

(Devotional #10) The Life of Faith: Hebrews 11:1-40 –
The Wilderness as Background for a Life of Faith – Part 1

OPENING SCRIPTURE READING – “The Justified shall LIVE BY FAITH” – Habakkuk 2:4^B

(Also ... please familiarize yourself with Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13.)

WHAT IS FAITH? Habakkuk tells Israel, and by extension, Christians, ‘to live by faith,’ but he doesn’t tell us what faith is or how to live according to faith.

The author of the New Testament Book of Hebrews tells us something more about faith:

“Now FAITH is the FOUNDATION of things hoped for, the EVIDENCE of things not seen; for by FAITH the men of old gained approval” – Hebrews 11:1-2

The Greek word we translate with our term, **FAITH**, is πίστις (*pronounced pistis*). *Pistis* has a range of meanings that includes the idea of ‘proof.’ *Christ’s resurrection is the proof, the trustworthy evidence, that one day God will judge the world*¹. *Pistis* also can express a personal belief that is held with complete trust. No better example of this exists than the trust a child has in the word of his or her parent. This use of *pistis* is the outgrowth of the companion Hebrew term for faith: אֱמָנָה – (*pronounced amanah*). When the Israelites saw the mighty power of God demonstrated through the plagues, the Exodus, and the splitting of the sea, they knew God was indeed God because they had trustworthy evidence of His power and authority. This is the reason we are exhorted to remember what God has done in the past, so we can be assured He can be trusted in the present. Faith is not simply an intangible belief; faith can be seen in the history of God’s acts in human history². Jesus told His disciples: **“By their fruits you shall know them.”** Since our relationship with Christ is **“by grace through FAITH,”** there must be something we can see that attests to the trust believers have in Christ ... and there is; the lives of the saints in Hebrews Eleven demonstrate ‘faith in action – observable faith,’ and as we work through the character studies of the saints in Hebrews, we will see how faith is observable in the lives of those who came before us. Their stories can have a direct application to our lives during the current pandemic. But before we dive into the lives of these men and women of faith, it will benefit us to look at some Old Testament background material that will orient us to the challenges and the blessings of walking by faith.

LET’S START WITH AN IMPORTANT HEBREW WORD – מְרִיבָה – (*pronounced M^eribah*) – This word, **M^eribah**, is a noun that means, ‘**Strife**’ or ‘**Contention**.’ **It also is a place-name.**

Soon after passing through the Red Sea, the Exodus generation came to a place Moses named, Meribah (**Exodus 17:1-7**). Then, almost forty-years later, their sons and daughters also came to Meribah (**Numbers 20:1-13**). Meribah, is associated with two incidents that are pertinent to the faith-walk of all believers ... and these two episodes at Meribah are critical to understanding *the faith-walk-stories* of the men and women of faith in Hebrews Chapter Eleven.

THE FIRST MERIBAH INCIDENT – EXODUS 17:1-7:

At the beginning of this passage, the Israelites are in the desert and there is no water to drink. Just a few days before, there was too much water! The Red Sea! But God had enabled them to

¹ See Acts 17:30-31

² Faith in faith is not Biblical faith ... it is mysticism. Biblical faith always has a tangible object.

cross through the sea on dry ground. Now, at least from a human perspective, they are in trouble – and once again, the problem is water.

We also learn that they were led to Meribah by God Himself. (*Verse one says, “They journeyed there according to the command of the LORD.”*) In other words, their situation was not an accident. And there the people quarreled with Moses. The word ‘quarreled’ is the Hebrew word that means ‘DIVORCE.’ The Israelites were ready to divorce themselves from any association with Moses. Like Elijah in *1 Kings 17:7*, who stood by a dried-up brook, void of water, these Israelites were in a situation without a human solution.

Lesson #1 – At some time in every believer’s life, he will find himself in a situation that has no solution apart from the direct intervention of God Himself. God brings every believer to a dried-up brook sometime in the course of his life, and it is then our faith is tested.

What we hope to read in Exodus 17 is that the Israelites fell to their knees and thanked God for the opportunity to trust Him in a crisis. We would like to see the kind of faith Peter expressed, when after being flogged for his faith, he rejoiced that he had been found worthy to suffer for the Name of Jesus (*Acts 5:40-41³*). We would like for the Israelites to recall the Exodus and the parting of the sea as a historical basis for trusting God in this specific time of trouble. But that is not what we read in Exodus. Instead of a faith-response, the people quarreled with Moses. ***“Give us water to drink! We’re thirsty! We want a human solution to this ‘thirst problem’ we are experiencing, and we want it now.”***

Lesson #2 – God often gives us blessings we do not deserve, even when we are quarreling among ourselves and with Him about our circumstances.

No one would argue that these Israelites did not have a serious problem; men need water to live, but the remedy God gave Israel for their thirst problem seems odd ... yet there was an important theological reason for it.

God told Moses to take the Board of Elders with him, along with his staff, and go into the midst of the people, who were about to stone him to death. Once there, he was to take his staff and strike the Rock⁴ at Horeb ... and God promised from the rock would come life-sustaining water.

Now remember, Israel is in the desert and God is promising to give them water from a rock! The New Testament tells us, this was a picture of Christ, ‘*the Spiritual Rock from which Israel drank the refreshing water of salvation*’ (*1 Corinthians 10:1-4*). The stricken Rock at Horeb represented the Messiah, stricken, smitten by God the Father for the sins of the world⁵. From this Smitten Messiah would flow rivers of living waters. So, striking the rock was an Old Testament picture of the crucifixion.

