

INTRODUCTION

Growing up means facing bigger challenges. A new school-year is here. Most families return to their routines. Some stay-home moms can enjoy more free time, or even go back to sleep after sending off their kids. School children go up to the next grade level. My two sons begin their first year of high school and middle school, respectively. My older one is very excited about going to a brand-new school facility. My younger one, however, whines about harder lessons and more homework. “I want to go back to elementary school,” he requested. I told him that everyone has to grow up and move to a higher level. He has to go through middle school, then high school before he can go to college. We often resist growing up. Young kids like to enjoy the convenience at home. Whenever there is a problem they just cry out “mom!” for help. But no kid should remain in diapers, bottles and crawling forever! Even adults do not like difficulties and failures. In the Exodus, the Israelites were still at their elementary level of faith. They grumbled when they faced a new crisis. In today’s passage they grumbled again when there was no water. That was their fourth grumbling already since they left Egypt! Are we not like the Israelites in some ways? We want to remain at the elementary level of our faith. We prefer life to be predictable and comfortable. How nice it will be for God to prepare everything for us even without our asking! But God sees problems as beneficial to us. As humans we grow up to become independent of our parents. However, as believers we have to grow up to become more dependent on God. This dependence is expressed in greater faith. We trust that God has some important life lessons for us to learn no matter what situation He leads us to.

EXPLANATION

1. 忘記神的恩典 Forget God’s Grace

The Israelites grumbled because they forgot about God’s grace. God protected them against the Egyptian army. God miraculously provided manna as food for them. It is unthinkable that the Israelites became ungrateful so easily. They got into a habit of grumbling when problem arose.

A. 向人埋怨 Complain to Man

First, the Israelites complained to man. Poor Moses was the target again. Look again at **verse 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?” Have we not heard the same argument before? The Israelites put the same blame on Moses when they saw the Egyptian army marching in and when food was running low. They adopted a “customers are always right” mentality. Whenever they filed a complaint they received some favorable outcomes. Since it worked before, why not play the same card again? Granted, the Israelites were in the desert. Water supply is a matter of life or death contingency. The Israelites wanted an instant answer whenever they encountered a problem. They made their request clear to Moses in **verse 2**: ... “Give us water to drink.” They thought they were entitled to happiness and satisfaction. They were only interested in the result rather than the process. They wanted to see

their needs being met, instead of experiencing God's faithfulness while waiting. "If God loves me so much then why does He allow me to suffer?" Have we not heard that question frequently? Perhaps you said the same thing before too! It is true that hardship often unsettles our faith. However, it is fair to turn the question around and ask: "If I love God so much then why shouldn't I trust Him more?" We shall see later that having doubt and outright disbelief are completely different. Problems should not pull us away from God. Problems should drive us to Him. Instead of complaining to Moses, the leaders could have called a prayer meeting to bring their urgent need to God. Adversity is the layover to maturity in our spiritual growth. No one likes suffering. However, there is no alternative for us to grow. Parents have to remove the training wheels on a bike, and allow their children to fall, before they learn how to balance the ride. Parents also have to remove the floaties from their kids' arms, and allow them to drink a few mouthfuls of water, before they learn how to counter the waves. But as Christians, our confidence is not in ourselves; our confidence is in God!

B. 向神埋怨 Complain to God

Moses knew clearly that just like the previous grumbling incidents the Israelites were in fact complaining to God. Let us read the second half of **verse 2**: ... Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" Moses pointed out the core problem – the Israelites were testing God. There was a same concluding remark at the end of **verse 7**: ... they tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" In the Bible, the word "test" can have both positive and negative meanings. God used difficulties to test our faith. His intent was for us to triumph over hardship and grow in our relationship with Him. In Genesis 22, God tested Abraham and asked him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Satan, however, can use the same test to beat us down and cause us to doubt God. Whether we trust God or ourselves will lead to completely opposite outcomes. In this instance, the Israelites tested God. Seemingly they were saying: "Since You fail to resolve our problem according to our wish and time-table then You prove that You are not with us." That was a serious allegation. Was God present with the Israelites? Absolutely! He was guiding them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night since they left Egypt. Everyone could vividly see that God was there! What other proofs did they still need? Disbelief is a serious sin. One miracle after another, God showed that He was faithful. But the Israelites still concluded that God did not have their best interests in His mind. They had to recall the exodus. Once they were slaves, but God made them His own people. Throughout the Bible, God repeatedly reminds us not to forget His grace. For example, **Psalms 103:2** reads: Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. We may try to forget the painful experience in the past. But we should never forget God's faithfulness. We grumble to God when we focus on our problems instead of His goodness. We grumble to God when we take His grace for granted. But when we recount His blessings our faith will grow. Faith is built up from past experience. We believe that since God has helped us in the past, He will continue to watch over us in the current situation.

2. 緊記神的恩典 Remember God's Grace

The Israelites forgot about God's grace. They grumbled over their problem. God was patient and merciful. He withheld His anger and judgment. On the contrary, God provided water for

them. In the process He also asked the Israelites to bear witness of His mighty power so that they would remember His grace. There were three types of witness in this passage.

A. 人證 Witness of Men

First, it was the witness of men. Look at **verse 5**: 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.” Let us visualize the situation. Moses was holding his staff. He led a few elders and walked past the Israelites. Those elders bore witness that they saw God performed a miracle through Moses. God gave water to His people out of nowhere. Moses did not discover a hidden spring. The term “elders,” especially in the Chinese translation, causes us to think of some church leaders. The Hebrew word can refer to both men of senior age or men of authority. In this instance, it is possibly both. God asked Moses to find some mature and trustworthy men as witnesses of the miracle. Those representatives could in turn tell the rest of the people where the water came from. Moses did a similar thing before to brief the elders about God’s plans. In chapter 4, Moses gathered the elders and told them God’s idea to take His people out of Egypt. Also, in chapter 12, Moses gave the instructions from God to the elders about how to prepare for the Passover. The elders were to bear witness of God’s work. They became Moses’ assistants and they shared his burden. Next time when the people grumbled to Moses those elders should defend for Moses and speak the same voice. Later on, we see further development of such organizational structure when the elders shouldered more of Moses’ responsibilities. God puts coworkers in a church for the same reasons. We share the workload. We also bear witness to what God did for our church in the past. When a new problem arises, the leaders can encourage brothers and sisters to put their trust in the Lord.

B. 物證 Witness of Means

Besides the witness of men, the Israelites had to bear witness with the means through which the miracle was accomplished. God could have given water to His people by saying a word. But He chose to bestow His grace through the rod Moses carried. In verse 5 we read earlier God specified that the rod was “the (same) staff with which (Moses) struck the Nile.” In **verse 6** God ordered Moses what to do: “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.”... Moses used the same rod to strike the rock. Neither Moses nor the piece of stick had any supernatural power. It was God who instilled His power through those means. The rod represents God’s presence. It gave comfort to Moses and his people. God was with them whenever they saw the staff. Today, every believer has the Holy Spirit in his/her heart to witness God’s presence. The Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts that we belong to God. Besides, a physical object can bear witness that God was with us in our difficulties. I have a bunch of junk in my file cabinet that I should have thrown away long time ago. But every time I look for a certain document I will flip through old records that bear witness of God’s grace. It could be letters that approved welfare benefit for my wife when she was pregnant with our younger son. I was studying at the seminary then and we had no income. It could be forms that trace our immigration application process. Without exception, my heart is filled with thanks when I look at that pile of paper. You may have something else in your collection. Perhaps it is an old photo or a keepsake you brought when you left your home country. The object reminds you that God is there in good times or bad times.

C. 名證 Witness of Names

Other than the witness of men and means, the Israelites also bore witness of names. Look at **verse 7**: And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord... Moses gave special names to that place. The footnote in your Bible may tell you that Massah means test, and Meribah means quarrel or protest. In the Bible, most names carry special meanings. It is like when your parents gave you a name at birth there might be some significance to it. Perhaps it is to remember a special occasion, or they want you to become what your name means. More than likely, parents want their children to be healthy and prosperous. No parent will call their kids dumb or ugly. God is always humorous. He was not shy to choose some funny titles for locations or even people. We may prefer to name that place where water came out “Stream of Grace,” or “Rock of Trust.” But God had a different idea. Just imagine later on a father told his children: “I need to go to the City of Test to visit someone,” or “I need to buy something from the Town of Protest.” The kids would ask: “Dad, where do those strange names come from?” Then the father would share some shameful moments of their ancestors. It serves as a negative example. Do not act like what they did! Do not protest to your leader and test God when the Lord proves Himself to be faithful time and again.

CONCLUSION

As believers we have to grow up to become more dependent on God. To the Israelites, it was inconceivable that God did not fulfill their dire and legitimate need of thirst immediately. Their conclusion was God had been absent. God did an impossible thing by gushing water out from a rock. He showed that He cared for His people. The recurring problem of the Israelites was disbelief. When we read the Old Testament history we may wonder why God chose to love such a bunch of grumblers. They doubted God, rebelled against Him and worshipped idols. God could have wiped those people out and started all over again with a different race. Or can He? The fact is, the result will be the same. After all, we are all sinners. We are equally bad. Disbelief and disobedient are part of our nature. God’s choosing of Israel, and His decision to save us proves His faithfulness despite men’s sinfulness. God does not want us to stay at the elementary level of our faith like the Israelites. We will still stumble and fall. But when God pulls us up from the mud we should walk one step ahead. God is present and He is able. We should learn from past mistakes and put our trust in Him alone.