

• *A fourth story of grumbling*

There now comes yet another story of the grumbling of Israel. It is the fourth (or the third since they left Egypt). First, they faced the enmity of Pharaoh. Then they lacked water at Marah¹. Then they lacked food while in the wilderness of Zin². Now there is a fourth incident that is similar. The people come to a place called Rephidim. It was a place where you would expect water because there was a spring there. But the spring had dried up and once again the people grumble. Again they criticise Moses³. Moses reprimands them of putting Yahweh to the test. Do they not remember what happened before? Again Moses cries to God to rescue them in their need⁴. Again God sends an answer⁵. He takes the elders of the people so that the elders can witness what is happening and can learn a lesson for the future. He comes to a rock at Horeb.

1 Exod 15

2 Exod 16

3 17:2

4 17:4

5 17:5-7

Learning God's ways

1. *Faith gets tested*

This kind of event has now happened several times. One might expect that Israel would 'learn God's ways' (see the phrase in Hebrews 3:10). Some lessons ought now to have been learned by them.

1. **Faith gets tested.** They had exercised faith when they had trusted in the blood of the lamb. Every one of these Israelites were in families where the firstborn son, the leader of the family, had taken shelter under the blood of the lamb. Yet the question was: would they continue in faith? Would they hold to the faith they had professed earlier? Would they apply their faith in the daily difficulties they met along the way to the promised land?

2. *Saving faith must become diligent faith*

2. **Saving faith must become diligent faith.** The faith that saved them must now be applied to their daily problems.

3. *What tests faith is a situation where God delays*

3. **What tests faith is a situation where God delays.** In each of these crises that they faced, God was ready with an answer to their need, but He came slower than they wanted, slower than they expected. There were times when they were in trouble yet God seemed to be absent. Faith believes that God is there¹ even when He seems slow in coming.

1 Heb 11:6

Testing Situations

1. *They were grumbling against the guidance of God*

The Israelites had now been through testing situations at least three or four times before. God was giving them many opportunities to learn. He was renewing them again unto repentance many times.

1. **They were grumbling against the guidance of God.** The people were travelling 'by stages from the wilderness of Zin, according to the command of Yahweh'. The pillar of cloud and pillar of fire was leading them. The trouble into which they came was trouble into which they were led by God. This is important. There is trouble into which we get ourselves by our own foolishness. But it is an entirely different matter when following the very detailed guidance of God gets us into trouble. These Israelites were being tested while they were in the will of God. The situation was not out of control. Moses was not making any mistakes. God was taking them where He wanted, step by step. Their complaints were complaints against God's guidance.

2. *What troubles them is disappointment*

2. **What troubles them is disappointment.** They were expecting to find water at Rephidim. It was near a 'wadi', a stream. So they were exceptionally disappointed to find there was no water there after all. Disappointment is sometimes hard to take. It may lead us into complaining against God.

3. *They grumble against their leader*

3. **They grumble against their leader.** As often, Moses has to bear the complaint of the people. ‘Give us water...’, they say^{□1}. ‘Why have you brought us up from Egypt. . . ?’. They are talking as if Moses is God. It is not Moses who gives water. It was not Moses who rescued the people from Egypt. When people are falling into unbelief, they talk as if the leaders are God, and their complaints against God are turned upon the ones God has given them. They do not want to treat leaders as God when the leaders are telling them what to do, but they wish to treat them as God when they are in trouble.

□1 17:2

4. *They fall into self-pity*

4. **They fall into self-pity.** These people are ‘unbelieving believers’. They have sufficient faith to put their trust in the blood of the lamb but now they are full of doubts. Unbelieving believers fall into self-pity and negativism. ‘You are planning to kill us’, they say to Moses^{□1}. ‘We are about to die’. They have forgotten that when they were complaining previously, their rescue was always near at hand. They were more gloomy than they needed to be. It led them into extreme hostility towards Moses^{□2}.

□1 17:3

□2 17:4

God’s provision

Again God had everything in hand. Moses took the matter to God^{□1}. He was told to go before the people, taking some elders with him. What was about to happen was to be seen by all the people. He was to take the same staff that he had used before^{□2}. It was to be a reminder that the God who had rescued before could rescue again. Moses is to strike the rock and water will pour out of it. This is what happens. At the end of everything, God had provided for them^{□3}, but they had failed God’s test. The grumbling made no difference. God provided for them, as He would have done whether they had grumbled or not. But their grumbling was yet again an expression of unbelief. The place was named Massah and Meribah (‘Testing’ and ‘Grumbling’) ^{□4}.

□1 17:4

□2 17:5

□3 17:6

□4 17:7

• *But they failed God’s test*

• *Grumbling against God’s providence, guidance, goodness and wisdom is serious*

• *Yet God rescued them*

Complaining against God is a serious matter. What happens to us when there is a serious delay in the way God is leading us? The Israelites grumbled against the providence of God, against the guidance of God, against the goodness of God, against the wisdom of God. They accused His leader of malice against them.

Yet it was wonderful that God still rescued them.

	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)</i> books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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