During the Feast of Booths, Jesus said: ***“If any man thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”***

There was a tradition in Israel that on the morning of each of the first seven days of the Feast of Booths, water was drawn from the Pool of Siloam and carried to the temple, where it was poured into a silver basin by the altar of burnt offerings. This was ***not*** done on day eight. Jesus spoke these words on ‘*the last day*’ (***day eight***) of the Feast of Booths. And He was associating Himself

³ See also *1 Peter 4:12* and *James 1:2*

⁴ The word translated ‘rock’ is not the common Hebrew word for rock (‘*eben*’). It is (*tsur*), which means ‘rocky cliff,’ so this must have been a prominent rock somewhere in Midian.

⁵ See *Isaiah 52:13–53:12*

with the Messianic passages of the Old Testament⁶. With His coming into the world, and by speaking these words, Jesus was showing His disciples that He was rendering the old ways obsolete, for He was to be the final and ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Lesson #3 – The Savior need only be smitten ONCE for the sins of the world.

When Jesus died on the cross, His death paid in full the penalty for the sin of Adam, and also for every sin committed by the human race. It was infinite in its value and therefore need not be repeated – nor can anything be added to it. When Jesus said, **“IT IS FINISHED,”** He meant it.

(Now back to the nation of Israel and the Second Meribah incident.)

THE SECOND MERIBAH INCIDENT – NUMBERS 20:1-13

Numbers 20:1-3 – Nearly forty-years later, Israel came again to *the Wilderness of Zin* and as before, they had no water. **(Surprise!)** The new generation was at the same place with the same problem! Will the sons and daughters of the Exodus generation remember the first miracle at Meribah, or will they quarrel with Moses like their ancestors?

Let’s do an exercise together – Instead of “*No Water,*” let me suggest “*No _____.*” You fill-in-the-blank. No “*money*”? No “*friends*”? No “*social life*” because of the Coronavirus?

Lesson #4 – Whatever word you placed in the _____ above, God has a purpose for it.

There are approximately 7,000 promises in the Bible. *(I’m not sure of the exact number but that’s close.)* And most of those promises are promises to bless believers, who walk in faith, *i.e., who trust in God despite their circumstances – that is what Habakkuk meant when he said: “The Justified shall LIVE BY FAITH”*

But unfortunately that is not how the Israelites responded as the people ‘*quarreled again*’ with Moses. The NASB reads, “*They contended*” but it is the same word that meant **DIVORCE** back in Exodus 17 *(some things never change)*.

In verses 4-5 the people say, ‘**Why have you brought us to this wretched wilderness ... there are no figs nor grain nor vines here; there are no pomegranates or even water!**’ You may think they are describing what they believed awaited them in Canaan ... but that isn’t what they are saying ... they’ve given up on Canaan; these people are describing Egypt – the place of slavery!

So, Moses went to the LORD and the LORD instructed him to go to the rock⁷ and **SPEAK** to it.

NOTE THE CLEAR AND DIRECT WORD OF GOD TO MOSES – SPEAK TO THE ROCK. And God promised Moses that when he obeyed His instructions, water would flow from the rock. But Moses was angry. He was fed up with the people, and he disobeyed the LORD. Instead of speaking to the rock, he struck it as he had years before. Nevertheless, in spite of his disobedience, God gave water to the people, but Moses’ paid a huge price for his sin.

Striking the rock in Exodus 17 was a foreshadowing of the crucifixion. **It pointed to the ONCE-ONLY-DEATH OF JESUS ON THE CROSS.** Paul said in Romans: “**For the death He died, He died ONCE for all**” **(Romans 6:10⁴)**. Jesus died once to provide **the water of salvation to eternal life** to those, who place their faith in him.

⁶ See Isaiah 12:3 and Isaiah 55:1

⁷ This is yet another word for ‘rock.’ It is not the common Hebrew word for rock (*’eben*) or even (*tsur*), but *sela* – a ‘split rock.’

If Moses' action in Exodus 17 depicted the crucifixion, what did the second strike in Numbers 20 depict? It depicted falsely another crucifixion of Christ! It was the worst thing Moses could have done because it diminished the one act of Atonement that occurred only once! This is why God told Moses to '*speak to the rock,*' not strike it a second time.

Lesson #5 – After we have accepted Christ as our Savior, and we have been redeemed by the Blood of Christ, we are to speak to God through prayer about our needs⁸.

God could have withheld the blessing of the water from the people after such a despicable act of disobedience by Moses – but He is a God of Grace and He did not withhold the water from the people. Yet because of this sin, Moses was prohibited from entering the Promised Land⁹.

Paul clearly states in 1 Corinthians 10, '*these things are examples for our instruction.*' Could it be that we, like the Israelites, need to be reminded that just as God has provided for us in the past, so He will be faithful in the present? And if God is faithful to us now, will He be faithful to us in the future? Could it be when our circumstances change, whether by an unprecedented pandemic or some other life-changing event, our God can be trusted? Recall who God is, what He has done, and the promises He has made, and then **REST** in his care – *This is how we 'live by faith.'*

Next week we will look at Psalm 95 and Hebrews 3:7–4:16 as precursor to the character studies from Hebrews 11.

⁸ See Hebrews 10:19-25

⁹ See Deuteronomy 32:48-52