for a shining future waiting for them.

However, the reality they faced was the opposite of their expectations. There was nothing in the wilderness they entered. Unlike in Egypt, there was no place to rest, nothing to eat, and nothing to drink. They came to the wilderness only believing in God and Moses, but the reality they faced was so bleak and uncertain. Their children and livestock were thirsty. However, as parents, who could watch their children suffer from thirst? When their children are sick, most parents' hearts would probably wish that they could be sick instead of their children.

When we see the Israelites quarrel and complain against God and Moses despite the miracles and grace shown to them, we may think they are foolish, but on the other hand, we can also understand their feelings because their situation is not so different from ours. We may not want to admit it, but we also have the weakness that the Israelites show in the face of deficiency and lack.

In the end, the Israelites cry out to Moses and God: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (3)

The grumbling and complaining of the Israelites reveal many things to us. Before they entered the wilderness as free people, they were slaves to the Egyptians. When they suffered in Egypt, God heard their cry, so sent Moses to lead them to freedom. However, when they faced hardships in the wilderness, they longed for the time when they were slaves in Egypt.

I think most of you sitting here have experienced God's grace and love and have walked a long journey of faith. However, like the Israelites, when we face difficulties, lack, and thirst in life, don't we also express our complaints and grievances to God, the church, or the pastor? This is a very natural phenomenon that occurs because we are weak. I cannot easily guarantee that I will not complain or resent God when I face difficulties in my life. In reality, trusting God without complaining or grumbling when we are going through hard times is very challenging.

From Moses' perspective, the grumbling and complaining of the Israelites would have been very daunting. In the wilderness, there was nothing Moses could do for his people. He was a human being just like us, and he couldn't quench the thirst of the Israelites. All he could do was cry out to God. He prayed to God: "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." (4)

God heard Moses' prayer and answered him. At that time, Moses always carried a staff with him. His staff had turned into a snake in Egypt and had turned the Nile River into blood, but it was a normal staff most of the time. However, this time, God commanded Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with his staff and lead the people there. So Moses led the people to Horeb and struck the rock as God commanded. What do you think happened then? Did water come out of the rock or not? Please answer. Yes, that's right. Water came out of the rock and quenched the people's thirst.

Currently, during Lent, we are studying the Lenten book titled Luke by Adam Hamilton. On the first Wednesday, we studied chapter 1, which encouraged and comforted both elderly and young people, and a few days ago, we studied chapter 2, which encouraged and comforted women.

When I read Hamilton's story about God comforting elderly people in chapter one, I received much comfort. This is because of my father. During Bible study, I mentioned that Korea is one of the countries that is very sensitive about age. In Korean society, being young is considered an advantage in many areas, including employment. This preference for youth is also reflected in Korean churches, where pastors are often expected to be ordained before the age of 35.

Despite this trend in Korean society, my father began his ministry as a second career. He majored in accounting in college and worked in a company for about 10 years. He felt called to become a pastor since his college days, but he denied it and eventually entered the seminary when he turned 40. He completed his studies and was ordained as an Elder at the age of 46. In American society, a pastor at the age of 46 seems not to be a problem. However, in Korean society, a pastor of that age was not the age preferred by churches.

In addition, the Korean Methodist Church has no appointment system. This means that, like Lutheran or Presbyterian pastors, Korean Methodist pastors should submit their resumes directly to churches and go through an interview process. Or they can plant their own ministry.

Age was a major obstacle for my father, and eventually, he planted his own ministry. By the way, the Korean Methodist Church doesn't provide any support when a pastor plants a new ministry. This means that he had to rent a church building and take responsibility for his own livelihood. In addition, church membership and attendance also start from zero. He received a calling from God, went to seminary, and was ordained, but the reality he faced was a wilderness. Poverty was naturally a part of his and his family's lives.

My father prayed harder than anyone, read his Bible fervently, and told everyone he met about his church and his ministry. His Sunday services always seemed to have an average of around 15 members. Perhaps he hoped the next year would be better, but even after one year, two years, five years, and ten years, the average attendance at his church remained 15 or less. Despite many difficulties, he didn't give up on his ministry and served the church he had planted for 12 years.

One thing my father said to me at that time remains in my memory. It was a hot summer day, and one day he said to me that he felt like a tree reaching out to the sky. So I asked him why he felt that way. He said, "Look at that tree. It stretches its branches towards the sky all day long, waiting for the rain to come. I too, rely only on God and wait for the rain that may come at any time." He says he matured spiritually and learned how to rely on God through a long period like the wilderness.

In the end, when God's time came, he was asked by a church to serve as their pastor, and he has been serving the ministry diligently and steadily.

Friends, we cannot predict how long our wilderness journey in life will last. And perhaps, we cannot even know when our thirst will be quenched. However, God allowed the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for 40 years to train them and to make them realize that they could do nothing without God's help.

Sometimes, we may complain to God like the Israelites did. However, God is the one who hears all of our groans, and comes alongside us in the wilderness to allow for manna, provide strength, and give courage. I pray in the name of the Lord that we remember this every day.

Job 23:10, "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold."